

The Des Moines Register

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2021 | THE NEWS IOWA DEPENDS UPON | DESMOINESREGISTER.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

‘JUST KEEP FIGHTING’: HOW COVID-19 TORE THROUGH ONE IOWA FAMILY

As Thong Sengphirom fights the coronavirus, her family gathers digitally and at her side, making tough decisions from across the internet.



Thong Sengphirom lies in an ICU bed as her daughter, Jade Robinson, visits her at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames, Iowa, left and top. Doctors and nurses look in on Thong during morning rounds, bottom.

Courtney Crowder, Des Moines Register

AMES, Iowa — Thong Sengphirom is groggy and delirious.

Despite her rapid shallow breaths, her diaphragm pumping like she's yelling into the wind, her voice is wispy and faint. She's barely audible over the hubbub of nurses moving beds and equipment and therapists attaching lines and monitors as they transfer her to the ICU.

"Give me some hope,"

she squeaks.

Dr. Tamim Mahayni kneels, pulling down the railing so he can lean on her bed. He wants to comfort her. The last thing he wants is to be fatalistic. But they have to confront a harsh reality: This is her sixth day in the hospital, the disease in her lungs is progressing rapidly, and her oxygen is falling quickly.

So, he has to know: *Does she know what a ventilator is? A breathing machine? Life support? If it*

gets worse, would she want to have a tube put down her throat to breathe for her?

"I don't know if it would help or not, a lot of people it hasn't helped," he says. "A lot of people, if it gets to that point, they end up dying. That's not to say you would, but a lot of people when they get that sick, that's what we are dealing with."

Thong turns away.

We should call your son in Colorado, Mahayni says, we need to talk about this

ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the past few months, Mary Greeley Medical Center opened its doors to the Des Moines Register, allowing us to tell stories of dedication, sacrifice, exhaustion, loss, pain and joy from inside the hospital. This is the second of an occasional series.

INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

while you're clear. "I know you don't want to," he says as a nurse brings over her phone, bright flowers encrusted on its case.

"How are you doing?" Tony, her son, asks.

"Not too good," she replies.

For many families, the slow progression of a serious case of COVID-19 starts just like this, with a call and a dark prognosis. Loved ones take furious notes about oxygen saturation. They scour the internet for information on Remdesivir, Dexamethasone and any other -pril, -lol or -prine that might provide relief. They make decisions at the end of a phone line.

Just as the virus seeps into lungs, it tears through families like buckshot, the pain of unanswerable questions — *Where did she get it from? Did we do everything we could for him?* — left behind like wayward shrapnel.

The particulars of each story change with every family, but the course of COVID's havoc holds. Swap out the names. Change the setting. The pattern repeats.

As Mahayni goes over next steps with Tony, tilting the phone's camera so he can see the various pieces of equipment, a nurse organizes Thong's room. She sets flowers on the cabinet tops, placing amid the blooms a family photo of Christmas past, Thong's youngest granddaughter smiling wide.

"Mom, just keep fighting," Tony says. "We're here with you. We'll do whatever we need to do to bring you home. Just keep fighting."

Tony is trying to say goodbye, but Thong holds



Jade Robinson holds a family photo taken in 1980 after her family immigrated to America from northern Thailand.



ICU nurse Monica Bohnert rubs Thong Sengphirom's back as she rests in a prone position to help her breathe on Dec. 10.

on, staring into the phone, not yet ready to hang up.

Day 6: 'I can't believe this is happening'

The last time Thong's daughter, Jade Robinson, saw her mother in person, she was being loaded into an ambulance, too weak

to walk the dozen or so steps to her daughter's car.

She called Thong in the morning that day, Dec. 3, and her shortness of breath had turned into coughing and a wheezing that sounded like sucking a thick milkshake through a straw. It was time to go to Mary Greeley Medical

Center.

By then, Thong, 70, had been sick for at least a week, falling ill with respiratory distress around Thanksgiving — almost 41 years after first setting foot in Iowa.

In 1979, Thong, then 29, her husband, Phouang, and their four kids, rang-

INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

ing in age from 9 to a babe in arms, boarded a TWA plane for a new life. Six Americans, unknown to the family, sponsored their emigration from northern Thailand, buying their plane tickets and setting them up in Ames.

When Thong told the story, she described snow falling at the Des Moines airport that night, Jade remembered. Her first interaction with flurries, their coldness made the already foreign country feel like an alien planet.

"We came here with the clothes on our back," Jade says. "With nothing, not knowing any English."

Their sponsors helped Phouang become a welder. Lacking a formal education, Thong became a custodian. In lean times, they relied on food stamps, and meat and cheese from the church.

The family scratched together a life, Thong and Phouang willing to sacrifice anything for their children's chance at the American dream, never letting on just how back-breaking their work really was.

At night, after a day on her feet, Thong would clean and cook, sometimes making Jade's favorite dish, Khao poon, a chicken curry with noodles that she made "spicy as heck."

They kept Thai traditions alive for a time, like sitting cross-legged at a table set a foot off the ground. They went fishing in the summer and ate what they caught, cooking it over a bonfire.

Her parents saved for a house in the small city of Nevada, and built up disposable income, enough to retire.

In her golden years, Thong passed her days talking on the phone with her best friend, or anyone, really — her mother text Jade, who'd rush over only to discover the "emergency" was her mom needed help buying a purse online.



Jade Robinson holds her mother's hand as she's treated for COVID-19 in the ICU on Dec. 11.



Jade Robinson embraces her mother, Thong Sengphirom, as she is treated for COVID-19 in the ICU at Mary Greeley on Dec. 10. As she leans in, her mother reflexively reaches up to touch her and hits her face shield instead.

“

I know she's scared of death.

Jade Robinson, Thong's daughter

was *always* on the phone, Jade says. She'd get her nails done, or her hair, or go shopping for jewelry, clothes and purses — especially when she could get a deal.

"Come quickly! Emergency!" Thong would

"It's on sale," Thong would offer by way of explanation.

But Thong was also incredibly giving. She never lost sight of the kindness she was once shown and sought to pay that goodwill forward.

"When anyone needed help, they were always willing," Tony says of his parents.

All of her life's early struggles made Thong fiercely independent, a fighter, Jade says.

Walking into the ICU — toting her N95 mask and face shield — Jade can't reconcile the mother she's always known with the frail, tired woman she sees lying in that bed. She looks, well, hopeless, she says.

"I know she's scared of death, of the unknown," Jade says.

"It hits you hard," she adds. "You just look through the window of her room and you're just like, God, I can't believe this is happening."

Thong and her husband recently bought a house near their hometown in Udon, Thailand, three plane legs and an hour-long car ride from Iowa. They hoped to retire there, Jade says.

In March, they were scheduled to leave for a full year in their own little paradise. But the nascent pandemic, just reaching its tendrils into Iowa, grounded their plans.

Day 8: 'You never expect ... things to get worse'

Jade waves at her mom through the glass doors and starts gowning up. Turning her back on Thong, she takes a few deep breaths, controlling her emotions. She had a dream about her mom and the doctors last night and woke up to a racing heart.

She's trying to stay positive, but her mind keeps getting ahead of her.

By the time Jade makes



Scenes with Thong Sengphirom as she is treated for COVID-19 in the ICU at Mary Greeley. With her to discuss care options are Dr. Tamim Mahayni; her daughter, Jade Robinson; and, upper right, nurse Wanda Ross.

it to her mother's bedside at about 2 p.m., she's been awake for almost 12 hours.

A phlebotomist at Iowa Methodist Medical Center, Jade wakes up at 2:30 a.m. to clock in at 3:30 a.m. to pull blood for the lab before doctors start rounding. Her job is to "literally poke and prod," she likes to say.

She worked at Mary Greeley until last summer, when she moved to start nursing school in Des Moines, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

When she gets off at noon, she goes home and sanitizes, showering and washing her clothes to ensure she's perfectly clean before coming to see her mother. (Mary Greeley typically bars visitors for COVID patients, but Jade's professional connection to the ICU nurses as well as her knowledge of proper personal protective equipment means she gets a bit more leeway.)

At work, she's seen how COVID rips families apart. She's watched patients deteriorate, listened

to their huffing. But Jade's superpower is her ability to put people at ease, and she wields it with the same gusto she does her syringe.

"They open up, and they chitchat with me, and that gives me a little hope, you know, that they're sharing their lives," she says. "This one gentleman told me that his son got his car restored and is ready for him to come and get it

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But the thing with COVID is there's just so much uncertainty with it.

Tony Sengphirom, Thong's son

and drive home.

"I asked him what color it is and what it is and his face just beamed with happiness," she adds. "And I said, 'Well, you better get better then! Let's get going here!' He goes, 'I'm trying!'"

Before, when she'd leave those patients' rooms, she'd have the same fleeting thought: *That could be my family.*

Thong and Phouang

were being safe, Jade says: no parties, no religious gatherings, no club meetings. But in Story County, where college kids packed bars and restaurants, community spread was a concern in the fall. They still needed to go to the grocery store, to Walmart, to get gas. Jade said she'd go for them, but her mom's independence won out; she just didn't want her children taking care of her.

Once she was admitted to Mary Greeley, Tony — holding his mother's power of attorney — tried to organize Thong's care from Colorado. Before Thanksgiving, she'd gone to one hospital where she couldn't get a test. And, then, with the holiday closures, other testing spots were booked for days.

During every call with the doctors, he took detailed notes. Then he

spent hours researching what was said to be better prepared for the next call. Becoming a living WebMD helped him combat the overwhelming feeling of helplessness.

"I'm no doctor, but maybe it'll help me ask the right questions, or help me learn more to help me make better decisions," he says. "It was, I don't know, just doing anything and everything, really."

"You never expect or plan for things to get worse," he adds. "You're always hoping for the better... But the thing with COVID is there's just so much uncertainty with it."

All gowned up, Jade walks into her mother's room. "Hey, ma!"

Jade leans down and wraps her arms around her mother, who reflexively reaches up to touch her face. Instead she hits her face shield, which she caresses lovingly for a moment as if it's her daughter's skin.

"As much as I love these guys here in the ICU, we got to get you out of here," she says. "You



Jade Robinson prays alongside the hospital bed of her mother, Thong Sengphirom, as she is treated in the Mary Greeley ICU on Dec. 11.

can go home and make me Khao poon again.”

Rubbing lotion onto her mother’s hands, her red nail polish glittering, Jade straightens out Thong’s bracelets and hospital ID bands. The pair talk until Thong nods off; her mom jerking awake a few times, looking to see if Jade is still there.

“I’m here, I’m here,” Jade says. “Relax.”

In the quiet, Jade can’t help but think about her dad. He’s depressed. He’s not been eating; she can tell by his cheeks.

When her mom finally falls asleep, Jade sneaks out to make him his favorite meal, Velveeta mac and cheese.

Day 9: Deeper into the woods

Thong’s iPad is set up on its red case, screen on and facing her bed. Tony’s on the other end, working, cooking, playing with his daughter, Rosalie — whatever he can do to



Jade Robinson strokes the hair of her mother, Thong Sengphirom, on Dec. 15 in the Mary Greeley ICU.

keep his mother company.

Mahayni and the ICU nurses have grown increasingly concerned about Thong’s trajectory. As it is with COVID, Thong’s labs are normal, her blood pressure and heart rate are fine, and her X-rays are consistent with the disease. But she’s needed more and more oxygen as the days have gone by, and she seems to be participating less and less in conversations with staff.

“It’s just kind of going deeper and deeper and deeper into the woods,” says Dr. Dan Fulton, the hospital’s infectious disease expert. “And what we’re looking for is any signal that we’re at least not going deeper into the woods, and that we’re turning around and coming back out of the woods.”

“We’ve gone about as deep into the woods as we can go,” he adds. “There’s not a lot else to be done.”



The staff is quickly approaching the only option they have left, a ventilator, and the family has to decide soon if they’re going to put their matriarch on life support.

But before they can have that conversation, Jade walks in, red-faced and crying. Her dad is in the ER, dehydrated, she thinks. It’s got to be depression, she tells the nurses; he just can’t stand not having his wife at home.

Repeating much of the same conversation he had three days ago, Mahayni presents the options. Going on a ventilator will mean they’ll be able to say they did all they could. But it will make Thong weaker — and it might not help her in the end.

“If it was obvious that this thing would help you, we would have done it be-



Jade Robinson holds her COVID-19 vaccination record in Des Moines on Jan. 27.

fore,” Mahayni says. Thong stares into the iPad, Tony’s face on the screen. He wants her to keep fighting, he says. When Mahayni leaves, Jade goes about her normal routine. Lotion. Straightening.

Her phone lights up with a message. She glances down and throws her hands up. Tony’s still talking to her mom as she turns her back to the room, shoulders shaking.

The nurses looking in ask what’s wrong. Jade tries to sit back down, to wave it off, but finally gets up and heads toward the door. She’s holding her breath, hoping the sound of snuffles doesn’t alarm her mother. Clear of the room, she melts to the ground behind the nurses’ station.

“Positive,” is all she can say through tears. Her dad is positive for the

coronavirus. As Mahayni walks in for one last look at Thong, Jade glances up: “You’re gonna have another patient.”

Day 11: ‘I want to die’

With her dad in the hospital and her mind unable to sleep, Jade goes to her parents’ house and sanitizes the counters, the door handles, really anything she can wipe. She goes grocery shopping and packs their fridge. She turns on strategic lamps so that when they get home, they won’t have to worry about rooms being

dark. That is her focus: *When they get home.*

With the weekend coming to a close, Phouang is doing well on the COVID floor, oxygen therapies helping him catch his breath.

But Thong is suffering. Early that evening, she asks Jade to let her go, to just stop all the pain.

“That’s what killed me,” Jade says. “Her thrashing around and just telling me, ‘I want to die. I want to die.’”

As Jade tries to coax her mom to sleep, Thong looks up at her daughter and asks: “When you get the vaccine,

would you ever give it to me?”

“In a heartbeat, mom,” Jade replies. “In a heartbeat. I would give it to you in a heartbeat.”

At 10:30 p.m., on the doctor’s recommendation, the family decides to intubate.

Two days later, Phouang is discharged. Jade brings him to the ICU, and he holds his wife’s hand and cries. COVID’s cruel toll is on display in one room: one parent better, one parent much worse.

The nightly routine Jade honed with her mom doesn’t change, even as Thong is paralyzed.

“Hey, ma!” Chitchat. Lotion. But this time, she takes the bracelets off, figuring her mom will be more comfortable unencumbered.

Tony calls on the iPad. “Hi, grandma!” her granddaughter Rosalie



Her thrashing around and just telling me, ‘I want to die. I want to die.’

Jade Robinson, Thong’s daughter

INSIDE COVID'S SIEGE

says, squeaky voiced.

“Miss you” she says, echoing prompts from Tony. “Love you. Want you to get bet-ter,” the word separated in her little-kid speech.

Jade rubs Thong’s back and wraps her arms around her mother.

“You got a whole bunch of people wanting you to get better, ma,” she says.

Day 15: Praying for answers

In the chapel next to the ICU, Jade asks for guidance. For a miracle. Her mom’s condition isn’t improving; the ventilator not helping. The prognosis for any sort of recovery is bleak.

“My brother called me and goes, ‘We need to do this for mom,’” Jade says. “We don’t want her to suffer.”

It is time to let her go. They organize a Zoom call with children and grandchildren. They apologize for all the times they broke her heart, promise to make themselves better for her. Then, a respiratory technician withdraws the ventilator.

A doctor once told Jade that the hearing goes last, so she whispers in her mom’s ear: *I love you. You’re the best mom in the world. I love you. You mean the world to us. I love you. You’re not alone. I’m here.*

I love you. I love you. I love you.

For a half hour, she holds her mom’s hand, watching the heart rate monitor slow, a literal representation of her mother slipping away.

With the exhale of Thong’s final breath, Jade screams, “Mom, please don’t leave me.” The sound of her siblings crying over Zoom



On Dec. 10 at Mary Greeley, Jade Robinson holds a family photo of her mother, Thong Sengphirom, with her husband, Phouang, their son, Tony, and his daughter, Rosalie.

echoes in her ears.

“My heart broke into millions of pieces,” she says. “I just died with her right there.”

The clock reads 9:10 p.m.

Jade stays with Thong as long as she can stand it, willing her mom to jerk awake again just to make sure her daughter is still there.

‘Just watch over us. Watch over Dad.’

Thong’s ashes sit in a makeshift shrine on her husband’s kitchen counter. Next to the bright teal urn encrusted with flowers are candles, Buddhist offerings and a photo of Thong smiling wide.

In the days after Thong’s death, Phouang was still confused, asking where she was — a symptom of COVID fog, the family believes. Tony had to keep telling him she died, which was “crushing.”

At least 400,000 American families have faced this virus’s ultimate devastation. For those left behind, their loved one’s death often comes as both a thief in the night and an angel of mercy — a shock and a comfort that leaves families’ emotions raw.

Goodbyes are said through a Zoom window; last rites are watched on YouTube. Without all the typical ways we mourn — the rituals we lean on to make sense of loss — the wound festers. And the politicization of a public health emergency only pours salt in the open gash.

After the new year, Tony started a new routine. Every morning, he and Rosalie call Phouang on his iPad and eat breakfast together. Phouang stares into the screen, never quite ready to hang up.

Tony wonders whether his daughter will remember his mom, or whether she’ll come to know her grandmother through pictures.

His grief is compounded with anger as he watches internet conspiracists talk down health experts. On the news, he listens as people who thought this was the flu pull a 180 when it affects their life. Some people don’t get a second chance, he thinks.

“Don’t play Russian roulette with other people’s lives,” he says.

“You don’t want to be in this position,” he adds. “These aren’t just made-up, bull--- stories. Put yourself in our shoes and then ask yourself, ‘Is wearing a mask such a difficult thing?’”

Jade shot her mom a text the other day. “Hi, mom. We love you. We miss you. I know you’re at peace now. Just watch over us. Watch over dad.”

If somehow the signal is strong enough to transmit through celestial planes, Jade knows her mom is looking at her phone, the case encrusted with flowers.

Some days Jade feels like she is moving forward. She boxes up clothes and purses for donations.

Other days, all she can do is sit and cry.

At work, she still goes into COVID patients’ rooms, wielding her smiles and syringes. But now she stays a little longer, chitchats with them a little more. Makes sure they know they are not alone.

“I grab their hand and I say, ‘I wish you the speediest recovery,’” Jade says.

“It hurts knowing that you see them pulling through; hurts, but happy,” she says. “It hurts that my mom didn’t, but happy that they’re pulling through.”

Just before the new year, Jade sat down to get her first shot of the COVID-19 vaccine. “Nervous?” the nurse asks.

“No,” Jade replies, “more excited.”

As the shot plunges into her arm, she closes her eyes.

“Mom,” she says, “this is for you.”



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