

Mother, Daughter On AMH COVID Front Line

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ALTON – It's nice to say that your co-workers are like family. In many instances, of course, that's literally true. And at Alton Memorial Hospital, that's the case in what has become one of the more high-profile departments for any hospital since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Natashia Womack took over as the Occupational Health nurse in late 2019. A few months later, her daughter, Brittany Nicholson, joined her in the department. Womack was happy to get the help, with Occupational Health suddenly thrust into the spotlight for monitoring COVID-19 cases among employees.

“It was way more than I bargained for,” Womack said about the job she accepted when COVID was just starting to make the news. “Just as wacky as this pandemic makes me, it makes me happy that management and my co-workers trust me to help them through this.”



Indeed, Womack has become even more respected and popular at AMH in the past year and a half, although she was already well respected for her years in the Emergency Department. In fact, she was named the 2020 AMH Employee of the Year.

“Having Tash and Brittany standing alongside our team on the front lines of this pandemic has created one of the many pillars to help us fulfill the mission of Alton Memorial Hospital,” said AMH President Dave Braasch. “We truly have an amazing group of people taking care of people in our community. Many thanks to both of them for all they do.”

“We are very fortunate to have Natashia and Brittany in the AMH Occupational Health office,” said Barb Archambault of Human Resources, which oversees the Occ Health office. “Knowing they are taking fabulous care of our employees is a blessing.”

Womack had little time to get settled in her new role before COVID-19 threw everything into overdrive.

“I wondered if I was going to like OH after having so much love for the ED,” she said.

Maybe it was time to make work more like family. Nicholson graduated from the CALC Institute of Technology’s LPN program in 2017 and was working at a nursing home when she came to AMH a year ago.

“It was an opportunity for change,” Brittany said. “I was pretty fed up with my job at the time. My mom would call me and vent about her workload and how bad she was in need of help and I would jokingly say, ‘Tell your boss I’ll come work with you!’ Then after a while, the joke wasn’t so funny to my mom anymore as she was steadily drowning as the demands of COVID seemed never-ending. The rest is history.”

It’s paid off as “Tash” and Brittany have led the way in Occupational Health, and AMH has achieved a very high percentage of employees who have had the COVID-19 vaccine. As with anywhere else, that could be a hard sell to many.

“Brittany and I could tell them how the vaccine affected us, and that was a help in persuading some employees that did not want it to get it,” Womack said “I also put in the reminder that most health care systems usually follow suit, since BJC was the first health care system that made the vaccine mandatory in June. But convincing some employees was very hard and I constantly had to just become the listener.

“I was very encouraged by the turnout of employees to the walk-in clinics that were held prior to the vaccine being mandated. And now I’m discouraged about how many frontline workers are not interested in the vaccine -- and they are some of the very ones who have had experience from a death related to COVID.”



The first vaccinations were available right before Christmas, and Nicholson was immediately encouraged.

“Working the mass vaccination clinics in December and January, and seeing the excitement in so many employees’ eyes about the vaccine, feeling as though by getting the vaccine it was the first step to getting back to life as we knew it pre-pandemic, was encouraging to me. At that time, I was still on the fence as far as getting the vaccine.”

During “normal” times, Occupational Health could almost be an afterthought for many employees. That certainly isn’t the case now.

“It has been very interesting and enlightening to see how many co-workers and managers really depend on our advice and thoughts about COVID,” Womack said. “A lot of them made me want to learn and explore more about COVID so I could have the most updated information to give them.”

“Taking care of the employees during this pandemic has definitely been an experience for me,” Nicholson said. “Seeing the effect it has on your co-workers has been surreal. I wouldn’t say I’ve done that much as far as convincing the employees to get the vaccine, but through the clinics I’ve had to do a lot of mind-easing and reasoning with employees. Some were understanding and felt better after our talk.”

Working together as mother and daughter has its pluses and minuses, but Womack and Nicholson are making the best of it.

“It was challenging at first due to me being more critical than her,” Womack said with a laugh. “Then when she was around me more she could see why I cross all my T’s and dot all my I’s. I feel like she compliments my skill set with her experience from nursing homes and group homes. Brittany is calmer and has better listening skills. I’m very easily excitable. She has a daughter’s intuition to pick up when I’m stressed. I’m not good at delegating and she knows which part she needs to take over because she knows I will try to do it all alone.”

“It’s a lot better now!” Brittany says. “In the beginning, I wasn’t so sure I would stay. We were always clashing because when my mom is overwhelmed because of her passion for what she does, she comes off very dramatic and is very transparent. Then you have me, on the other hand. When I’m overwhelmed, you’ll only know if I say it aloud. So we actually learned about one another through working together. We discovered one another’s strength and how we complement one another.”

Womack has worked as a CNA, at the Alton Mental Health Center and a few other hospitals and spent 13 years in the ED at AMH. After a few years at Barnes and Children’s Hospital, she returned to Alton in 2018 in the Nursing Float before taking the Occupational Health job in late 2019. Another daughter, KeAndrea, is a mental health tech at Alton Mental Health and is finishing up her pre-requisites for nursing school.

For now, the work continues fighting COVID-19. Womack and Nicholson will remain firmly on the front line.

“I was kind of right about the pandemic in that I figured we would have another surge, but I thought it would not be until late September or October,” Womack said. “I feel like this will be like the past flu outbreaks and will eventually die down from vaccines being offered yearly.”

“It’s been discouraging to see many employees feeling discouraged and once again worn out with this Delta variant,” Nicholson said. “I’m praying that vaccination rates increase and this all will pass.”