

James McCue (submitted July 15, 2020)

2020, the year that would become hindsight

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Corona virus. We heard about it quickly here and there on news briefings. It seemed benign at first. Then the news was getting worse. Not here though. Not anywhere but in China. It was not our reality. Who really cared? Then it hit here. Little did we know how bad it would really get.

My name is Jim; I am a Captain/Paramedic for the New York City Fire Department Emergency Medical Services Command. I have been in EMS since February of 2004. This is my story. Through my eyes and thoughts.

It was Around February when the first cases hit our work force. It was in my division and it was 2 members. I remember going to parent teacher conferences at my kids' school and in talking telling the teachers that I knew 2 people that had the virus and they were pretty sick but not too bad. That spiraled into calls from the school asking if I had been in contact with these people. They were ready to shut the school down just because of a conversation. A coworker that also lives in Matawan and me had been talking that week that because of our job we felt like our kids were being treated like they were contagious and we were sad for them... Still in my world it was bad but not horrible. If only I knew.

A few weeks went by and it started to escalate. We were seeing more and more coworkers get sick. The calls to 911 were rising slowly. I myself was in the hospital in mid-march for a procedure and had heard whispers of people with the virus coming in. March 16th I returned from the weekend off and all hell had broken loose. In my 17 years in EMS in total I was not prepared for what was ahead of me, neither were my coworkers. The words "If you're going through hell, keep going" (-Winston Churchill) were never so true. I went from working 8 hour days Monday to Friday immediately to 12 hour days 7 days a week. By week 3 we were overwhelmed, tired, scared, and homesick. We had each other though. That was enough. People were donating food and other things to lift our spirits. It helped but we still had our fears. Especially when the city placed a refrigerated morgue truck outside our stations front doors. Fear is good in our profession. It keeps you sharp. Sharp is what we needed. On a normal day EMS in NYC does around 3,000 calls, at the peak we were doing 7,000 plus calls a day. Finally the cavalry arrived. Hundreds of EMT's and Paramedics from around the country came to our call for help

and help they did. They immediately became our family. They ate with us, worked with us and cried with us. For them I will be forever grateful.

As time went on we saw more and more of our members getting sick citywide. The fear was growing. Would I be next? How sick will I get? We had members that were now on vents, sick, dying some did die. We had members that took their own lives. We had new members shell-shocked to say the least. It was a warzone. We were pronouncing people dead all day, every day. More than we ever did before in the prehospital setting. It was horrible. I was seeing members with 25 years in EMS breaking down into tears when they thought nobody was looking. I even cried more than once. It would get better eventually but at the time eventually felt like it was miles away. Like it would never come to us. It did though. The calls slowed down. The units from all over went home. We got back to normal. This is however only half of my story...

Outside of work I have a beautiful family. My wife and 2 boys 8 and 7 years old. My 8 year old is a type 1 diabetic that is also on the Autism spectrum. So life is not the easiest at times. I also have a very medically fragile mother on Staten Island that lives with my father and sister. Back in December she fell and was in the hospital for 2 months recovering from a brain bleed that left her bed ridden and weak. She was home before the virus really broke out. We were at least safe there.

When I was at home the kids were usually in bed already. I was working 12 hours 7 days a week so I was able to keep away from them. My wife had moved into their bedroom also so she could be safe. I was not in the same room as any of them ever and it was taking a toll mentally on me. At work I was super careful so I felt I was doing everything I could to keep my family safe. Then I got a call from my father. My mother was sick. She had a fever. How? She never leaves the house, how is she sick. She was rushed to the ER by ambulance. They ran a battery of tests. It was an infection. Not the virus. Once again we were safe. The hospital kept her in a COVID free section of the hospital. She was safe. Life kept moving on. A little over a week later she was finally home. Due to the virus I could not go see her at her house. So I went there and talked to her through an open window for a few minutes. If I had known what would happen over the next few weeks I would have said so much more. But I didn't. Hindsight is 20/20. She was home for about a week when I got the call again from my father that she needed an ambulance. She was not herself. This was April 25th I was home that day. I knew things were about to change. Since early 1995 my mother has been sick. She has been in and out of hospitals too many times to remember. She had been on death's door more than we liked to admit. This time it felt different. The next day I was at work and received a call from the hospital that one of the nurses was willing to let my mom use their cell phone to face time me. I decided that my sister would benefit from it more as she was my mother's best friend and caregiver. I regret that decision as much as I am glad I passed it to my sister. This would be the last time any of us spoke to her. If only I knew. That night at 10pm the hospital called me and told me she was having a hard time breathing and desperately needed to be on a vent to breathe. I, as a paramedic knew what this meant long term. I agreed to the procedure and prayed. The next day they offered us the opportunity to put my mother into a clinical trial through the MAYO clinic for convalescent plasma transfusions. The procedure had shown some

promise and honestly at this point what did we have to lose? We agreed as a family this was the way to go. If nothing else the trial would gain data to help others. Tuesday they did the first round in the morning. That afternoon the ICU doctor called me with an excitement in his voice I was not expecting. He was telling me how well she did with the treatment and that they were able to lower her vent settings. He gleefully told me how if all went this way by Friday they would try to extubate her. I was so relieved. Did she beat death once again? In her 68 years how many times could she avoid it? I cried from relief.

4am Wednesday morning the phone rang again. It was the same doctor. He was much more somber. He asked if we had considered a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) for my mother. I was confused. We were talking extubation a few hours earlier. Why would we need a DNR? She had taken a turn for the worse. Her body was not healing. I told him I would talk it over with my father and we would decide. I called my father and we decided we would sign a DNR as that is what she would have wanted. I called the doctor back and told him I would be there at 8am to sign the paperwork. I cried again.

On my way to the hospital the doctor called yet again. He needed to know where I was, was I coming? I said yes I am almost there. He sounded nervous.

When I arrived they ushered me up to the ICU it was a horrible place to be. Everyone in head to toe PPE, vents beeping, staff running from room to room treating the sickest people I have ever seen. He then explained to me that she was in multi organ failure and the machines were the only thing keeping her alive. I asked if she was in pain. He said no. I asked our options. He said we could prolong the treatment but either way she was not coming out of this alive. I made the hardest phone call to date that I have ever made. I called my father. I had to tell him that his wife of over 40 years had no chance to live and he could not see her again as both he and my sister had tested COVID-19 positive and the hospital was not allowing any visitors. I was there to sign a DNR but I was now there to be the only one to say goodbye. In full PPE they allowed me into her room, I held her hand and cried. I cried for what felt like hours even though it was minutes. They started the process of stopping the support of the machines. Within seconds she was gone. April 29, 2020 at 10:30 A.M. MaryBeth McCue had died. Surrounded by nursing staff and me. By 1pm I was back at work at my desk. I had to be there. I had to be busy. I could not process it. I still haven't. We had no wake, no funeral no nothing. We had 10 minutes graveside with 10 family members and we were rushed away... There is no closure.

My father and sister have now recovered fully, I remain healthy. We have a new norm. I have seen multiple angles of this virus. It is the scariest thing I have ever lived through. Am living through. Will be living through.

This is my reality now.