

# The Des Moines Register

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2021 | THE NEWS IOWA DEPENDS UPON | DESMOINESREGISTER.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## ‘I couldn’t be pulled away’: Young nurses hold phones and hands on an Iowa COVID-19 floor



Amanda Baetsle's shift was over. But Louis Luiken was fading faster than his family could get to the hospital. So she gowned up and grabbed a phone.

**Courtney Crowder**, Des Moines Register  
AMES, Iowa

A twinge of concern creeps into Jennifer Luiken's chest when the clock ticks past 4:15 p.m.

The FaceTime call with her father, Louis Luiken, was supposed to be at 4. She is anxious; this would be the first time she has laid eyes on her dad since the night he was rushed from his rural nursing home to the ICU, the coronavirus taking over more and more of his lungs.

4:30. The COVID-19

floor is busy, Jennifer tells herself. And goodness knows how many other families have asked for FaceTimes. Just wait.

Lou's bedside. He was "fragile" after transferring from the ICU that morning, but spent the afternoon in his recliner, quiet,

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**Mentally, you're trying to pour yourself into these patients.**

Marjie Duysen, a lead nurse at Mary Greeley Medical Center

4:45. Panic sets in. Hang on, she thinks. Breathe.

In the hospital, nurse Amanda Baetsle is at

comfortable.

Now, he takes big, heaving breaths, needing more and more oxygen.

### ABOUT THE SERIES

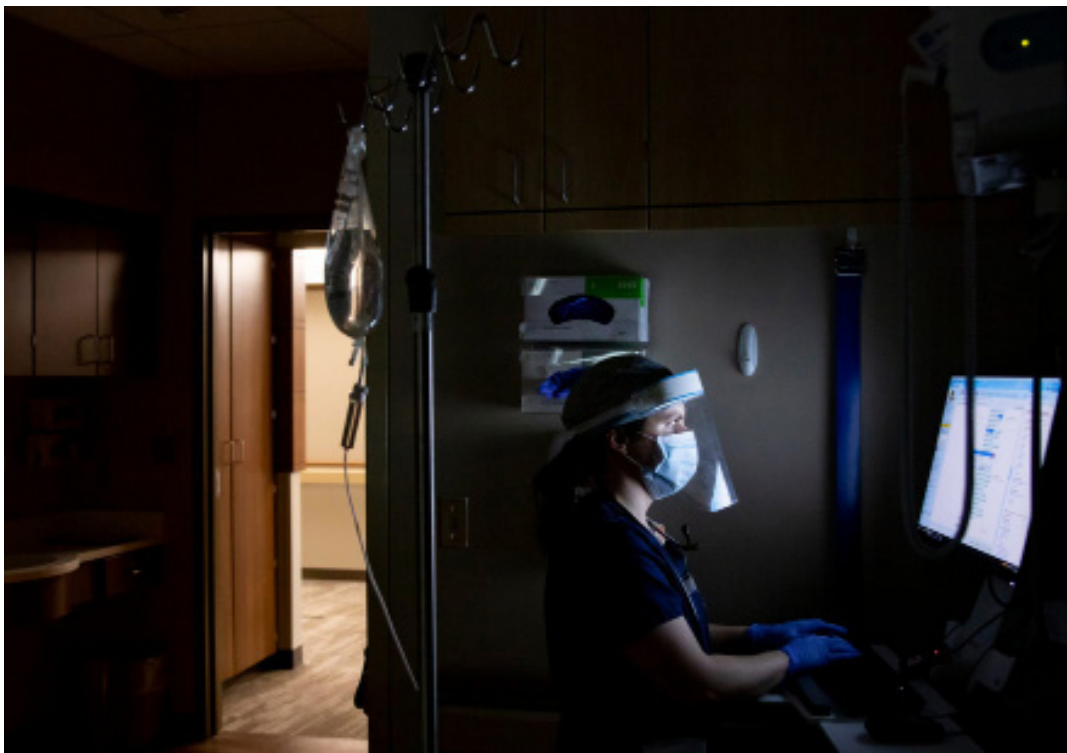
Over the past few months, Mary Greeley Medical Center opened its doors to the Des Moines Register, allowing us to tell stories of dedication, sacrifice, exhaustion, loss, pain and joy from inside the hospital. This is the fifth of an occasional series.

Confused, he pulls at his mask. Amanda and two others work quickly to stabilize him, changing therapies, moving IVs, dabbing sweat from his brow.

At 5 p.m., she rings Jennifer: *There's been a change. I don't know if this is a momentary setback or something significant. I'll call you back.*

Nearly a year ago, Amanda and her colleagues on the post-surgical floor were thrust into the battle against the coronavirus, asked not only to tend to dying patients but to shoulder the weight of being a family's only tether to a loved one suffering from a disease that's killed more Americans than World War II.

The sixth floor of Mary



Nurse Amanda Baetsle enters information into a patient's chart at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames on Feb. 12, 2021.

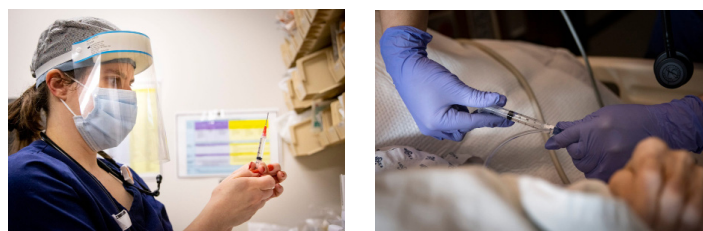
Greeley Medical Center used to be where people came to get fixed. Whether patients were rehabbing from a knee replacement or a broken hip, these nurses — many in their first few years as professionals — were tasked with getting them up and walking on their new joints. After a few days in the hospital, their patients left for a refreshed life.

But that was before COVID-19, before they got a crash course in palliative care. Since April, these nurses have become middlemen, the voice on the other end of the line delivering bad news when so many families crave a ray of hope.

Nursing school imparted technical knowledge, but the pandemic has taught them the importance of health care outside a hospital room. They now understand just how much a patient's wellness is tied to their family's emotional



Marjie Duysen, a nurse and shift lead at Mary Greeley Medical Center, on Dec. 9, 2020.



Nurse Amanda Baetsle prepares a syringe and injects a medication into a patient's IV while working at Mary Greeley Medical Center.

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**You're just at the end of yourself. You feel helpless because there is just nothing left to do but wait. I mean, literally.**

Jennifer Luiken

health, that separating the two is like unbraiding a pretzel.

Even as these nurses continue to show up, their desire to fix and their despair when they can't forms a ruthless feedback loop.

“You have this ideal of the nurse you're going to be, and you kind of hold yourself to that standard,” says Marjie Duysen, a nurse and shift lead. But COVID-19 pushes everyone to their limits.

“You see these nurses questioning themselves and the career they chose, even though they're fantastic nurses,” she adds. “All of us are struggling, and mentally, you're trying to pour yourself into these patients.”

In Lou's room, interventions and therapies aren't working. He's taking more than 40 breaths per minute, nearly quadruple the normal 14.

Amanda's shift ended two hours ago, but she gowns up and grabs a phone.

“Jennifer, this is Amanda,” she says. “I think this is something significant.”

## Singing son of a preacher's daughter

The outbreak in Lou's care center in Hubbard started with one resident's half-day trip to the doctor.

The virus spread slowly at first, bouncing between staff and residents, a local newspaper reported. One case became three. Three cases became six, became a dozen, proliferating like dividing cells.

The center went on lockdown as a containment measure, sequestering residents to their rooms — a tough break for Lou,

## INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

79, who always seemed to be roaming, always best when he could tangle minds with someone else.

“Ah man,” Jennifer commiserated, “But you’re feeling OK?” Yes, he assured her.

Raised in a German Baptist household, the son of a preacher’s daughter, Lou and his three brothers had the run of Steamboat Rock. Nature was their playroom, and whatever games they could imagine their entertainment.

Lou, a goofball to his core, loved harmless pranks — flicking the one loose piece on his metal school chair so *ting, ting, ting* rang out behind the teacher’s back — and Norwegian Ole and Lena jokes — real groooooaaners, says his other daughter, Suzanne Winkelpleck.

His parents were strict, but not in a ruler-on-your-knuckles way, Jennifer says. They were absolute about following a moral path: Work hard. Be honest. And if you know the difference between right and wrong, you do right, always.

Attending Buena Vista College, Lou joined the baseball team and the choir, pursuing an alto one grade below him named Patty. Separated in the summers and during her senior year of college — when Lou moved to Radcliffe to teach middle school social studies — the pair kept in touch through nearly daily letters. They married on a hot Iowa summer day in 1963.

A community stalwart in Radcliffe, a hamlet of about 600 residents, Lou eventually moved into sales and served on the



Lou Luiken’s family through the years. At top: Lou, his daughters Jennifer and Suzanne, and his wife, Patty. Bottom row from left: Lou and Patty’s wedding day, an early Christmas, and Lou with Jennifer.



Lou Luiken with his daughters, Jennifer Luiken and Suzanne Winkelpleck, taken on Christmas Eve 2019. | Jennifer and Lou after a Bingo sweep at his care center.

City Council and as mayor for years. He was the person you could count on to flip pancakes at 6 a.m. for a church fundraiser or give up a weekend to vol-

unteer at a town festival, Suzanne says.

When Lou had a family of his own, faith stayed central. They were in church three times a week,

Suzanne says, with her dad hosting Bible studies, teaching Sunday school and leading worship music.

On Sundays, as the preacher wrapped up his weekly sermon, Lou would start thumbing through the hymnal, searching for one that matched its message. And on weekend evenings, Lou and Patty performed with a Christian group, holding concerts in basements, halls, wherever someone wanted the Word sung.

Hymns were the soundtrack to Luiken life. Lou found meaning in their melodies, peace in their refrains, Jennifer says. His

mind was a metronome, a choir of voices playing in his head all the time.

“Even up until recently, anytime that you’re with him, if you would say part of a sentence that would remind him of a song, he would break out singing,” Suzanne says.

A day into the lockdown, Jennifer got a text from her sister.

“Call me,” Suzanne wrote.

“Is it Dad?” she replied.

“Yes.”

### A nurse daughter worries about frail father

Suzanne called off work at the wound center in Waterloo before she texted Jennifer.

She’d been bursting with energy just 24 hours before, light on her feet, deftly able to put her patients at ease. “This is a huge mountain,” she’d tell them of their injury, “But, eventually, you’re hardly going to think about it.”

Her daughter Sophie, a high school senior, came home sick in the afternoon. “Just feeling off,” she told her mom.

After dinner, Suzanne’s lightness faded. Exhaustion hit. Her temperature rose. She started shivering. She thought it could be COVID-19, but convinced herself that she’s just not a sickly person.

“I kind of felt, as a nurse, I had been around this before, MRSA and all kinds of bacteria,” she says. “I don’t remember the last time I had a fever til this happened.”

Working in health care for more than two decades, Suzanne was fascinated by COVID-19, so interested in its spread and



Suzanne Winkelpleck at her home in Dysart on Feb. 11, 2021.



Suzanne Winkelpleck holds a photo of her parents, Lou and Patty Luiken, at her home in Dysart on Feb. 11, 2021.

symptoms that her children begged her to stop talking about it: *Enough of your coronavirus doom and gloom, mom.*

well. A respiratory sickness was her worst nightmare.

Suzanne’s phone rang early that morning. Lou

checked Lou for COVID-19. He was positive.

She thought about what she tells her patients: *This is a huge mountain.* Just like them, she hoped, her dad would get over it.

But Lou had a simpler take: If he didn’t, he’d get to be with his beloved Patty again.

### Family fights the virus on two fronts

As her virus-stricken family recovered, Suzanne’s symptoms quickly worsened.

Walking from the bed to the bathroom left her panting. A ring of darkness formed around the exterior of her vision, throbbing inward along with her pulse. Coughing turned to dry heaving.

In rural Iowa, “there’s nowhere to go,” she says. “Your family doctor, you can’t go there. You can’t go to urgent care. There’s really nowhere to go to get checked out.”

She drove to the ER twice in 10 days, neither



**This is the first time I've had to work with people dying.**

Amanda Baetsle, a nurse at Mary Greeley Medical Center

But her obsessive fascination was really a cover for worry. Her dad’s Parkinson’s meant he didn’t have the strength to cough

fell overnight, a care center nurse said, and he was really, really weak.

Her heart sank.

On a suspicion, they’d

## INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

time qualifying to be admitted, and instead returning to fight the disease on her couch.

Lou's trajectory was gradual. He went from being a little tired to sleeping all the time. He ate less and less until he was so frail that the center's nursing director spoon-fed him applesauce. If he got much worse, she told Jennifer, they'd call an ambulance.

For days, Jennifer fielded calls on these two fronts, sister and father.

"You're just at the end of yourself," she recalls. "You feel helpless because there is just nothing left to do but wait. I mean, literally.

"People would ask what they could do for me, and I would say, 'All you can do is pray.'"

The disease spread past the center's pre-planned COVID-19 quarantine area, through the hallways and finally into the Alzheimer's wing — the unit that brought the Luiken family to the center in the first place.

About a decade ago, their matriarch, Patty, started having little memory slips. As the dementia worsened, Lou, her husband of 50 years, became her caretaker, prepping meals, running errands.

She developed paranoia as the disease progressed, demanding that Lou take her home, to *her real home*. He'd drive their small town to calm her, asking her to point out her house and eventually pulling back into their driveway.

When the care became too much, the family got Patty a room in the center's Alzheimer's wing, and Lou moved in down

the hall.

He'd walk over to her

closed her mouth and opened her eyes wide, Lou

you."

### Nurse as go-between: 'She's saying she loves you'

For over an hour, Amanda and her fellow nurses tried to stabilize Lou, now in his sixth day of hospitalization, but he is slipping. His cheeks puff in and out violently under the mask forcing oxygen into his lungs.

On FaceTime with Jennifer, Amanda raises the phone over Lou's face, finding the right angle, and rubs his chest near his heart. "Can you see?" she asks, her fingertips visible on Jennifer's screen. "It's your daughter."

Like many others on the floor, Amanda was drawn to nursing to help people. She's studious, but incredibly shy. One on one, in these private moments with her patients, she could be the boost someone needs.

On the surgical floor, she delighted in getting patients up, helping them walk on their new joints. Her patients left the hospital; any other ending was few and far between.

"This is the first time I've had to work with people dying," she says.

Amanda tries to hold the camera steady as she strokes Lou's arm.

"I love you," Jennifer starts repeating. Suzanne loves you, your grandkids love you, your son-in-law loves you.

"Do you hear her?" Amanda asks. "She's saying she loves you."

Lou can't speak, but he touches his heart, right where Amanda is massaging. He reaches up to the phone — not like he wants to grab it himself, more



Lou and Patty Luiken



Suzanne Winkelpreck shares photos and love letters exchanged by her parents, Lou and Patty Luiken.



unit every afternoon, and they'd sit on a loveseat. She was nonverbal then,

said, before staff wheeled her away.

For years, he kept Pat-

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**Sometimes you can't give people time. I felt like, just being there, it was almost giving me something because I could give them my time.**

Amanda Baetsle, a nurse at Mary Greeley Medical Center

but he'd just hold her. On days Lou couldn't make his trip, the staff set a big teddy bear next to Patty, who'd curl into its fluff.

"Mom was just a shell of herself by then, but he just didn't see that," Suzanne says.

Patty died at the breakfast table in 2017, about a year into their stay. She

ty's memory alive in pictures draped all over his room, a veritable shrine, and by reading, sometimes out loud, all those love letters.

"Dearest Lou, how wonderful it would be to be near you!" she wrote in one. "And to be able to snuggle into your arms and tell you that I love

## INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

like he wants to stretch his hand through the screen to feel his daughter's face.

"I'm here," Jennifer repeats. *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.*

Amanda squeezes Lou's hand and tells him it's Jennifer squeezing. "He's trying to squeeze back," she says.

There's a point in these situations where you give over your physical being to someone else, Amanda says. You become their instrument.

"Heaven awaits," Jennifer says. "Mom's there. She's there to welcome you home."

Jennifer dials in Suzanne, who's on the mend, but far from out of the woods. Lou waves, tries to smile.

"Even in that moment, he's trying to make us feel calm," Jennifer says. "To take the worry away from us about what's happening."

Another nurse tends to the medical side, IVs and monitors, but Amanda occasionally puts the phone down to help. Each time, she leaves it right next to Lou's ear, making sure he can always hear his daughters.

When words fail, Jennifer and Suzanne lean on the soundtrack of their lives. Jennifer pulls out her dad's old hymnal, thumbing through for ones that match the moment.

They sing through their tears. Suzanne, still gasping, adds a harmony, piping in as long as her own lungs will let her.

"I have no idea what hymns we were singing, but we know a lot of them, so she would just pick a new one," Suzanne says. "We were just trying to be whatever we thought

would comfort him at the time."

Amanda kneels beside his bed, holding his hand, rubbing his chest as the pair sing and sing. Someone passes Amanda a message that she can go. She stays.

Lou's breathing calms, his body loosens. His daughters' refrains echo as he drifts off to sleep, death fought back for one more night.

By the time Amanda

that she wished she could have reassured in this way.

"Sometimes you can't give people time," she says. "I felt like, just being there, it was almost giving me something because I could give them my time."

Shift lead Marjie calls her nurses after difficult deaths. You did everything you could, she reminds them. You tried to be a fixer, but sometimes COVID-19 is stronger

they had a full life, that they were loved. Replace the picture in your mind, she says.

A couple of days after another hard loss, Marjie called Amanda. They went to a lake nearby with her son and hung out all day.

They didn't talk about the deaths. They just sat with each other, breathing in the lake air.

Breathe in. And out. In. Out.



**I think people become truly who they are created to be in crisis situations like this, and those nurses, the people at that hospital, they were revealed to be living their calling.**

Suzanne Winkelpleck

hangs up, finally able to remove her mask and shield in the hallway, she's been at Lou's side nearly four hours.

### **At the end, nurses sub as missing moms**

On her way home, Amanda replays the events over and over. *Had she done the right things? Said the right things?* Lou and his family run through her mind as she tries to sleep.

"I don't think there was a decision about staying or not staying. It was just I couldn't be pulled away," she says. "I had that feeling like I needed to stay."

And part of her was channeling other patients, she says, other families

than us.

"Some nurses will say, 'I'm having nightmares,' like, 'I'm seeing this patient's face,'" she says. "They just can't get it out of their head."

When Marjie had a baby a few years ago, she started looking at palliative care differently. Now, as she sits with the dying, she asks herself: "What would their mom do?"

"I just think, when I take care of these patients, this is someone's baby," she says. "They don't have anyone here to tell them, 'It's OK.' So I'll just hold their hand and tell them, 'It's going to be OK.'"

Look up your patient's obituaries, she tells the nurses who are having a hard time coping. See that

### **Soundtrack of a life plays again**

Lou rallied for a few days, but Suzanne and Jennifer knew the nurses weren't hopeful. During two different check-ins, nurses cried with Jennifer. "We really like your dad," one said.

After her second ER trip, Suzanne started to feel "7% better every day," she says. When the call came that her dad was dying, she mustered the strength to be at his bedside.

Slowly walking the long route from the parking lot to the COVID-19 floor, Suzanne thought about how many times these young nurses had helped family members just like

## INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

her put on all the PPE and shown them into a room, knowing, with so much repetition, what they were going to experience.

Even as she faced her father's death, Suzanne felt a pang of relief. Lou was older and had co-morbidities, but Amanda saw only a dad with daughters who loved him. The future of nursing, Suzanne's passion, was well-held in the hands of these young caregivers.

"Despite the yuck that was 2020, we had the goodness, the humanness of people revealed to us," Jennifer says. "I think people become truly who

they are created to be in crisis situations like this, and those nurses, the people at that hospital, they were revealed to be living their calling."

The care center's outbreak lasted more than a month, pushing employees to work days on end, the local newspaper reported. The virus eventually tore through more than 90 percent of residents and dozens of staff members.

Nearly a week after Amanda called, Suzanne and Jennifer again take to the soundtrack of their childhood. With monitors turned off, the beeping

quieted, the hymns ring even clearer.

In the middle of a refrain, Lou closes his mouth, opens his eyes wide and passes.

*Go be with mom*, they say.

A few days later, Suzanne dreamed she was in the sanctuary of her childhood church, her dad in their regular pew. They didn't speak, but she leaned down to give him a hug, "just a really, really good hug," she says.

It was the sort of hug she likes to think Patty gave him, overjoyed that her teddy bear was finally replaced with the arms she snuggled for 50 years.



Crowder



Boyden-Holmes

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