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## Hidden heroes: Hospital housekeepers on the front line battle COVID-19 with mops and wipes



Sherry Weitzel cleans the floor of COVID-19 patient Jan Beeghly's room on Dec. 9, 2020, at Mary Greeley. Weitzel showers as soon as she gets home and keeps her shoes in the garage, frightened that her dogs might lick the treads, then swipe her family's hands or faces.

**It takes an army to fight COVID-19. Hospital housekeepers save lives, too — just with sprays and sanitizer instead of shots and scripts.**

Courtney Crowder, Des Moines Register  
| USA TODAY NETWORK

**A**MES, Iowa — Door handles keep Sherry Weitzel up at night. Computer keyboards, too. Oh, and bed rails, faucets and light switches.

Really any “high-touch area,” she says, places where lots of hands meet lots of surfaces — many of which have pesky nooks and crannies that are breeding grounds for nasty infections like MRSA, C. diff, COVID-19, “any sort of ick.”



On Dec. 9, 2020, Sue Walsh holds a Woody doll from the movie “Toy Story,” which she photographs in funny places around Mary Greeley.

**“I can remember the first COVID room I did. It took everything I had to keep the tears back because I was so scared.”**

**Sherry Weitzel**, a housekeeper at Mary Greeley Medical Center

### ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the past few months, Mary Greeley Medical Center opened its doors to the Des Moines Register, allowing us to tell stories of dedication, sacrifice, exhaustion, loss, pain and joy from inside the hospital. This is the fourth of an occasional series.

As a housekeeper at Mary Greeley Medical Center, Weitzel is a professional ick fighter — felling her foes room by room in 10 minutes or less.

While doctors wrestle disease inside the body, Weitzel and her colleagues wield wipes and sprays, mops and rags to battle bugs on counters and tables. Their ultimate goal is to ensure that the next patient doesn't pick up whatever the last one brought in.

“If we're not doing our jobs right, that's exactly what's going to happen,” Weitzel says.

From cooks to valets to machinists to assistants to inventory managers to housekeepers, hundreds of people work behind the scenes to keep a hospital's ecosystem healthy so doctors can focus on healing.



Sherry Weitzel wears full PPE as her partner Sue Walsh wets a cloth to clean a COVID-19 patient's room at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames on Dec. 9, 2020.

**"We've seen numbers go up; we've seen numbers go down. We get to feel those emotions just like the rest of them."**

**Sherry Weitzel**, a housekeeper at Mary Greeley Medical Center

During the coronavirus pandemic, these employees are among the hidden heroes on health care's front lines.

As COVID-19 continues to sweep the country, many of these workers find themselves still side by side with white coats — even though they took a job, not an oath.

Just like their physician counterparts, the coronavirus's constant threat has worn them out, too. They've canceled vacations, missed family holidays and sat out weddings, funerals and graduations.

And as links in the supply chain strained and stress rose alongside patient counts, Mary Greeley's housekeepers found themselves responsible

for far more than just the custodians can be a patient. In the COVID era, patient's only visitor beyond



Sherry Weitzel cleans COVID-19 patient Jan Beeghly's room at Mary Greeley Medical Center on Dec. 9, 2020. Weitzel seeks to make a connection with patients by striking up a conversation as she works.



Housekeeper Sherry Weitzel cleans COVID-19 patient Jan Beeghly's room on Dec. 9, 2020, at Mary Greeley. Weitzel follows a 37-point cleaning process for an occupied room in the pandemic era.

medical staff, called on to be a listening ear or to coax a smile with a silly gag.

"We've seen numbers go up; we've seen numbers go down," Weitzel says. "We get to feel those emotions just like the rest of them."

Housekeepers save lives, too, she offers, just in a different way.

### Prepping for a menace

Outside Room 6015 on the hospital's COVID floor, Weitzel dons her protective equipment deliberately, layer by layer: mask, then gown, then face shield, then gloves.

While Weitzel cleans inside, her partner Sue Walsh stays in the hallway. Walsh slips on one glove to grab the room's trash, laundry and anything considered contaminated, but keeps one hand completely clean in case she has to run for fresh supplies.

With a knock and a greeting, Weitzel starts at patient Jan Beeghly's tray table. Years of cleaning rooms have taught her that patients calm down, settle in a little, when you address them face to face first.

Now they can see only her eyes through all the masks and shields, but the truth holds.

"Is there anything on your table you want me to throw away?" Weitzel asks, grabbing up a cup and some dishes.

"They're going to make me keep the rest, I think," Beeghly says of the scattered notes and medical devices.

"All right, well, we do what they say to make us

## INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

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better, don't we?" Weitzel says.

When Weitzel came to Mary Greeley about a decade ago, she was looking for health benefits, plain and simple, she says.

Her previous job made employees find their own insurance — an expensive endeavor given her husband's significant health issues.

Walsh, a teacher by trade, needed to supplement her substitute work while she looked for permanent placement. After a handful of years at Marshalltown schools, she returned to Mary Greeley full-time in spring 2019, a few months before an illness started spreading in China.

When COVID-19 reached American shores in early 2020, the housekeeping division refined its meticulous 37-point cleaning process for occupied rooms in the pandemic era. (For a "terminal clean," when one patient leaves and another comes in, the cleaning process has 171 points.)

First, to cut down on possible exposures, just a select few would clean COVID rooms. And, second, they'd always work in pairs; better to have two sets of eyes when one tiny mistake could mean infection.

As the pandemic crashed into the coasts, the bleach wipes Mary Greeley had long ordered became scarce, then nearly impossible to find. They switched brands, opting for a re-



Housekeeper Sherry Weitzel exchanges banter about home and family with COVID-19 patient Jan Beeghly as Weitzel cleans Beeghly's room at Mary Greeley on Dec. 9, 2020.



Dustin, a Woody doll from "Toy Story," finds himself in the oddest places around Mary Greeley. Housekeeper Sue Walsh brought him to the hospital to boost morale. She posts photos on the hospital's intranet to chronicle his adventures.

fillable spray bottle and a washable rag.

In mid-March, valet attendants stopped parking cars and instead screened temperatures at the door, hospital bouncers responsible for regulating who got in and who didn't.

Food service employees reconfigured parts of the cafeteria, posting at terminals 6 feet apart and ditching the salad bar and the popular payday make-your-own-taco station.

Everyone was ready for the onslaught.

And then they waited.

With spring surgeries canceled and the coronavirus not yet spiking, housekeepers had time to deep-clean operating rooms and surgical suites — nooks and crannies normally in high use. Oddly, the ear-



ly days felt like a break in the action, a moment to clear to-do lists.

"From top to bottom, left to right," Weitzel says. "I mean diagonal, everything got cleaned."

But the hospital's rooms wouldn't stay empty for long.

**'The smell of bleach now relaxes me'**

Inside Room 6015, Weitzel pulls a bag from the garbage can, ties it and places it near the door, knocking on the thick wood quietly.

"How long have you been here?" she asks Beeghly. Walsh cracks open the door with her clean hand, grabs the bag with her dirty hand and closes the entryway behind her.

Almost a month, Beeghly says. "My husband is at home."

"Well, you need to see him again!" Weitzel grabs the laundry, ties, knocks. "A break is good, but not that long!" Beeghly nods in agreement.

Walsh's hand appears, grabs the bag and disappears as Weitzel holds court while sweeping and sanitizing.

*Where are you from? Do you have any kids? Where do they live?*

Beeghly answers in kind, laughing along with Weitzel: *Conrad, Iowa; three; and all over, Marshalltown, Sioux Falls and Kansas City.*

After months of cleaning COVID rooms, Weitzel knows most patients are desperate to talk — if they can just catch their breath.

By late April, Mary Greeley's first COVID surge was underway.

Floors crowded, rooms filled up.

"I can remember the first COVID room I did. It took everything I had to keep the tears back because I was so scared," Weitzel says.

She worried about bringing the virus home to her family, a 16-year-old daughter, a 13-year-old son and an immunocompromised husband who surely wouldn't survive if he came down with COVID.

The "in-between moments" scared her most. The morning drive, the walk from her car to her office, all the times where you let your guard down and habit takes over. *Had she been careful enough? What had she missed?*

Both Walsh and Weitzel shower as soon as they get home. Weitzel keeps her shoes in the garage, frightened that her dogs might lick the treads, then swipe one of their hands or faces.

"I never used to clean my own home with bleach water," Walsh says. "Now I do because the smell of bleach now relaxes me because I know it's sanitized."

With repetition, the chest-gripping terror of catching COVID faded to a healthy fear, they say.

Walking into patients' rooms now, they're just sad. You can't help but have sympathy for people stuck in the hospital for days, weeks, in the worst cases, months, Walsh says.

"You want to be there, but we got to keep moving," she says. "It's heart-breaking because you don't want anybody to have to be alone in the hospital."

**A new team member, just for the fun of it**

In late fall, a new team member joined the housekeeping staff.

Waiting for her knocks, Walsh pulls out him out.

He's a doll. Specifically, a Woody from "Toy Story" that she keeps in her scrubs.

As the hospital's second wave crashed in October, the staff's stress level was at an all-time high, Walsh says. Everyone was exhausted and just, well, down.

They couldn't gather, holiday parties were out of the question. Housekeepers would learn a woman whom they'd joked with yesterday had died overnight. Even if they weren't holding the patient's hands and listening to their family say goodbye, the loss weighs.

Chalk it up to Walsh's years as a middle school teacher, but an idea struck: What if she brought in a figurine, carried it around the hospital and cataloged its adventures on their workplace Facebook. Kind of like a flat Stanley or a traveling gnome, she says.

So far Dustin — as Woody has been named — has been stuck in a vise, plunged into a soap dispenser, hung over cleaning solution, hidden among paper towels and sat at the CEO's desk.

"I'll take him for a while, I'll do something silly and then I'll say, 'OK, who wants him,' and they'll take him and they'll send me pictures like, 'Ope, caught him doing this,'" Walsh says. "That way everybody gets

a turn, being silly and having fun."

No politics. No medicine. Just *fun*.

With the pandemic far from over in Iowa, Dustin's become some needed respite.

The past year at the hospital has felt like a bad case of insomnia, Weitzel says. When patient numbers are up and people are dying, you can't sleep, no matter how heavy your eyelids. Then the hospital empties a bit and maybe, maybe, you can catch a wink.

But in the back of your mind, you know the cycle will repeat.

Walsh went to the ICU in December with orders to clean a room, but the nurse stopped her.

"You don't need to," she told Walsh. "He's gonna go see Jesus soon."

"It's like she's gonna lose another one," Walsh says. "How can that not drain you?"

As Weitzel and her fellow housekeepers move around the COVID floor, they've seen nurses break down. The nurses are not the same as they were a year ago; they're tired, drained, Weitzel says. But "like soldiers at war," they keep putting their boots on.

"I have cried for them," Weitzel says. "You pray for them at night because it's not about their ability to take care of their patients. It really is about the emotional piece that's tearing them apart."

Walsh and Weitzel bristle when compared to medical staff on the front lines. Those guys are *really* helping, they say, *really* putting themselves in harm's way.

But that's the thing

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about heroes; they often think there's someone else more worthy.

A decade ago, Weitzel came to this job for benefits, plain and simple. But somewhere along the way she found *her place*, she says, a chance to make a difference one spray-and-wipe at a time.

Good medicine is a lot more than pills and shots, she says. Good medicine includes a dash of humor and a dollop of heart — and a clean room.

With the high-touch areas cleaned and the garbage moved, Weitzel mops from the bathroom toward the door in a broad “S” pattern, twisting the edges with the flourish of a dancer.

“Oh, wow,” Beeghly says brightly, “you can come clean my house any day.”

Just over nine minutes since knocking, Weitzel is all finished.

“Anything I can get you before I go?” she asks.

“No ma'am,” Beeghly says.

Weitzel goes back to the tray table for one last look in her patient's eye.

“I sincerely wish you will get better,” she says. “Please take care of yourself, OK?”

As she turns to leave, she looks over her work.

Then she sprays the door handle one more time — just to be sure.



Jan Beeghly recovers in a room on the COVID floor at Mary Greeley Medical Center on Dec. 9, 2020. Beeghly died Feb. 2.

## Epilogue

Jan Beeghly, whom we profiled in Part 1 of the series, survived COVID-19 after spending more than a month at Mary Greeley.

Admitted on Nov. 13, Beeghly was transferred to the ICU two days before Thanksgiving and almost put on a ventilator. On the mend on the COVID floor about two weeks later, nurses secretly arranged for her husband, Roger, roses in arms, to visit her the moment she came out of isolation.

Two days before Christmas, staff gathered around her, clapping and cheering, as she rang the “going home bell” and left the hospital.

Jan Beeghly, 71, died on Feb. 2. She loved fishing, dominoes, cards, cooking and any activity that brought her closer to her friends and family.

For years, she prepared Thanksgiving dinner for 50 people, serving it at a hall in Conrad to fit her many guests.

“We'd invite anybody and everybody that wants to come,” she told me.

Jan was known to say, “As long as I made somebody smile, I had a good day,” her family wrote in her obituary.



Crowder



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