

Voices from the Pandemic

‘The fires were everywhere’

Paul Swann, on the death of his mother, Darlene Krawetz





As told to **Eli Saslow**

JUNE 6, 2020



I didn't think she could die like this. Even once her fever hit 104 and her heart started racing out of control, my mind wouldn't go there. Every time she got another bad diagnosis, I would tell her: "You're fine. This is the low point. We'll manage and get through it." She was so healthy. She practically lived at the farmers market. The virus got into her lungs and her heart and her liver, and I still thought she was going to beat it. I was giving her CPR, and I was telling myself: "This can't kill her. This won't kill her."

About this series

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

I caught myself doing the same thing at her funeral this week. I've never been to a funeral before, and it was all so weird. There was a prayer and a poem, and that was basically it, and I spaced out for a minute and started thinking she was back at home lying on the couch. I was like, I wonder if she took my morphine yet? I need to get back. I need to go check her temperature.

She was 52. How am I supposed to accept that? I can't get it to sink in. My brain keeps on refusing.

It was mostly me and her during the last few weeks. Her fever had finally come down and she was breathing on her own again, but she had blood clots in her lungs and a mass on her liver. It was growing faster than anything the doctors had ever seen, and they wanted to get her ready for chemo. They said her whole body was breaking down from the nonstop stress of fighting the virus since March. They said, "It's causing all these fires, and we have to put them out one by one," but it seemed like the fires were everywhere.

She wanted to come home until she started chemo. She had a fear of hospitals, even though she was a nurse. I thought it was a bad idea. She needed morphine and blood thinners and so many other medications, and there was nobody else to watch her. Her husband had to keep working at the grocery store, because that was the only paycheck coming in. My twin sister's in Texas, and my youngest brother is only a senior in high school. I'd never taken care of anybody before. I'd just finished school and gotten out of the Army. She'd always taken care of me. I was scared of what might happen, but she was determined to be home.

She was on the couch in the den, and I would give her ice packs or help her change positions. I put her medications on a schedule. I cooked her au gratin potatoes and asparagus, but it took her maybe three hours to eat a little bit. She wouldn't drink the Pedialyte. She was having headaches and disorientation. She moved from the couch to the floor because she said it felt better to lie against something hard. I'd go try to nap, and if I got by

myself, I'd start thinking about how it had been just a few months before. We'd go rock climbing together or shoot off fireworks by Lake Ontario. We'd road trip to Canada because she wanted to try this certain kind of vegan food. She had this unstoppable energy. Her mother died in childbirth with her, so she had to fight and scrap from the very beginning. It was foster homes, abuse — she dealt with a lot. She knew how to soldier up and push through. There was no way she wasn't going to beat it.

But then I'd hear her in the den mumbling or groaning or talking real low. It didn't sound like her. I was physically sore and tense from the stress, but I'd force myself to go check on her every hour. I was afraid of what I might find. How much of her is still in there?



Paul Swann, 28, at his family's home in Liverpool, N.Y.
(Todd F. Michalek for The Washington Post)

Then one morning she woke me up before 6 and said: "Hurry up. Let's go. We're running late for the doctor." She seemed coherent, but she was agitated. She said if we didn't hurry, she was going to get fined. It didn't make sense. There was no appointment. No doctor's office was even open yet. I thought maybe the medication was clouding her thinking, or she was trying to rush back to her old life. She was always a busy bee from the second she woke up. She would buzz around the house doing ten things at once, and if you got in her way, you'd get stung. I told her: "Your doctors want you to stay home and rest right now. If you need something, they'll come see you." I helped her back onto the couch. She said she was sorry for getting confused, but it started to get worse.

She'd try to leave the house every morning at like 3 or 4 o'clock, but she could barely move. She was a wall walker. She would grab the car keys and inch her way out of the house in her underwear and then collapse into a chair on the porch. She was itching her legs really bad, and she started to get small infections because she was scratching past her layers of skin. She kept talking about how she was late for work, she needs to go work, she's going to get fined, she's going to get arrested. She didn't want to take her medication. She was refusing to eat. Sometimes, she didn't know where she was. I called my sister in Texas, because she went to nursing school and she knows more about this stuff, and she told me to think of it like treating someone with Alzheimer's or dementia. She said: "You have to talk to her like a 2-year-old. You have to comfort her and keep her company." I tried to mix her medication in applesauce and then take a bite to show her. "Look, Mom. We're eating together." I made a show of bringing the spoon up to her mouth. I told her it was

going to be okay. I put the oxygen on her to calm her down. I tried to make distractions to get her to stop talking about going to work. I was firm and put her in a timeout for trying to leave the house. I sat with her. I told her how much I loved her. I held her tight and cradled her like a baby.

It was too much. We needed help — a full-time aide. Me and her husband started calling the doctors and nurses a few times a day. “I’m not comfortable. I’m not equipped. What do I do? How do I take care of her?”

They sent a nurse out to evaluate. The appointment was for 9:30. I had to get her up and get her ready, but I was scared to wake her, because I never knew if she’d be a little combative or confused or trying to run out of the house. She said to me: “Paul, can you take me to the bathroom?” She was so helpless. I can’t explain. It was gutting. Looking at her was traumatizing. She was 111 pounds. She was losing weight in her face, her legs. She was getting that belly you normally see with starvation. She knew who I was, but it was like her eyes wouldn’t focus. She had that thousand-yard stare. I tried to pick her up, and she couldn’t move her body. She could barely lift her arms. She was just dead weight. I said, “Can you roll over?” I didn’t know if she could hear me. I said: “It’s okay. You’re okay. I’m going to get us some help.”

I went to the porch to see if the nurse was there yet, and then I heard this weird gasping sound. I turned around and she wasn’t blinking. It made my heart stop.

The nurse walked in right as I was calling 911. The emergency operator told us to move her to the floor,

get her straight. “You need to do CPR.” The nurse couldn’t help do the puffing, because she could catch the virus, so I ended up trying to give my mom the air. Her eyes were gone. It wasn’t her. She wasn’t in there. The ambulance came and they probably worked on her for 20 minutes. The sheriff was there. The house got crowded and we got pushed back. They started taking her out on a stretcher and I was looking to see if they had covered her face or anything. We kept asking if there was a pulse, is she breathing, but they wouldn’t say.

They pronounced her right away at the hospital. The doctor told us it was a pulmonary embolism — a blood clot that got trapped in her lungs. He said it was something you see a lot of with covid. He called it a sudden death, but it didn’t feel that way. She’d been getting carved up a thousand different ways since March. I went to the hospital room and I sat with her body for a long time. I kept her company. I tried to think of something to say, some last words.

We wanted an autopsy. My sister flew in, and we started calling around late that night, getting transferred from one medical person to the next, trying to make the arrangements. We needed answers. This whole thing was a mystery. I had gotten the virus and basically had a bad flu for two weeks. Nobody else in the house got sick. And she caught it and she died? Was it all because of the blood clot? Did the pneumonia factor in? The morphine? The mass on her liver? The weight loss? Some kind of vitamin deficiencies? All of this not knowing had been driving her crazy for two months, and it almost felt like we owed it to her. What happened? Why? How come she never got better?



staff with exposure to covid. It went on and on. Her husband is Muslim, and he wanted to respect the body, wash the body, bury it right away. He was being real accommodating, respecting our wishes and putting us first, so he pushed the funeral back three days. But time kept passing, and we weren't getting anywhere.

Eventually, the funeral day came, and we just had to accept it: It's never going to make sense. Nothing is solid. She caught the virus and it kept on assaulting her body for months until it was too much to handle.

So, we let it go. We let her be.

eli.saslow@washpost.com

More Coronavirus coverage

[Coronavirus Newsletter: Sign up for our Coronavirus Updates newsletter to track the outbreak. All stories linked in the newsletter are free to access.](#)

How to help: [Your community](#)

FAQ: [What you need to know about coronavirus](#)

Read more from Voices from the Pandemic

‘She’s dead, and I’m quarantined. That’s how the story ends.’

Tony Sizemore, on the death of Birdie Shelton

[Read his story](#)



‘You’re basically right next to the nuclear reactor.’

Cory Deburghgraeve, on one of the pandemic’s most dangerous jobs

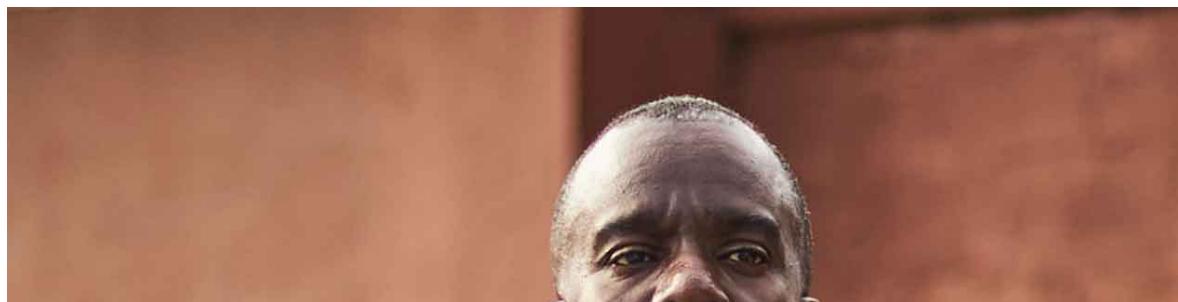
[Read his story](#)



‘Wearing a mask won’t protect us from our history.’

Burnell Coton, on his beloved community grocery

[Read his story](#)



‘It was impossible. It’s still impossible.’

Mikaela Sakal, on being an ER nurse in an overwhelmed hospital

[Read her story](#)



‘Is this another death I’ll have to pronounce?’

Michael Fowler, Dougherty County coroner, on the reopening of Georgia

[Read his story](#)



‘I apologize to God for feeling this way.’

Gloria Jackson, on being 75, alone, and thought of as expendable

[Read her story](#)



‘How long can a heart last like this?’

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

[Read her story](#)



‘But what happens if they run out?’

Johnny Rivero, on his first time standing in a food line

[Read his story](#)





‘It was me. I know it was me.’

Francene Bailey, on passing the coronavirus to her mother

[Read her story](#)

