



Retired Alton Firefighter, Now Registered Nurse Robert Whitener Is Helping In COVID-19 Response In Yonkers, N.Y.

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON - During the current COVID-19 pandemic that has swept across the country and around the world, many medical professionals, such as doctors, nurses, paramedics, among others, are currently being hailed as heroes who are risking their lives in order to help out patients that are currently suffering from the disease. Some have traveled from near and far to assist others in many areas that are being hit the hardest by the pandemic.

Retired Alton firefighter Robert Whitener, who is now a registered nurse and earned his degree from Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, has answered that call for

help, and is now in Yonkers, N.Y., located about 25 minutes from New York City, assisting with the response of the pandemic, which has hit both the city and state of New York particularly hard. He's working as a nurse in an intensive care unit of the local hospital in Yonkers.

Whitener, a 30-year resident of the Alton area and a former letter carrier for the United States Postal Service in Alton, was inspired to volunteer by watching news reports on the pandemic from New York.

"I was being bombarded by recruiters who were trying to find qualified nurses to go there and help, but I wasn't really interested in going there at first," Whitener said in a recent interview. "One day, I was watching the news, and two things moved me to change my mind: Several interviews with nursing staff in New York. that they described their hardships, their exhaustion, the stress of the pandemic. But they also described the joy they had when they got a COVID patient through the roughest part of the disease, and to discharge them from the hospital. That made me to really get involved, but I did not make a move yet. Then I saw my fellow firefighters in the city going to the hospital and cheering on with lights, sirens and sounds of praise. Me being a retired firefighter, I realized I wouldn't get to do that, but I can go and help where I can, so I signed up."

While in Yonkers, Whitener will depend on his firefighting and paramedic skills, plus his ability to deal with crisis situations in a calm and reassuring manner, to help his patients, along with lessons learned along the way as an Alton firefighter and his faith in God.

"I feel that firefighting taught me to deal with a crisis in an objective way," Whitener said. "When I was a new firefighter, Tim Spaulding was my line chief. He always taught us 'It's not your emergency. You are there to assist others with their emergency. If you treated it as your emergency, then you can't help anyone.' Being able to do that calms me and keeps my feelings in check while I do the best job I can to help the patients and staff. Also, I will always be grateful for the critical thinking skills being a paramedic brought me. But the greatest help for me is what I have learned from the Bible, that things like this pandemic is part of the signs of the last days that Jesus Christ foretold were to occur. It calms me because I know soon that Jehovah God will usher in a world free from sickness and death," citing the Book of Revelations 21: 3, 4.

In addition, Whitener also enjoyed a reunion with Sarah Rookey, a nursing school classmate from LCCC who now lives in Cape Coral, Fla., on his first shift. Both Whitener and Rookey hadn't seen each other in 10 years since their graduation from nursing school together, and were very glad to see they would both be working on the same team.

"It was actually in nursing school, and we had many classes together," Rookey recalled. "It was all clinical classes, with all the core skills, so we had our hands-on training at a facility, but he was always around for us. He always made sure we were all OK and safe. He was just like the big brother of the group."

When Rookey discovered that they would be working together, she was very pleasantly surprised, looking ahead to working with Whitener.

"It was so neat," Rookey said. "I saw his name on a list, and i said 'no way!' I contacted him, and it was so nice to see him again."

Rookey has enjoyed working together with her classmate, and they both have something in common as they fight the disease. She also takes comfort in working alongside Whitener.

"The people are all experienced, and they're wonderful," Rookey said. "We're all working together to fight COVID-19. It's a familiar face in something totally new."

While in Yonkers, Whitener hopes to accomplish many things, including assisting his fellow nurses, hoping to save many lives, and to provide kindness and friendship to his patients.

"I hope to bring some relief to my fellow nurses by being able to put one more nurse on the line," Whitener said. "Although I can't perform any miracles, like Christ, I want to try to help heal those who need it so desperately. If I am not able to save their lives, I can be there to comfort them, like many nurses have been doing while they pass, since families are not allowed in hospitals at this time. They will not die alone, I will be there holding their hand."

Many people are seeing not only health care workers as heroes during the pandemic, but also first responders, retail and grocery store workers, among others. Whitener doesn't necessarily see himself as a hero, but as a worker who answered the call, and he encourages others to do so if they have the opportunity.

"A lot of people call us heroes right now," Whitener said. "I don't think any of us wanted to be called heroes, we just want to do our jobs and go home to our families at night. People do not choose to be called heroes, but history picked them. It is just now our turn to be on the front line. If you are considering coming here to New York City or to another hard-hit area, there will be some who will try to discourage you to go, because they do not want to see their loved ones go to the front. This is an experience that you will be proud you were a part of, and you will meet people who are so grateful that you answered the call. When we first stepped on the unit, a nurse was moved to tears upon

seeing us walk through the door. Everyone from hospital staff to the people you see in the market always thanking us. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So if your spirit is moving you to go help, don't hold back. Give what you can, even if only for a few weeks."

Whitener thinks that his classmate is a shining example of the high quality of people who come from the Riverbend area, and also uses their impromptu reunion as an example to encourage others to volunteer.

"That is a real testament about the kind of people who come from our area," Whitener said. "So if you come, who knows who you may be reunited with? This is a small world that, despite what we may see on the news so often, it's still filled with good people."





