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## ‘EVERYTHING’S A GIFT NOW’

HOW AN IOWA TEACHER IS GRAPPLING WITH COVID-19 SURVIVOR’S GUILT



From left, nurses Connor Ramirez, Pedro Huerta and Lauren Carlson care for Mary Embrey as she recovers from COVID-19 at Mary Greeley on Dec. 9.

### 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 third of an occasional series.

**Special-education teacher Mary Embrey was hospitalized with COVID-19 for nearly two weeks. Back at school, she finds herself asking: Why did I survive?**

Courtney Crowder, Des Moines Register

**A**MES, Iowa — Mary Embrey walked to the window and saw life.

For 10 days, Embrey stared at her hospital room’s three walls, cabin fever setting in. So with morning fog bathing her suite in Film Noir low light, Embrey heaved herself out of bed and inched the dozen or so steps toward the sunrise.

A mail truck. A woman walking her dog. Morning shift workers trudging in from the west side parking lot.

Trees. Alleys. Houses. Swing sets. Driveways. Creation.

“Oh, yeah,” she says to herself, “there is life outside this room.”

The war inside Embrey’s lungs wasn’t yet won, but somewhere deep down she knew that this picture — the sun trying to joust away clouds in a small central Iowa town — was the image that marked the beginning of the end.

But as it is with combat, Embrey didn’t come out of her battle without scars.

For those who survive COVID-19, questions linger: *What has this done to my long-term health? Can I get reinfected? Am I immune? Why did I pull through?*

*Why me? Why me? Why me?*

A special-education teacher, Embrey believes she and her colleagues were exposed to the coronavirus at school — though she can’t be sure. Working with kids who have behavioral disabilities, her exposure risk was high, and as an asthmatic, Embrey knew she had to be extra careful.

An unease plagued her

all fall. Time pushed in on her, pressure mounted. She had to do, prepare, finish, lest the virus close schools again, flip her students’ equilibrium on its head again.

Her kids started out excited and vigilant about pandemic precautions, but they tired of them, she says.

“They don’t want to wear the masks,” she says. “They don’t want to, you know, social distance. Some of them don’t understand. And so that made it really hard.”

Embrey tried to stay safe, maybe militantly so. She always masked, shielded, distanced and sanitized. She took her temperature daily and dutifully ticked off a list of symptoms on her school’s intranet: No coughing. No body aches. No shortness of breath.

But the virus still found her.

Now, she's in a "weird club," she says, of people who have suffered serious cases of COVID-19.

She makes her way back over to her bed on the COVID-19 floor of Mary Greeley Medical Center as a guitar riff rings out across the hospital's loudspeakers.

The hospital plays The Beatles' song when someone survives a ventilator. In this case, it's a ginger-haired elderly woman in the ICU who'd been on a breathing machine as long as Embrey had been admitted.

Another member of her club, Embrey says. Another battle-scarred patient who will, hopefully, get to go home.

"There's that sense of undeserved-ness, you know?" Embrey says. "Because I'm sure there's a lot of very fine people who have lost this fight. And I somehow escaped."

Survivor's guilt lingers, Embrey says, buried in the most haunting of questions.

When you've cheated death, what do you do with the rest?

**'There it is. I've got it'**

After decades of early school alarms, Embrey has become accustomed to daybreak. So, when the hospital cafeteria opens at 7 a.m., Embrey's fingers are poised over the phone's keypad, ready to order.

By Dec. 9, her 12th day in the hospital, Embrey has tasted every dish on the menu. This morning she wants lunch, so she asks for an oriental chicken salad. "I need the protein," she says.



Mary Embrey looks out the window of her hospital room as she prepares to be discharged from Mary Greeley after treatment for COVID-19 on Dec. 10.



Mary Embrey stands for a photo at Webster City Middle School after a day of teaching Wednesday, Feb. 3.

"Oh, and a coffee."

Nurse Pedro Huerta looks Embrey over as she ticks through her daily medications. "My steroids?" she asks. "Yep," he says, "got them."

Zinc? Uh-huh. Lasix? Yes. Potassium? No potassium today.

"Shhh!" She turns to her monitor, which beeps as they move cords and wires. "Be quiet!"

"He's been the boss of me for too long," she says.

All day, nurses have been telling her how good she looks, how much better she is than when she first

came to them.

She feels better, though she still takes two gasping breaths, like gulps of reserve air, before talking.

A member of the White Earth Indian Reservation, Embrey, 57, grew up in Minnesota. After meeting her husband, Ricky,

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*Dustin, a Woody doll from "Toy Story," finds himself in the oddest places around Mary Greeley. Housekeeper Sue Walsh brought him to the hospital to boost morale. She posts photos on the hospital's intranet to chronicle his adventures.*

an Oklahoma native, the pair decided to build a life somewhere in the middle.

"It was almost like throwing a dart on the map," she says. "We didn't know anybody here. It was close enough, but not in everybody's backyard."

Embrey has always been "the kid person," she says. Children were habitually attracted to her, maybe because she had a lot of

energy, maybe because she was nonthreatening.

She was the go-to babysitter growing up and nannied on and off in her younger years. Her lifelong dream was twofold: have kids and work with kids. She checked off the first when she had her son, now 30, and then her daughter, 25.

She tackled the second when her kids went

to grade school. She already had a bachelor's in English, so she studied education, specializing in teaching kids on the fringes.

In the almost two decades she's been in the classroom, she's worked with kids who have extreme behavioral disabilities, kids who were incarcerated, kids with addiction issues, and she's

lost two kids to suicide. The work can wear a person down, but she's dedicated to helping students chart a new path for their life.

"I always just wanted to make positive change," she says. "Just help them see a good version for themselves and a future that, you know, might be different than what they know, or different than



Nurse Pedro Huerta gives Mary Embrey a medication as she recovers from COVID-19 at Mary Greeley on Dec. 9.

Mary Embrey rests as she recovers from COVID-19 at Mary Greeley Monday, Dec. 7.

what they see for themselves.”

Working with fifth-through eighth-graders at Webster City Middle School, Embrey has a roster of kids she teaches social skills and re-teaches subject matter as they go through their daily classes. Along with six associates, Embrey helps her students problem-solve the difficulties of everyday schooling.

When Webster City Middle went virtual last spring, Embrey saw how differently digital learning affected her students. Some thrived with the technology and the ability to go at their own pace. Some suffered from the lack of connection with peers and adults and the absence of in-person accountability.

Before classes started last fall, Embrey was assigned a new, bigger room, a blessing, she says. But her kids don't stay in their seats as much as she would like, and despite giving them their own sets of supplies, they lose them and end up using community materials.

The school year be-

gan normally enough. Reminding kids about masks became the norm; asking them to social distance de rigueur. Her associates traveled class to class with their kids. The week before Thanksgiving, a behavioral analyst from the local education agency visited to observe a student. Embrey and the woman talked about the student's progress for about 20 minutes.

Every day, Embrey and her fellow teachers entered their temperature into a computer program and responded to a list of symptoms. Embrey never registered a fever or any of the listed symptoms, but started feeling tired, *really tired*, just before the holiday.

Then on Nov. 21, a Saturday morning, one of Embrey's associates texted that she couldn't taste her morning pomegranate tea. The associate went to

get a coronavirus test. She was positive.

Embrey set out to take her own test. Waiting for the results, she got a second text. A different associate messaged that she was positive, too.

“Do you have any symptoms?” Embrey asks the woman.

“No, just tired,” she says

“I'm like, there it is,” Embrey says. “I've got it.”

### Battling COVID-19's vicious cycle

Embrey props her wrist up on a set of pillows. Days of practice have taught her the exact right angle to make getting medicine painless.

She keeps track of where on her body she's received certain shots. The abdomen yesterday, so upper arm this morning, she tells Huerta.

Her goal is to get off

oxygen. She's on a low dose right now, but if she wants to go home, they'd like her free of it, Huerta says.

After Embrey's positive test, she stayed home and rested through Thanksgiving. A cough started. Her breathing slowed. Each breath became a little harder than the one before.

She tried to parse what was her “normal bad breathing” and what was COVID-19.

Her sister sent an oximeter. It registered incredibly low numbers: 82 once, 77 another time. Way lower than the mid-90s doctors prefer to see.

“I was still trying to convince myself that it was a fluke, that the oximeter wasn't registering right,” she says. “That I must have been doing something wrong, because these numbers can't be that low.”

“I wasn't in denial that I had COVID,” she adds. “But once I got it, I surely was in denial with how bad it was.”

After a week on the couch and her breathing worse, Embrey knew it



**Every time I bring someone else down, I just think: One more. One more.**

Audra Piittmann, technician



Mary Embrey stands for a photo at her home in Jewell on Jan. 28.

was time to go to Mary Greeley.

Embrey's health fluctuated wildly her first few days in the hospital. Some moments Embrey felt OK, thinking, *"Why am I taking up this space? I'm fine."*

But deep breaths soon became elusive. She needed more and more oxygen. Then, heated high-flow therapy. She watched the numbers on her monitors swing.

"I knew that, you know, in order to breathe, you have to relax," she says. "Hard to relax when you can't breathe, and it was just this vicious cycle."

She kept taking pictures of her hands; they

were so pale and getting paler, she said. She started coughing up dark mucus, like an alien species erupting from her lungs. She was mad at her body, mad at herself.

The floor staff worried about Embrey's trajectory, says nurse Maggie Zimmermann. But they felt like she was healthy enough to pull through, like maybe she could be

about her family, anything to keep her outlook positive.

At night, Embrey's breathing got ragged, and the numbers lowered. As the sun dipped below the horizon, she'd get a tingle: "Night is coming. It's all about to get worse."

"I knew that they were on the brink of possible intubation," Embrey says. "I just knew it. But I didn't want it. And all I kept thinking is that somebody else would have to make that decision."

Whenever she had clarity, she tried to check in on school, glancing at her students' Google Classroom pages.

Students messaged her. She didn't know what to

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Here comes the sun, doo da doo doo.

Here comes the sun, and I say

It's all right.

She texted her family constantly.

*"Any symptoms? Are you OK? Don't mess around with this. We know it's in the house now."*

one of their happy endings.

Whenever she had a minute, Zimmermann stopped in to raise Embrey's spirits. She braided her hair, talked

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say. She didn't want them to be scared, but she also needed them to know that she wasn't just another adult disappeared from their lives.

She tried to disconnect.

"If I want to help the kids," she told herself, "I got to get better first."

### One more goes home

Thirteen days after her admission, Embrey is finally off oxygen.

With her last remaining hurdle to discharge jumped, she changes into sea-foam teal scrubs and fuzzy pink socks. She started wearing scrubs to school in the fall. They're easy to wash and sewn with big pockets for her inhaler, pencils and candy. (You look like a nurse, a friend told her, you've got to have lollipops.)

"I'm getting nostalgic now," Embrey says while waiting for final paperwork.

"Maybe I'll take home the menu," she adds, grabbing a paper sheet off her tray table.

Every time a patient is discharged, the floor is abuzz, says Sara Udelhoven, a case manager. A good outcome is always welcome news for the COVID-19 staff, who have seen so much death.

"It's not uncommon for patients to spend 20 to 30 days isolated," Udelhoven says. "So it's always exciting to see patients go home and take the next step. Even if there are setbacks, they are home and with loved ones."

One of Embrey's associates who tested positive rode COVID-19 out on her sofa. The other contracted pneumonia but

was able to fight the infection as an outpatient.

The consultant who visited her classroom was admitted to the ICU just after Thanksgiving, according to an online journal from her family. She was put on a ventilator the day Embrey saw life outside her window.

"The thought of going to school right now is not appealing," Embrey says.

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**I could have died last week.**

Mary Embrey

"I'm in a better position than most because I am pumped up with all this stuff."

Still, Embrey is concerned about reinfection, so her focus is on getting a vaccine. By early February, her focus is still on getting a vaccine.

Just before noon, tech-

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**Everything's a gift now.**

Mary Embrey

nician Audra Piittmann arrives with a wheelchair.

"Is that my ride?" Embrey asks.

"I am your ride!" Piittmann responds.

"Someone told me recently we have had like 300 people survive COVID," Piittmann says. "Every time I bring someone else down, I just think: One more. One more."

She holds up her point-

er finger by way of emphasis.

Embrey's husband gives her a hug as he guides her into the passenger seat, tucking a blanket around her lap. He throws her bag in the backseat, and the pair head for home, a swift ending to almost two weeks in the hospital.

Her family celebrates her return quietly, excited she's home, but unsure of

the virus's ultimate toll. She isolates in her daughter's old room, snuggled under her weighted blanket.

The next day, she wakes up, grabs a lawn chair and has her morning coffee on the driveway.

After 13 days inside, staring at the same three walls, Embrey wants to

feel the sun on her skin.

**'I could've died last week'**

Embrey was back in the classroom a week after leaving the hospital. She was dizzy; almost as if moving between the hospital world and the real world too quickly had given her the COVID-19 bends.

Walking the length of the main hallway tires her. She waits for passing periods to end in her classroom, ensuring corridors are empty when she finally steps out.

"That day I felt like I was teaching underwater," she says. "Everything was in slow motion."

When a student had a meltdown at lunch, Embrey turned to her and said, "I could have died last week." The student ate her meal and picked up the items she'd thrown in anger.

Embrey had chest tightness for days after discharge, and didn't take a good, big breath until mid-January. She's still not breathing right, though it's hard to judge.

"I do sort of think that that's part of the reason why I'm being sedentary," she says. "I don't want to know that I can't breathe like I used to, so maybe it's a little game I'm playing with myself."

She used to have a darn-near perfect memory — friends and colleagues would call her for a specific name or date, like a living encyclopedia — but now she finds herself forgetting small things. "Is that the COVID fog?" she wonders.

"I'm not 100%," she says. "I feel better than I did on day one. I feel better than I did a week later. I feel better than I did four weeks later. I don't know if I'll feel 100%. I like to think I will."

"They're learning more about COVID all the time and different things," she says, "So anytime I see something new, I look and say, 'Well, is this a problem?'"

Mary Greeley has seen re-

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peat infections in COVID-19 survivors. The week of Embrey's discharge, a middle-age man was back after testing positive again, and a 30-something who already had COVID-19 came in with another infection.

When a COVID-19 survivor reports other concerns, "I can't say that is not COVID-related," Dr. Tamim Mahayni says. "These secondary problems that we are seeing, are they co-morbidities of COVID? I don't know."

"I think we are slowly going to learn more about these downstream complications, some of which at best will debilitate you, but at worst could lead to death," he adds.

Since her hospital stay, another associate in Embrey's room tested positive. Considering Iowa's rampant community spread, no one can be certain they caught the virus at school.

Two of her associates had only mild symptoms and recovered, Embrey says. One still can't fully smell or taste.

The consultant started receiving kidney treatments a few days after Embrey went home, according to the online journal. Then she got an infection. Four days before Christmas, she died.

In her obituary, her family quoted Maya Angelou, one of her favorite authors.

"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget the way you made them feel."

Embrey — like many survivors — is still grappling with how the virus has changed her; not just her physical being, but her spiritual one.

Recently, she's been getting Facebook messages from former students. "I'm still learning from you," wrote one. "You were always so supportive," wrote another.

Surviving the virus has allowed her to refocus on what got her into teaching in the first place, to help kids see a future for them-

selves. In doing so, she's trying to see a new future for herself, too. She's slowly relieving all the built-up pressure, pushing back against the crush of time to do, prepare, finish.

"I value education, but I always have to think of what's important to those kids, too," she says. "If they're anxious and all that, you know, pushing back on the academics might not be such a bad thing. Because it's not going to help their growth and development if we're constantly pushing."

Nothing that happens in middle school today will be life-altering unless you let it be, she says.

Embrey finds herself thinking a lot about the duty board in her hospital room, the chart where nurses wrote their names.

She wants to remember them, to thank them.

"I can't now just say that nothing matters because a lot of people pulled together to see that I came home," she says. "And I feel like I owe it

to people now. There are a lot of people who didn't come home."

As to "the rest," Embrey says she's still shaping that, still charting her life's new path.

"I feel like I just have another chance, and what do I want it to look like? And what would be beneficial for everybody?" she says.

She pauses and takes a deep breath: "I feel like I have time," she says.

"Everything's a gift now."



Crowder

Boyden-Holmes

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