

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Heather Runnels

COLLECTION: 4700.3188

IDENTIFICATION: Vice president of patient care services for OLOL Ascension Community Hospital

INTERVIEWER: Alyson Neel

SERIES: Our Lady of the Lake, "Under Pressure: A Louisiana Hospital's COVID-19 Experience"

INTERVIEW DATE: July 11, 2024

FOCUS DATES: 2020-2022

ABSTRACT:

Tape 5246

Introduction to Heather Runnels, vice president of patient care services for OLOL Ascension Community Hospital and who served as senior director of nursing for the Lake until 2021; Runnels grew up in Metairie; went to East Jefferson High School, where she played lots of sports; late moved to Chalmette; moved to Baton Rouge after Hurricane Katrina; was in an accelerated nursing school program during Katrina with Tulane and Our Lady of the Lake; bachelor's degree in psychology from University of New Orleans; started work at Our Lady of the Lake in 2006; has four siblings; parents' professions; unsure what to do with a psychology degree, she looked to the medical field; shadowed her aunt, a transplant nurse at Tulane; her first nursing job was on a physical rehab unit; enjoys the outcome-based aspect of rehab; as a bedside nurse, developed an interest in helping staff make decisions to improve patient outcomes; "I think it's important for the leaders to actually have done the work of the people that they lead."; OLOL has suffered through weather and technology disasters in the past; the hospital has set protocols for hurricanes, but COVID was unpredictable; CDC advice changed minute to minute; difficulty of dealing with constant changes in protocol; first awareness of COVID-19 virus; caring for the hospital's first COVID-19 case in March 2020; anticipations and concerns about the virus before it reached Louisiana; personal safety concerns; "This was really the first thing in our lifetimes here, for people in my age group, that this was really something that actually came to fruition."; from their first case, Runnels immediately recognized COVID would be a crisis; she was the courier taking samples to the vet school to test for COVID, since the hospital lacked the necessary equipment; at the beginning of the pandemic, Runnels was senior director of nursing for patient care services; "they used to call me Chief Fire Stomper"; describes her job duties pre-pandemic; Runnels appreciates that in her role, every day is different; the pandemic was "probably one of the most innovative times, where there were no barriers to any idea. Like

any idea was like, yeah, let's try it.”; nursing is a hands-on job, so trying to care for patients during COVID was totally different; hospitals were set up around patient privacy, which meant solid doors; got baby monitors to watch patients from outside their rooms; later cut holes in patient room doors to make windows; sourcing window glass; patients felt better being able to see the nurses; nurses had better morale when they could see the patients; got more IV tubing so the IV poles could be outside of the rooms; nurses were more empowered to be innovative during pandemic; discussion around negative pressure rooms; a construction contractor helped them create negative pressure rooms on the fly; staff could see that the hospital was doing everything possible to keep them safe; devising remote ways to track patients’ vital signs; suddenly all patients required isolation, instead of the usual few; many nurses of childbearing age had concerns about COVID vaccine; OLOL made the vaccine mandatory, except in cases of religious or health exemption; leadership of Dr. Catherine O’Neal; anxiety decreased as time went on and mortality decreased; difficulty of ensuring that the physical and emotional needs of nurses and families were met; extreme difficulty of watching patients die alone; “It was extremely difficult to monitor the interaction that might be the last between a patient and a family member over an iPad.”; nurses are programmed to hold patients’ hands; faith-based resources for staff; it was a relief even when one person could enter a patient room in full protective gear; Runnels hypothesizes that the disparity in doctors getting vaccinated more than nurses goes back to many nurses being females of childbearing age; Runnels was impressed by the concerted coordination between hospitals and willingness to help during the pandemic; the pandemic taught her to be more prepared for the unknown; during the pandemic lots of nurses decided that nursing wasn’t for them; but nurses that stayed are even more committed; “I think that now all health care providers that went through this experience appreciate their profession in a very different way than we would ever have before.”; community support for healthcare providers; “I don't think we've ever had so much food in this building in my entire life.”; celebrations when COVID patients went home. Counting COVID conquerors on a ticker; playing “Eye of the Tiger” and clapping when long-time COVID patients were released; community members brought food and sewed masks for them.

TAPE: 1 (T5246)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 3 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 30

OTHER MATERIALS: None

RESTRICTIONS: None