The opera singer who won the Penn’s Got Talent contest during Penn Medicine Experience Week, feels especially connected to Penn Medicine. Not only does she work as an executive assistant to the senior executives of Good Shepherd Penn Partners (GSPP) at Penn Medicine Rittenhouse, but just five months into her job, her life took a turn and she became a heart surgery patient at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP).

In 2019, Havens sang at the Savannah Voice Festival in Georgia and the San Diego Musical Theatre, and lined up two performances for April 2020. Then COVID-19 hit and canceled all performances. At that point, Havens, who had always worked temporary office jobs in between theater gigs, was surprised when the teacher of a choir class that she was taking for fun encouraged her to pursue music seriously.

Havens was accepted into the university’s College of Music, where a teacher sent her a CD of his favorite opera singer, Shirley Verrett.

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Growing up in a family of music lovers and musicians, Havens always loved to sing, but it wasn’t until she was an undergraduate at Florida State University that she discovered opera. She actually started school as a pre-med student, but was surprised when the teacher of a choir class that she was taking for fun encouraged her to pursue music seriously.

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“I went, ‘Oh my gosh, he’s one of us,’” Havens said.

In the video, Acker, who started playing the guitar at eight years old, reflects on the commonalities between music and medicine.

“Both require incredible dedication and focus and practice, and both, to attain the ultimate heights, you have to add a little bit of yourself, and the creativity portion, the nuance portion, the musicality, or the artistry of surgery,” Acker says.

After Havens watched that video, she felt an immediate connection with Acker. She knew that he would understand her fears of surgery. Havens said, “I felt like he heard me when I said, ‘I really want to be able to sing.’ I didn’t care if it was just in my kitchen, I just wanted to be able to sing.” Havens said.

On May 6, 2021, Acker was able to completely repair Havens’ mitral valve, which meant she wouldn’t need further surgeries down the road. Only time would tell if her voice would fully recover. A few months later, Cooper asked if she would like to sing to a dying patient and his husband, who were big opera fans. It was the first time Havens had sung since her surgery. Havens brought along her husband, also an opera singer, and they sang arias from the patient’s favorite opera, Tosca.

“I was singing for somebody who loved what I did, and I was singing because I could, because I was alive,” Havens said. “It was really meaningful.”

By October, after months of postoperative recovery and rehabilitation, Havens was still getting her voice back but starting to perform concerts again on Cooper’s encouragement, she entered the virtual Penn’s Got Talent contest as part of Penn Medicine Experience Week. She won the competition with her performance of the aria “En vain pour éviter” from Carmen with Opera Delaware in early 2021.

“Natalie has exceptional talent — a beautiful voice that I wanted her to share with others,” Cooper said. “And the recognition through this competition helped to rebuild her confidence after a major surgery.”

Havens plans to continue pursuing a full-time opera career, but the last year has taught her that she can’t predict what might happen next.

“I feel very supported in my abilities, and it’s something I’ve never had in my life,” Havens said. “I’m where I need to be right now, and I’m thankful. I’m so grateful to GSPP and the whole Penn system.”

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Bedside nurse Laura Smith-Gary, BSN, RN, didn’t let the fear of the virus get in the way of comforting patients who were at the end of their lives, said fellow nurse Monica Poenske, BSN, RN. Smith-Gary held their hands, prayed with them if they wanted, and advocated to allow a family member to visit every time they were approaching death. “She also empowered the rest of us to advocate for our patients, to give everyone a chance at a peaceful death, even amidst the horrible circumstances,” Poenske said.

In addition to spending extra time with her own patients, Smith-Gary reached out to Palliative Care and other units that were more familiar with comfort care. Armed with new resources, she put together a binder of information to help her fellow nurses feel more comfortable with the end-of-life process. Smith-Gary was one of 12 HUP employees recognized in this year’s Patient Advocacy Awards. The awards recognize employees for their commitment to the Penn Medicine experience and the Penn Medicine Standards: Compassionate, Present, Empowered, Collaborative, and Accountable. “Laura went out of her way every single time. Even if she wasn’t caring for that patient, she would reach out to the staff and make sure they knew what to do,” Poenske said. “Everyone felt really supported, and it inspired more people to spend time in rooms and all work together to help people pass more peacefully.”

The security team at Penn Medicine Rittenhouse is always prepared for anything, but even they had to pause one morning when about 50 infants, preschoolers, and their childcare teachers showed up in the lobby.

My Bright Beginnings, a childcare facility down the street, had received a bomb threat and Penn Medicine Rittenhouse was their go-to evacuation spot. Sparing no time to pick up strollers or jackets, the director, owner, and other teachers grabbed an infant in each arm and marched the older children up the street.

The teachers entertained the children with songs and games in the lobby while Assistant Executive Hospital Director Joseph Cooney found them a better place to wait for the all-clear — a surgical waiting room in the Turtleneck Center at Pennsylvania Hospital’s outpatient surgery center across the street. Several nurse managers, clinical directors, and security staff jumped in to help get everyone safely across the bridge to the Turtleneck Center.

“At that point, the teachers and all of us were pretty exhausted, because we’re each carrying one to two infants plus the young toddlers that are just learning to walk,” said Yelena Spector, owner of My Bright Beginnings—Graduate Hospital. “The Penn staff helped our teachers take the infants and the older children’s hands and made multiple trips to help us. It was just so amazing.”

The group was cleared to return to their building soon after that, and returned the following week with thank-you cards for the hospital staff who helped them.

“The staff always rally together, whatever the emergency,” Cooney said. “This was a unique challenge and they met it head on and did a fabulous job.”