

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS

From bedside to bedridden, this Kentucky ICU nurse is fighting for her life from coronavirus

Maggie Menderski, Louisville Courier Journal Published 6:40 a.m. ET June 30, 2020 | Updated 6:44 a.m. ET June 30, 2020

After caring for COVID-19 patients for three months, 25-year-old Molly Dawson found herself lying in one of her own intensive care unit's beds at Tri-Star Greenview Regional Hospital in Bowling Green.

Her family had thought the pandemic would get the young ICU nurse eventually.

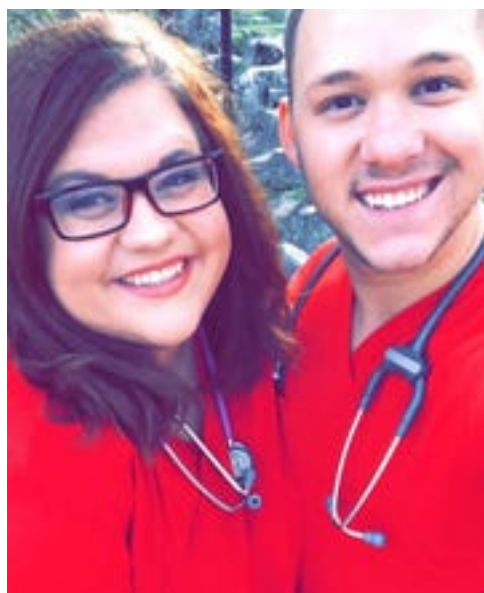
That's just the way this virus works, her mom, Patty Dawson, told me.

They'd heard the stories about how Molly's colleagues had wrestled with it, mostly on a mild level, since the coronavirus pandemic hit Kentucky in March. Patty tried not to think about it much back then, because if she really let herself process it, she'd be worried sick.

Her daughter was fighting to keep a virus at bay that had already claimed more than 125,000 lives in the United States.

Now, Molly is fighting for her own life.

By the time I got Patty on the phone Friday, Molly had already been hospitalized with COVID-19 for more than a week.



Molly Dawson poses with her best friend and fellow co-worker, Ryan Curry. (Photo: Courtesy Patty Dawson)

The young ICU nurse hadn't been afraid to treat people with the virus, her mom told me, even though her asthma could in theory put her at risk for some complications. When the pandemic hit in March, her primary concern was making sure she and her colleagues had the proper personal protective equipment to do their jobs. She was adamant about wearing her mask and ordering her groceries online because she knew working in a hospital could put others at risk.

You may like: [What it's like to go to the movies in Kentucky during a pandemic \(/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/06/24/movie-theaters-reopen-in-kentucky-after-coronavirus-shutdown/3108903001/\)](/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/06/24/movie-theaters-reopen-in-kentucky-after-coronavirus-shutdown/3108903001/)

She was tested regularly for the virus, but even when she first started feeling sick in mid-June, it always came back negative. Then it didn't.

Molly spent a few days fighting the illness by herself at home, but when she struggled to breathe, she checked herself into the emergency room on June 17, and she was quickly moved to her own ICU.

Her friends — the people she saved lives with every day — would have to intubate her.

Molly really didn't want that, Patty told me. She knew what that meant.

"You need to let them intubate you," her mother remembered telling her in a text message.

She hasn't been able to speak to her daughter since.

The next day, Patty drove from the family's Versailles home south to Bowling Green.

Before she even got to town, Molly's colleagues decided to transfer the nurse to [TriStar Centennial \(https://tristarcentennial.com/\)](https://tristarcentennial.com/) in Nashville where she could have more advanced care and participate in clinical trials. They didn't want to wait until it was a life and death call to send her south, so she had to go now.

A nurse friend flashed a gloved "I love you" sign language symbol as the life flight helicopter took off, and Patty followed her daughter on the road below. She kept an eye out for the chopper as her foot pressed on the gas pedal.



A nurse colleague flashes an "I love you" sign at the helicopter that took ICU nurse Molly Dawson from Bowling Green to treatment in Nashville. (Photo: Courtesy Patty Dawson)

She booked a room at a nearby hotel with a view of the hospital, and on her second day there, she snapped a photo of the towering building in the distance and put it on Facebook. At least in Bowling Green, she was able to see her daughter through a glass window.

"This is as close as I am allowed to be to her because of the pandemic," she wrote.

You may like: [From 'Civil Rights' to 'Black Lives Matter,' Louisville's aging activists still protesting \(/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/06/11/louisvilles-civil-rights-activists-say-george-floyd-protests-needed/5322005002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/06/11/louisvilles-civil-rights-activists-say-george-floyd-protests-needed/5322005002/)

Even though she can't be by Molly's side, she knows she can't go home without her. If Molly takes a turn for the worse, she wants to be there when it happens — not three hours later.

When I asked her to tell me about her daughter, I heard her smile through the phone. Molly has a big personality, Patty told me. She's a kind person who would do just about anything for anyone. Service has always been important to her, whether she was growing out her hair for [Locks of Love \(https://locksoflove.org/\)](https://locksoflove.org/) as a young girl or participating in OPA, a service sorority at [Western Kentucky University \(https://www.wku.edu/\)](https://www.wku.edu/).

It's incredible how many people Molly has left an impression on in just 25 years, Patty told me. She thinks her daughter would be shocked — overwhelmed, even — to know how many people have reached out and offered to help since her battle with COVID-19 started.

Sydney Walsh, a friend of Molly's from WKU, has been leading the charge to help Molly weather the financial storm after she beats the virus. She organized a [GoFundMe page \(https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-molly-dawson039s-fight-against-covid?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet\)](https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-molly-dawson039s-fight-against-covid?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet) that's raised nearly \$8,000 to help Molly with all the medical expenses she's incurring while she's away from work. More than 120 people had reached out to help as of Monday morning.



Molly Dawson poses with her sister Claire Dawson, her mother Patty Dawson and her brother Ben Dawson. (Photo: Courtesy Patty Dawson)

"Molly has always been an incredibly loyal friend who is there for you when you need her most," Walsh told me. "I wanted her to have a cushion to fall back on, so she didn't have to be stressed out financially when she wakes up."

It could be a while, too, before she lands on that cushion.

This is a marathon, not a sprint, Patty told me. Molly had been on and off a medically induced paralysis and sedation. Her numbers had stabilized and slightly improved, but there wasn't any way to know if she'd stay that way.

On Friday, she was alert and could follow basic commands. All Patty could hope for in that moment was that Molly didn't backslide and that eventually, they could see her over FaceTime.

You may like: [Masks on, scissors out: What it's like to get a haircut in Kentucky under new restrictions \(/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/05/29/coronavirus-louisville-what-its-like-get-haircut-post-shutdown/5246261002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/louisville-city-living/2020/05/29/coronavirus-louisville-what-its-like-get-haircut-post-shutdown/5246261002/)

It's hard to know how long Molly may struggle with the virus, but Patty knows this isn't over yet. Time runs together for the Dawsons lately, but doctors speculate it could be four to six weeks before Molly recovers.

And that's if things go well.

For the moment, though, all Patty can do is look out the window at that Nashville hotel room and pray that her daughter makes it through.

She still sends Molly texts even though she knows it'll be a while before she can read them. Patty busies herself making lists of people to thank and chatting with Molly's nurse friends, who help translate what the doctors are saying into words she can understand.



TriStar Greenview Hospital intensive care unit nurse Molly Dawson. (Photo: Courtesy Patty Dawson)

What she understands more than anything lately, though, is that this isn't over yet and the world has really rallied around her daughter the same way the young nurse helped other people.

Before we got off the phone, I asked her to send me a photo of Molly.

A little while later a picture of a young, vibrant smiling woman holding a sign that says "It's a beautiful day to save lives" came across my phone.

Molly believed that.

Now the Dawsons are trusting everyone around her in that hospital does too.

Features columnist Maggie Menderski writes about what makes Louisville, Southern Indiana and Kentucky unique, wonderful, and occasionally, a little weird. If you've got something in your family, your town or even your closet that fits that description — she wants to hear from you. Say hello at mmenderski@courier-journal.com or 502-582-7137. Follow along on Instagram and Twitter @MaggieMenderski. Support strong local journalism by subscribing today: [courier-journal.com/maggiem](https://www.courier-journal.com/maggiem) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/maggiem>).

Read or Share this story: <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/life/wellness/health/2020/06/30/kentucky-icu-nurse-fighting-life-after-contracting-coronavirus/3263971001/>