

Nursing school graduates say pandemic confirmed their career choice

WASHINGTON (CNS) – The COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed much of the college experience for this year’s graduating class, but nursing school graduates may have felt this more acutely.

The pandemic forced them to initially learn procedures online that are very much hands-on, and it also constantly reminded them about the necessity of the field they had chosen and its challenges.

Early in the pandemic, news reports portrayed nurses on the front lines suffering from exhaustion and burnout while caring for COVID-19 patients and also often being the only ones with these patients when they died.

As the pandemic continued, hospitals across the country reported nursing shortages, but conversely, nursing schools had an increased number of applicants.

The week before their graduation, six nursing school graduates from Trinity Washington University in the nation’s capital [spoke to Catholic News Service](#) about their college experience during the pandemic and if they ever had second thoughts about their chosen profession.

While most of them acknowledged that it was harder to initially learn skills remotely, they said ultimately the pandemic confirmed and solidified their desire to be nurses.

Ebony McLeod, a 44-year-old graduate, said the COVID-19 pandemic “intrigued my calling even more.”

“Me becoming a nurse has been 17 years in the making, and so being able to live through a pandemic and learn how to have

nursing skills through that made me want to become a nurse even more," she said, just hours before the university's May 12 pinning ceremony – a traditional event for nursing graduates.

Similarly, Golden-Paula Eromose Emokpaire, who is 21, said the pandemic, which started during her first year of nursing studies, didn't change her career choice.

"I didn't have any doubts," she said. "I knew since Day One I wanted to be a nurse."

The pandemic confirmed her decision because even when people were dying of COVID-19 – the death rate now numbers 1 million deaths in the U.S. – she saw that nurses were "doing their best to give their patients the best care ever" and providing the holistic care she wants to do.

This determination was not always shared by everyone in the group, all of whom are recipients of the university's Joanne and William Conway Scholarship program for high-achieving low-income students in the school's nursing program.

"In all honesty, I did have some doubts at some point in the pandemic," said Keely Romero, a 21-year-old graduate who said she hadn't had any experience in the medical profession and no one she knew – outside of school – was a nurse.

"For me, it was like trial by fire," she said, but as she learned more about what the job entailed and read about people doing this work, she became more interested and "wanted to be a part of that."

Melissa Rivas, 29, similarly noted the challenge saying: "Every day it was kind of like, I don't know if I can do this. And for me, it was like each week I need to just get through this week."

She said the other students in the program similarly related

to this struggle, which was felt in online learning to working on the simulation mannequin that mimics various ailments and then working with patients during the students' hospital training sessions that started last spring.

Adonis Mokom, 23, said the online learning was hard to get used to because she is "not a virtual learner," but she held onto the feeling she had since she was a little girl that she wanted to be a nurse.

"The pandemic actually made me realize that 'hey, I have strength in me,'" she said, adding that she also relied on support of friends and family.

She got through exams by coming up with better ways of studying and making about 100 index cards to quiz herself.

A bigger hurdle, she said, was during the first clinical, or hospital training, where she said many of the patients they saw on the first day were basically OK during the day and then a few hours later tested positive for COVID-19 so she and the other students had to be tested as well.

Mokom's longtime desire to go into nursing stems from seeing so many family members with chronic or long-term conditions that weren't identified early on.

Emokpaire likewise followed the nursing path because of what her friends and family members experienced in Nigeria, where she grew up. As she put it, people lost their lives because of a health care system that "wasn't that great."

After moving to the U.S., her focus has shifted to racial disparities in health care where she hopes to make a difference.

Karina Nolasco, 22, also wants to reach out not just with medical skills. She said that studying for her nursing degree during the pandemic brought out a resiliency in her that she

didn't think she had and which she also credits those around her for helping her through.

She similarly wants to help others however she can, something she already witnessed in a small scale during her hospital training when she felt she was "able to be a voice" for women, immigrants and Hispanics.

This group of students, graduating May 20, is part of 30 nursing graduates from Trinity this year.

At their pinning ceremony, Patricia McGuire, Trinity's president, told them: "You have chosen a career that will literally change the lives of so many people. We are very proud of you."

And for these six, their careers will start soon after they put away their caps and gowns with jobs starting this summer at local hospitals where they will work in intensive care units and surgical and cardiac care.

They are confident their work will continue if the pandemic wanes or continues or with any other changes.

As McLeod put it: "I wanted to become a nurse because I realized that no matter what is going on in the world, a nurse will always be needed. It doesn't matter if the economy is up, if the economy is down, who's in charge, who's not in charge. A nurse will always be needed."