

AMERICA RESPONDS

Humble heroes

Everyday Americans have made a big impact with even small gestures

Matt Alderton
Special to USA TODAY

Although it affects different people in different ways, COVID-19 typically manifests two to 14 days after exposure with such symptoms as fever, cough and shortness of breath. For anyone who has surveyed its impact on Americans more broadly, however, another symptom of the novel coronavirus has become exceedingly obvious: kindness. In the face of a global pandemic that has robbed them of graduations, weddings and vacations — not to mention the more than 100,000 friends, neighbors and relatives whose lives it has claimed — Americans of all ages, professions and backgrounds have responded with acts of goodwill that no one expects but everyone needs. Here are just a few of their stories.



A tent set up by Salerno Medical Associates to handle COVID-19 patients. SALERNO MEDICAL ASSOCIATES

'You hunker down and fight'

Dr. Alexander Salerno is a primary care physician with offices in Orange, East Orange and Newark, New Jersey. He inherited his practice, Salerno Medical Associates, from his parents, who established it in the 1950s. After race riots in Newark in 1967, many doctors and business owners fled the city for other, whiter communities. But the Salernos stayed and have been caring for New Jersey's urban poor ever since.

"My parents taught me that when the going gets tough, you don't get up and leave. You hunker down and fight. So that's what we did when COVID-19 hit," Salerno says. His practice began treating COVID-19 patients exclusively in March, when he set up tents outside his offices where clinicians could provide coronavirus triage, testing and treatment.

Testing was especially crucial, Salerno says, because of "silent spreaders" — people who have the virus but are showing no symptoms and transmit it without



Alexander Salerno
SALERNO
MEDICAL
ASSOCIATES

knowing. So Salerno decided to test everyone he could.

Unfortunately, many people in low-income communities lack transportation to get them to where they can be tested. Salerno therefore spent \$42,000 on a van that he turned into a mobile clinic he could park on street corners, outside senior housing and at churches. By June, his team had tested more than 6,000 people in New Jersey's hardest-hit communities.

"Testing is really important, and it has to be done in every nook and cranny of our communities," Salerno says.

Caring conversations

As a physician at Clark Memorial Health in Jeffersonville, Indiana, Dr. Rahel Teferra works on the front-most lines of the pandemic. When the virus peaked in southern Indiana, she was seeing as many as 20 suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients a day. Those who most appreciate her presence, however, are



Rahel Teferra
COURTESY OF RAHEL TEFERRA

her patients' loved ones, whom she personally calls every day since they aren't allowed to visit.

"Families of these patients are scared," Teferra says. "Sometimes conversations are difficult and sad. ... There are stressful conversations, like end-of-life discussions. It can be trying, but it has to be done."

Because some COVID-19 patients must spend more than a month sequestered in the hospital, the daily conversations give family members a sense of routine and connection.

"Family members tell us about what kind of a person their loved ones are, what they did, what hobbies they had. These conversations make me feel I know the person as more than just a patient in a hospital bed at their worst time in their lives," Teferra says. "Families feel reassured knowing that we can have a normal conversation with them — that there is a human being on the other side of the phone who is responsible for the care of their beloved."

AMERICA RESPONDS



Taylor Smith with other FEMA volunteers. COURTESY OF TAYLOR SMITH

EMT earns an 'A' in empathy

When she was 16, Taylor Smith began volunteering for an emergency medical service near her home in South Jersey. That's when she decided to become a paramedic. Just a few years later, she's studying emergency medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and working as an emergency medical technician in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania.

When COVID-19 hit its peak in the Northeast, the Federal Emergency Management Agency sought volunteers to help meet the increased demand for emergency medical care in New York. Although she was staring finals week in the face, Smith signed up. Just 20 years old, she was among the youngest responders deployed by FEMA to assist ambulance crews in the New York metro area.

"For the first five days, we worked 24-hour shifts with 12 hours off in between," says Smith, who deployed for two weeks in April and took her final exams remotely between shifts.

Although many of her patients did have COVID-19, she says the people she helped most were those who didn't have the virus but were terrified that they might. "A lot of people were really scared but didn't need to be. It was nice that we could reassure them."

As for her finals: She ended the term with a 3.9 GPA — her best semester yet.



Jeremy Ragsdale builds a clear panel through which senior living residents can interact with loved ones. THRIVE SENIOR LIVING



Jeremy Ragsdale
SARA HANNA PHOTOGRAPHY

A clear solution for families

Because COVID-19 is especially dangerous for older adults, Atlanta-based Thrive Senior Living made a difficult decision in March: It would stop allowing visitors at the 17 senior living communities it operates in eight states.

"While closing the communities to visitors was unquestionably the right thing to do, it has been so heartbreaking," founder Jeremy Ragsdale says. "Closing the communities has ripped apart spouses, pulled sons and daughters away from parents, and reduced the precious time that grandparents and great-grandparents have with the next generations."

Although they supported his decision, many family members reached out to Ragsdale to plead for a way to interact with their loved ones — somehow, some way. His solution: "Clear Connection"

panels, transparent plexiglass barriers that allow residents and visitors to see each other and interact without coming into contact or breathing the same air. (They speak through phones.)

"We custom-built each Clear Connection panel to fit snugly inside the front doors of each community," Ragsdale says.

He designed and constructed the panels himself with materials from Home Depot. "I enlisted the help of my dad, who is more skilled in this area, and we designed the prototype on graph paper over the phone," he says.

Within 72 hours, Ragsdale had built 10 panels, and by early June he'd finished and installed 15. "There is certainly nothing proprietary about these ... but the moments they've helped foster are truly magical," he says.

Continued on page 60

AMERICA RESPONDS

Continued from page 59



Adam Bishop COURTESY ADAM BISHOP

Survivor's blood is in the fight

As a firefighter, Adam Bishop of Breezy Point, New York, is used to being the hero. When he got sick with COVID-19, however, he had to get comfortable with being the one in need of help.

"I have never felt so sick in my life," says Bishop, a lieutenant in the New York City Fire Department who initially came down with a cough and low-grade fever, and soon was admitted to the hospital with double pneumonia in both lungs. "Part of me didn't want to go to sleep, as I thought I would not wake up."

But he did wake up. And when he finally recovered, he decided to aim a figurative firehose at the coronavirus by volunteering for ImmuneRACE, a virtual clinical study wherein people who have been infected with COVID-19 donate blood samples to researchers for the purpose of studying their immune response to the virus.

"As someone who's been infected and beat COVID-19, my immune system holds clues about how to detect and treat this horrible thing," Bishop says.

"If my data can help scientists develop better tests, vaccines and treatments, I'm all in."

Delivering doses of hope

For people with hypertension, diabetes and many other chronic conditions, pharmacists are the most essential of essential workers.

"Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we've been coming to work day in and day out to make sure people have access to their medication," says Myron Laban,



Pharmacist and artist Myron Laban looks at one of his inspirational murals in Chicago. PHOTO PROVIDED BY MYRON LABAN



Myron Laban
COURTESY OF MYRON LABAN

a Walgreens pharmacist in Libertyville, Illinois. "People still get sick, they still take their maintenance medications, and they still have questions about their health."

Sometimes, however, people need an entirely different kind of medicine. That's why Laban has spent his free time during the pandemic painting inspirational murals on Chicago's North and West sides.

"I believe it's very important to create something to give people hope during hard times," Laban says. He has been painting his "Uplift" series of murals since 2017; each work depicts a large figure walking forward with a smaller figure riding on his shoulders, along with an inspirational message such as "You Deserve to Be Happy" or "Rain Eventually Goes Away."

"At the end of the day, you can choose to move forward or let things hold you back. In my experience, the healthiest thing we can do is to persevere when things are hard."



Brent Shehorn
COURTESY OF BRENT SHEHORN

Cherished goodbyes

COVID-19 has made life difficult. But also, death. Because of state-mandated bans on large gatherings, funerals across the country have had to be kept small or skipped entirely, adding catharsis and closure to the list of commodities in short supply during the pandemic.

Thanks to funeral directors like Brent Shehorn, owner of Lake Shore Funeral Home & Crematory in Waco, Texas, families and friends don't have to forgo farewells entirely. When the pandemic hit Waco, he began offering families the opportunity to live-stream funeral services on the internet, and to host socially-distant drive-through visitations.

"Folks just pull up in the parking lot, roll down their windows and express their love," Shehorn says. "It's a parade of friends and family coming forward to express their condolences, and it's a really beautiful thing."

Continued on page 62

AMERICA RESPONDS

Continued from page 60

Convenience with compassion

When she opened her better-for-you convenience store, The Goods Mart, in New York's SoHo neighborhood in 2018, Rachel Krupa was trying to make it easier for people to be healthy.

Two years later, she's doing exactly that from her 300-square-foot store-front, which she has doggedly kept open during the pandemic despite a dramatic decrease in patronage.

"The reason The Goods Mart exists is to serve the community, and the best way to serve the community when you're going through something like this is to stay open," says Krupa, who describes her store as a cross between Whole Foods and 7-11. "Because whether you have four people come in during the day or 100, it makes a difference to those people that you're there."

To make an even bigger difference, Krupa collected over \$10,000 in customer donations, which she has used to send care packages to health care workers at New York City hospitals.

"Every time we send snacks, the hospitals send us photos," Krupa says. "You can't see people's faces behind their masks, but you can see them smiling in their eyes."



Rachel Krupa's NYC shop offers "mission-driven products" that are tasty, healthful and environmentally friendly. KATIA REPINA



Josh Savage, left, with one of his team members. HERO PLUMBING, HEATING AND COOLING

Flowers from the plumber

Plumbers aren't used to seeing people smile. As COVID-19 bore down on the Midwest, however, smiles were exactly what Josh Savage thought his technicians needed to see.

Savage, owner of Hero Plumbing, Heating and Cooling in Minneapolis, was celebrating date night at home with his wife when he decided to buy her flowers at the grocery store.

"This was at the beginning of the pandemic. Everyone was very rigid, very cold. ... You could feel everyone's fear around you," Savage recalls. But his mood was instantly lifted when he arrived in the floral department. So much so that he decided to buy extra flowers to give to his neighbors. "I ended up buying \$350 worth of fresh-cut flowers; the cashier thought I was nuts."

On his way home, it dawned on him: If his wife and neighbors enjoyed receiving

"Receiving flowers as an unexpected gift makes customers feel instantly better about their day, and about what's going on in the world. It also helps the technicians; when they see a customer's face light up, it makes all their problems go away, too."

Josh Savage

Owner of a Minneapolis plumbing, heating and cooling company that has given out more than 4,000 flowers

flowers, so would his customers. So he called a friend in the floral business and arranged to buy a truckload of flowers. He divided the load among his technicians, each of whom was asked to give bouquets to customers, neighbors or even random strangers — which they did every day for more than two months.

Continued on page 64

AMERICA RESPONDS

Continued from page 62

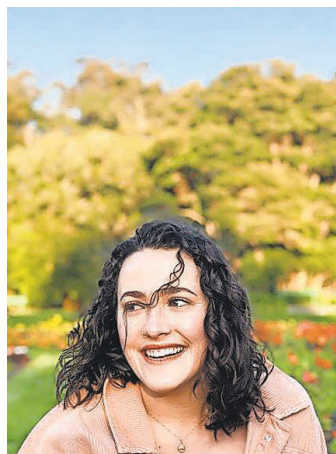
A teacher's most important quiz

When her school had to pivot from in-person learning to the virtual kind because of COVID-19, Ellie Donovan had to learn new ways of teaching. "We had to change our practices overnight," says Donovan, who teaches sixth-grade language arts and social studies at San Francisco's Presidio Middle School.

To engage auditory learners, for example, Donovan launched her own YouTube channel, where she read aloud every written resource that she posted in her online classroom.

But Donovan's most important task wasn't teaching at all; rather, it was supporting distressed students. To help her recognize which ones were struggling, she designed her own BuzzFeed-style online quizzes. Every week, she presented a new quiz — such as "Which SpongeBob Are You?" or "Which Beyoncé Are You?" — with humorous captions alongside emotive pictures of cartoon characters or celebrities experiencing joy, sadness, anger and other feelings. When a student indicated stress, she notified a counselor or social worker, who followed up directly with the student's parents.

"At the end of the day," Donovan says, "the message I tried to convey to kids and families is: If you forget how to write a paragraph, it's OK. If you don't turn in an assignment, I don't care. As long as you're safe and healthy, my job is done."



San Francisco middle school teacher
Ellie Donovan. COURTESY OF ELLIE DONOVAN



2020-21 MDA National Ambassador Ethan LyBrand. MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY ASSOCIATION

Nothing stops these smiles

COVID-19 is no joke. Especially not to people living with conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to the virus.

But if you ask 11-year-old Ethan LyBrand of Decatur, Alabama, who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, the old adage is true: Laughter really is the best medicine.

In January, the Muscular Dystrophy Association named Ethan as its 2020-21 MDA National Ambassador. Normally, that would involve traveling around the country raising awareness and money

for muscular dystrophy research. Because of COVID-19, however, Ethan had to find a new way to contribute to the cause. So, he decided to record a video "Joke a Day" through MDA's social media channels while Americans sheltered in place.

"I'm a very positive person and a joker at heart, so a joke series just made sense," says Ethan, who recorded 42 jokes in all.

His favorite: *Why can't you tell eggs a joke? Because they'll crack up!*

"I just really wanted to make people smile," he says.



Pattie Guck CHARTWELLS K12

Filling bellies and hearts

When schools closed due to COVID-19, many of the 30 million American children who depend on free school lunches lost their only reliable source of food. But kids in Birmingham, Michigan, didn't, thanks to Pattie Guck of Chartwells K12, which provides food service for the city's schools.

When the district shut down, Guck began serving more than 1,000 emergency meals a day to students, whose parents could pick up breakfasts and lunches at spots throughout the district — including an apartment complex whose residents could retrieve meals from a school bus parked onsite.

"Our goal was to make sure kids still had healthy meals every day," says Guck, food-service director at Birmingham Public Schools, who kept things light by choosing a new theme every day for staff, kids and parents, some of who even decorated their cars according to the day's theme. One day, for example, was superhero day. Another was Christmas in March. Still another was Disney. And every Friday was pajama day.

"(The coronavirus) was scary, so I wanted to provide happy, positive energy," says Guck, whose secret weapon is a tube of pixie dust in her pocket; when she senses someone needs it, she sprinkles a pinch on the ground. "It's silly, but it really makes people's day."