“Funny” was the word 68-year old Robert Calandra first used when describing the symptoms that would eventually lead to a COVID-19 diagnosis. But soon, “funny” turned to “sick,” which turned to “very, very wrong.” The Ambler resident is a talented writer whose work has appeared in books, magazines, and newspapers, but he never expected that his own life would become the story.

He felt fine while playing ice hockey one day in early March, but by the following day, his temperature began inching up, and he felt increasingly tired and listless. “I actually went into my office and pulled out my will and medical power of attorney, wrote some notes, signed them, and left them prominently on my desk. I just had a feeling that something bad was happening,” he said. “From there, it spiraled.”

At the encouragement of his primary care physician and friend Michael Cirigliano, MD, FACP, a Penn Medicine internist, Calandra visited the drive-through coronavirus testing site in Radnor. But his longtime girlfriend Monica Hamill soon needed to call Cirigliano again — Calandra’s temperature had jumped to 102.5 degrees, and he was so weak that he could barely sit up, even with Hamill’s help. They simply couldn’t wait for the results of the test. Cautioning Hamill to stay at home to contain the virus in case she was also infected, Cirigliano recommended that Calandra’s daughter, Lindsey Calandra, MSN, CRNP, a nurse practitioner at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, go out and purchase a pulse oximeter for her father. If it showed his oxygen level was under 90 percent, they needed to go to the emergency room immediately.

Calandra’s reading was a dangerously low 80 percent.

“I was pretty out of it, but I did tell them that Penn Presby was the only place I wanted to go,” Calandra said, explaining that he had previously received exceptional care at PPMC when he experienced septic shock. “Monica bundled me into the car, and from there, I remember flashes — parts of the car ride, being helped into a wheelchair, arriving in the isolation room,” he recalled. “My last clear memory is of the doctor telling me I needed to go to the ICU immediately. And then… I began my magical mystery tour.”

For Hamill and Lindsey Calandra, the next several days were harrowing. Because they could not visit the hospital due to COVID-19 precautions, Lindsey established contact with his care team and regularly received a roller coaster of updates. Calandra was initially described as “very sick,” then seemed to be pulling through, only to suddenly become unstable again.

But the experience was very different for Calandra. While he was unconscious for most of his 13 days on a ventilator, he remembers a series of incredibly vivid dreams, some of which corresponded with his condition. “I was a 19th century ship’s captain for a while, and I remember having a ponytail and wearing a short green jacket and silk stockings,” he said. But when his blood pressure dropped and his fever spiked to 103 degrees, his dream state shifted to “a devilishly hot day in Atlantic City. I just kept saying, ‘We gotta cool off!’ I think that was the night they were putting ice packs around me to bring my temperature down.”

With an incredible care team on his side, Calandra steadily began to improve. Infectious disease expert William Short, MD, MPH, reached out to Lindsey about a clinical trial he was leading investigating the effectiveness of an antiviral drug, Remdesivir, in treating COVID-19, and she agreed to enroll her father. A few days passed, during which a foggy Calandra had FaceTime conversations with both his girlfriend and daughter that he has no memory of, mistook Short for actor James Earl Jones, and, after being extricated, revealed in the perfection of the “gourmet meals from the gods”— applause and puking.

But there was one thing that Calandra was not foggy about at all, and he shared it during his next phone call with Hamill. “I've received nothing but great care. They saved my life.”

During his hospitalization, Hamill’s father also passed away. “It was time to move things forward. So… I asked her to marry me. She was stunned, but eventually said yes! And it had nothing to do with the ICU drugs!’

“Amidst the chaos that COVID-19 has brought into our lives, it has also forced us to reflect on what’s truly important and to find ways to connect,” recalled internist D. Rani Nandiwada, MD, MS. “When our team met with Robert in the ICU, we told him that the gossip mill said he might be engaged. He laughed and told us that after everything he’d been through, he hit the point ‘where you just gotta do it.’ He made our day and brought so much happiness just by sharing his joyful moment.”

After transitioning to the step-down unit, Calandra was finally discharged — nearly 30 pounds lighter, but alive and on the road to recovery. For the last several weeks, he has been working with Penn Medicine at Home diligently via telemedicine, noting that he “can’t say enough good things” about occupational therapist Sarah Penning, PT, DPT, MDT. “They’ve been fantastic. I came home on a walker, and now I’m walking on my own — still a bit shaky, but doing better than anyone expected.”

The compliments extend to everyone who cared for him during his battle against COVID-19. “I tell everybody, ‘If you’re sick, you need to go to Presby,’” he said. “I’ve received nothing but great care. They saved my life.”

Thanks to the tireless efforts of PPMC’s doctors, residents, nurses, and respiratory therapists, Calandra has been able to put his will and medical documents away. Instead, his desk will soon be piled up with manuscripts detailing his story, song lyrics about his experience to share with his bandmates, and plans for the future.
As PPMC’s resilient staff members make their way to work for another challenging day in the COVID-19 era, it can be tough to shake off worries about the latest headlines or loved ones’ health. Renee Rice, Cassandra McDuffy, Shaunnice McKnight, and Denise Santiago know this; that’s why they come in bright and early each day and ready to share warm greetings, campus updates, and even snacks.

In more “normal” circumstances, these compassionate Patient Access representatives welcome patients and work in admissions and registration. But for the past several weeks, they’ve been stationed at the hospital’s entrances to scan the temperature of every employee, patient, and caregiver. “The pandemic has required us to practice new skills and develop innovative solutions to meet the changing needs of our employees and community,” said Stacie Watkins, director of Patient Access and Business Operations.

“Teamwork and perseverance can transform a challenge into something positive,” and she’s proud that her team can play such a vital role in safeguarding the hospital.

Rice has been at PPMC for 33 years, and while she has never experienced something quite as difficult as COVID-19 during her career, she continues to look for the good in every day. “I miss talking to patients at registration, but now I interact with coworkers I never had the chance to mingle with before. I thank them for coming in because a little bit of positivity can go far,” she said. “We’re all in this together, and it’s really rewarding to play my part.”

**PMMC’s Preparation Pays Off**

Whether developing campus expansion plans or exploring cutting-edge technologies, PPMC’s leaders are always looking towards the future. That’s why it was no surprise that in the earliest days of the COVID-19 crisis when social distancing was merely a suggestion and grocery stores still had hand sanitizer in stock, PPMC staff were already making extensive preparations to handle an influx of patients and creating safe spaces to care for them.

Just a few weeks before the coronavirus hit the Philadelphia area, Peter D. Sananman, MD, director of Disaster Preparedness and an emergency medicine physician, was running a mass casualty drill during his Wilderness and Disaster Medicine course for Perelman School of Medicine students. By March 17, class was over, and PPMC was facing a real-world challenge.

Though the emergency department (ED) was not yet overwhelmed by patients concerned about COVID-19, Sananman wanted to ensure that PPMC was fully prepared for a surge as soon as possible. With the support of leadership and the help of emergency medicine residents Jonathan Baz, MD, and Seth Merker, MD, Sananman created a staging area outside of the ED. “It’s normally a two-week process to build a tent like this during a pandemic. We got ours up in eight hours. It was an all-out blitz,” he said.

For several weeks, patients moved through the temporary tent one-by-one and were examined by redeployed clinicians, then sorted into categories that determined whether they were directed to the ED, treated in the tent, or treated for coronavirus and discharged to self-isolate. By sending individuals with mild symptoms home with instructions and assessing other non-COVID medical needs in the tent, the ED was able to maintain the capacity to care for more severely ill patients. Though the tent can easily be reassembled again if the need arises, PPMC’s other spaces have been able to handle the current patient volume.

When a patient suspected of having COVID-19 is admitted, they are isolated in a negative pressure room. These rooms allow air in, but trap it so airborne contaminants cannot get out. Instead, the compromised air is exhausted directly out of the hospital. For patients at risk of aerosolizing and spreading the coronavirus, a negative pressure room creates a crucial barrier between them, their care team and other patients, and other staff. PPMC continues to enforce protocols restricting visitors in order to limit the spread of coronavirus among patients and staff — but one of the hospital’s four-legged friends has received special dispensation to stop by and boost morale.

Every other week, Jessica Justice Vogt, MHS, PA-C, a physician assistant in the trauma-surgical intensive care unit, returns to the hospital on her day off with Cody, a 10-year-old Labrador and Great Pyrenees mix, in tow. Vogt’s husband rescued Cody from the side of a road when he was just a puppy, and three years ago, they realized that his calm, cuddly demeanor would make him a perfect pet therapy dog. Coming in at over 90 pounds of fluff, Cody has been a welcome sight at nursing homes and elementary school story times, but he has truly hit his stride as a member of PPMC’s Presby Pooch program.

Vogt and Cody cannot risk visiting patients at this critical time, but they’ve been the perfect pick-me-up for staff on the front lines — providing comfort to clinicians caring for COVID-positive patients, offering a delightful distraction for all essential workers, and sharing snuggles with the night-shift teams.

“If something as simple as giving a few hours of my day can lift someone’s spirits during this crisis, I’m happy to do it,” Vogt said. “Our jobs are especially intense right now, and everyone deserves a bit of joy. Everyone is always so excited to see Cody, and it’s really nice to be able to brighten someone’s day.”

## Helping Staff Stay Paw-sitive Amidst COVID-19

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