Rolling with the pandemic punches: Local nurse has fought COVID from many angles — from a leader in the early days of the breakout and from a bed as she battled for her life

- By David Witte/News-Sentinel Sports Writer

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Donna Navarte has seen COVID-19 from many angles.

The licensed vocational nurse (LVN) fought it as a leader in Vienna Nursing and Rehabilitation Center’s Red Zone, the facility’s 19-bed COVID-19 ward.

She also fought it from a hospital bed after catching the virus herself.

On Nov. 16, Navarte will be one of 12 individuals honored as a Health Care Hero by the California Association of Health Facilities at its annual convention in Palm Springs.
“I’m very thankful. Vienna has been very supportive in their prayers. I’m just thankful for them, especially my administrator,” Navarte said. “They were with me when I was first admitted in the hospital. I gave them updates, but when I got really sick and I had to go to the ICU, I wasn’t sure that I was going to make it. I said to my D.O.N. (Director of Nursing), this is the reason I became a nurse. Ever since I was little, I knew this was what I want to do, this was my dream.”

Navarte has mixed emotions about receiving the award — she’s proud of her 18-year career at Vienna, and that she volunteered immediately for the Red Zone when the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread. Vienna had 56 patients catch the virus in the month after the first positive case.

She also remembers fighting for her life at Kaiser Hospital in Modesto. She said she still wakes up at night with nightmares of being back in the intensive care unit, with the smell of the hospital room and the feeling of IV needles in her arm.

“To tell you the truth, it was an awakening for me as a patient,” Navarte said. “I don’t expect to be a patient, you know? The feeling of being alone, you want to do things for yourself, but you have to depend on other people.”

Navarte was a leader in the Red Zone, working 12-hour shifts during the day. Her husband, a C.N.A., worked 12-hour night shifts. Their son stayed with grandparents in Las Vegas.

“I love to help. I love to care for patients and people. I took an oath as a nurse,” Navarte said. “I was scared. They were still studying what COVID was about. We were taking precautions with proper PPE, Corey (Wright, administrator) made sure we were supplied with PPE, the D.O.N. was making sure we were doing what we need to do.”

Navarte was leaving work in July when she began to feel symptoms — chills, fever, and shortness of breath.
“I didn’t even make it home. I had one of my coworkers ... take me to the emergency room,” Navarte said. “From there I never returned.”

Navarte said she has diabetes, a dangerous underlying condition when it comes to COVID-19. She was admitted to the ICU, and was in for the fight of her life.

Even while fighting the virus, Navarte was working — checking in on her coworkers and patients.

“She and the facility kept in close communication and we at some point had to tell her to stop texting for facility updates in order for her to concentrate on getting better,” Wright said in a press release. “Hospital staff ended up taking her cell phone away to ensure needed rest.”

But things got more serious as the disease progressed, and soon she was told drastic action was needed.

“When they said they had to intubate me, I said this is it,” Navarte said. “I had to call my parents.”

Navarte called her family and said what she thought would be her last goodbye, to her parents, to her husband and child, to her sister Valerie Lacuesta, a doctor who was the one who pushed Navarte to pursue her dreams of working in healthcare.

But she pulled through, and soon she was a patient at Vienna, in post-acute rehabilitation. In September, two months after she tested positive, Navarte was back at work with what she considers to be a second life.

“Life is more important. I don’t care about money, or materials,” Navarte said. “It’s life, about being with family and friends.”

Today, Navarte gets emotional when talking about the experience and how thankful she is for her family and her team at Vienna.
“I appreciate them. They’re like my family. They also updated my family,” she said about her Vienna coworkers. “I’m very appreciative from the bottom of my heart. I just love them, because without them I wouldn’t be here.”