

Prayer, ICU Team Lead Family Through COVID

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ALTON - As a woman of faith, Amanda Gavaza is grateful to God and the Intensive Care Unit at Alton Memorial Hospital for her husband recovering from COVID-19.

Stephen “Walt” Gavaza, 44, came to the Emergency Department on the evening of July 20 with severe breathing difficulties after testing positive three days earlier. Little did the Gavazas know that it would be Aug. 28 before Walt would return home.

“If I didn’t have my faith, I don’t know where I would have been,” Amanda says. “I just kept praying that Walt would get off the ventilator so he could return home to be with his family and friends. I never really thought that he wouldn’t. I couldn’t let myself think like that. I had to give it to God and keep it together just as I promised Walt I would do.

“It was a hard time, but I can’t say enough about the support I was receiving from our friends, family and our new second family -- the Alton Memorial ICU team. They were absolutely amazing through the whole process.”

Walt and Amanda were both tested at a walk-in clinic July 17 in Jerseyville, where they live with their four children. Amanda was negative the first test but soon learned they both tested positive.

“After a couple days, it just wasn’t working for Walt to be home,” Amanda said. “We came to the ER at around 8 p.m. July 20, then he was admitted to the third floor (Medical Care Unit) by 4 a.m. Walt took a turn for the worse, so he was transferred to ICU on July 23 and had to be placed on a ventilator July 28. I could tell the staff was preparing me for a few things in the days before he was placed on the vent. They couldn’t have been any more caring.”

For the first 15 days in the ICU, Amanda could only see Walt through the glass but couldn’t get close enough to touch. On day 11 she was finally able to hold his hand again. Walt was vented for a total of 15 days.

“The ICU staff was just wonderful in keeping me informed,” she said. “It brought me great comfort to see the care they provided Walt, and really all of their patients. The care given allowed me comfort to still go to work for a while, and then come to the hospital and spend the rest of my day watching over Walt.

“They would talk to him like he was awake, and I think he could understand some of it, at least that’s what the head nods made me think. The ICU staff puts their patients care first all of the time, but to watch them all come together and work as they do to prone their patients, and the aftercare that’s required, you realize quickly what an unbeatable team they have on that floor.”



On day 18 in ICU and day 13 on the vent, Amanda was told by one of Walt's nurses, Jarrick Lumma, that Walt's numbers had started to look a little better. That was all she needed to hear.

"I got my burst then," she said. "I knew he would make it off the vent soon. He is too stubborn not to. Jarrick was saying 'We got this.'

"Walt was responding right away as he came out of sedation, although we eventually needed to get a dry erase board so he could communicate with me without getting too aggravated that I wasn't a mind reader."

When Walt came off the ventilator, Amanda called it "our miracle." And that wasn't just for the Gavaza family.

"It was just as amazing to watch the reactions of the ICU staff," she said. "They were fist-bumping, raising the roof walking down the hall, and many tears of joy were shed. As great as it was for us to see Walt's improvements, it was just as exciting for them, because too often they see it go the other way. They kept telling him that he was a miracle. And we believe that."

Walt came off the ventilator Aug. 11, but still had more than two weeks before he was finally able to go home Aug. 28. A few weeks later, it was still all he could do to walk from his recliner to the kitchen table. And he uses a wheelchair to get around the house for the most part.

“My birthday is Aug. 16, and that was Walt’s goal to get off the ventilator before then,” Amanda said. “He was my greatest gift. It was of course very hard for our children, and we actually tried to keep a lot of the details away from our two youngest while all this was happening. They knew what daddy needed, a whole lot of prayers and love, and that is exactly what they sent him.

“We know it’s a blessing. The glory goes to God. It’s the power of prayer, not just from our church, but our whole community lifting us up and being added to all their prayer chains, our family and friends, and the ICU staff at Alton Memorial.”