

Voices from the Pandemic

# ‘How long can a heart last like this?’

Darlene Krawetz, on what life becomes when covid-19 won’t go away



As told to **Eli Saslow**

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I've hardly moved from this couch in weeks, but right now my heart rate monitor says I'm at 132. That's double my normal. That's like if I'm climbing a mountain. How come? Nobody knows. Nobody ever knows. And why has my fever been spiking again? Do I need to go back to the ER? I'm on week six of this crap, and I still don't know if I'm getting better or worse, but people want to act like the threat is behind us?

#### About this series

Voices from the Pandemic is an oral history of covid-19 and those affected.

Wait, no, that's not right. This is actually week eight for me. I started getting symptoms right before New York shut down. I mix up my dates.

My mind is all foggy. I've been a nurse for 30 years, and now I can't even remember if my last Tylenol was five minutes or five hours ago. It feels like electricity is burning through my spine, and nobody can tell me why. It's like I'm sucking air through a straw. When I stand up, my ears start ringing until dizziness forces me back down. Every symptom is a whole new mystery. This virus is unpredictable and so, so violent.

I'm up to 140 now. See? It's relentless. How long can a heart last like this? The palpitations come a few

times every hour and go on for a minute or more. It's just banging, banging, banging, banging.

It hurts too much to talk. I'll try again later. I have to lie down and breathe through it. That's what they tell me to do.

\* \* \*

*The next morning, Wednesday, May 6*

My heart rate is back down now to 105. That's nothing to celebrate. That's still considered abnormal, but it's typical now for me.

I didn't use to be like this. I'm healthy. I'm a vegetarian. I'm only 52. I've got grown kids in the military and a teenager at home, and we hike and kayak. I'm a positive, hard-charging person. Maybe I got it at the VA hospital where I work, but we didn't have any confirmed cases yet. Or my son might have had an exposure and given it to me. Who knows? It's one more mystery. I didn't even notice I was sick until another nurse asked why I was coughing. I figured it was allergies. Take some Zyrtec and get on with it. Hardly anybody here in Syracuse had covid at that point. What were the odds?

Then, after I tested positive, I thought I'd get a mild case. I told my husband: "Relax. I'm fine." I don't have diabetes. I don't have hypertension, COPD or anything like that. I thought I could stay home, take care of myself and be back at work in a few weeks.

Right away I started running a temperature of 103, and the Tylenol couldn't control it. I was shaking and cursing all day in bed, and the symptoms spread from there. I was head-to-toe exhausted. I wanted the whole world to let me alone. I had equipment at

home from my nursing work, and I started checking my vitals and saw my blood pressure shooting up. I've never had that. I'd get up to shower and start gasping for air. My son was also covid-positive, and he ran a high fever and recovered within a week while I kept on getting worse. Maybe because I'm older? Or because I used to be a smoker? You can't get a definitive answer on anything with this. I started coughing to the point of throwing up. I coughed until I was incontinent. My lips were chapped from dehydration. I had headaches.

Migraines. Heartburn. Rashes. I lost 16 pounds in the first few weeks. I would lie down at night after taking melatonin and Benadryl, soaked in sweat and terrified of what might be coming next. What if I fall asleep and stop breathing? More Benadryl. More melatonin. Maybe try a Xanax. I'd lie there for hours but it was nonstop insomnia. I'd turn the TV to Lifetime for a distraction, but I couldn't make sense of what they were saying.

One day, my son needed money to buy groceries. I said I'd give him \$80, but I couldn't count it out. I couldn't do the math. I handed him \$50, then \$70. I asked him: "Is this really happening right now or is this a hallucination?" He took the cash and counted it himself. He begged me to get help.

I went to urgent care. The X-rays showed pneumonia, so they told me to go to the ER. I didn't want to risk a secondary infection at the hospital, and I knew they didn't have any magic treatment for this virus, but I couldn't take care of myself. There wasn't any choice. I wrote down my end-of-life wishes, and I had my son drop me at the ER.

I'm having another palpitation. Hang on. Are these panic attacks? I never had them before. It feels like

my heart is trying to jump out of my chest.

Breathe. Stay calm. What is there to be calm about? It's up over 150 now. Something is really wrong with me. I need to go rest. I need to figure this out.

\* \* \*

*A few hours later*

Okay. I'm a little better. It's hour by hour. I'm not sure I can handle it again if I have to go back to the hospital. That first stay lasted 10 days, or at least that's what they told me. I couldn't tell days apart. I had a little glass isolation room with a curtain they kept closed. There was nothing to see out the window except a parking garage across the street. I couldn't have visitors, and most of the doctors and nurses were afraid to stay in the room. It was okay. I was too sick to talk and too scared to feel lonely. I appreciate what they did. They were honest about what they didn't know, and they tried. They kept throwing stuff at the wall to see what might stick.

They gave me a malaria drug, but it did absolutely nothing. They gave me an antibiotic for pneumonia, but I still couldn't breathe without 15 liters of oxygen. They tried vitamin C, magnesium, shots of blood thinner, baby aspirin, Tums, multivitamins, Xanax, cough syrup with codeine. It was like fixing a car when you don't know what's broken. They gave me inhalers and breathing exercises to do every hour, but my oxygen level kept dropping. They wanted to put me on life support, but I was afraid I'd never come off. The doctor came in and said: "We have a team ready to revive you in case you start to code. We're going to watch you closely." Watching was all anybody could do. Then, one morning, my

fever started to go down. Nobody knew why that happened either. But it stayed down for 36 hours, and they said I could go home.

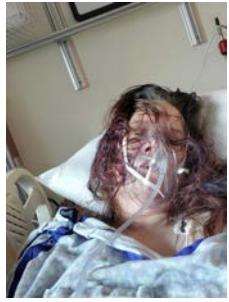
Now I've got my oxygen on a long extension cord. I can make it to the kitchen or the bathroom if I'm feeling good, but usually I stay here in the den. My husband never caught it, so we're staying apart. He works as a manager at Wegmans, and if he got sick, we might be out on the street. The \$1,200 stimulus went to rent and hospital co-pays, and now we're burning through our savings. I try not to think about it. I watch the news and check my vitals, but they're always bad. My family stands in the doorway to visit sometimes, and other people text or call. "Are you feeling better yet?" It's like they're becoming impatient. They want to feel safe going out. We managed to buckle down for a while, but now it's getting nice outside, and people need to work. The deniers and the protesters are coming out. One of my relatives went on Facebook and wrote that this whole virus is overblown, or maybe even a hoax. People want to minimize.

"Are you better yet? Why aren't you better yet?"

I don't know. I don't know anything. My brain keeps racing with unanswered questions. Are my lungs scarred? Is my heart damaged? Can I get sick again? Will I be hiking the Adirondacks this summer or lugging this oxygen tank from the den to the bathroom for the rest of my life?

I hate this virus. It's been two months of uncertainty and I don't think I can take any more. Why are my legs burning? Why is my skin so hot? I need answers. I need help.

\* \* \*



Darlene Krawetz in a Syracuse, N.Y., hospital in April.

*The next morning, Thursday, May 7*

I'm back at the hospital.

My fever won't come down. The doctors say I have blood clots on my lungs and a mass on one of my organs. They're trying to figure it out. There's no timeline and no prognosis. All I know is they're admitting me. I've been crying my eyes out. The morphine is making me in a fog. When will this damn thing let me alone?

\* \* \*

Darlene Krawetz died of covid-19 at her home in Liverpool, N.Y., on May 28, 2020.

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