A Little Batch Of Helping

Nursing major sews face masks for healthcare workers

Tuesday, April 7, 2020

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Laura Howard '20 had planned to spend spring break picking up extra shifts at the hospice house in Merrimack, New Hampshire, where she works as a licensed nursing assistant. After that, she'd return to campus, finish her final semester as a UNH student, and graduate with a degree in [nursing](.).

"I have a deep desire to meaningfully contribute to this field and truly see it as an honor to care for each of the patients I work with..."

At the beginning of March, that had been the plan. Soon after, however, the coronavirus was declared a national emergency, and everything changed. At first she was disappointed. But then she heard through a cousin who is a nurse in New York that many hospitals were running out of personal protective equipment -- items such as masks and gowns that help limit workers' exposure to hazards like the highly contagious COVID-19 coronavirus. So she and her mother, who once had been a professional seamstress, set to work making face masks to help keep healthcare workers safe. Howard's sister helped, too.

"We made them with a pocket between the outer and inner fabric so disposable face masks could be inserted and hopefully made a little less disposable," says Howard, who was recently named Nursing Student of the Year by the New Hampshire Nurses Association. "We gave them to Littleton Regional Healthcare, where I had my senior practicum in the emergency department; the first little batch was a little more than 60."

LAURA HOWARD (RIGHT) WITH HER MOTHER DEB HOWARD

Since then, Howard's mother and sister have "picked up the baton," sewing the masks for the community hospitals in the area as well as the Community Hospice House in Merrimack, where Howard works — for now. She has just been offered a job at Exeter Hospital in their medical surgical telemetry unit and starts in July.

Of receiving the nursing award, Howard says, "It is such an honor and one I do not take lightly. I have a deep desire to meaningfully contribute to this field and truly see it as an

honor to care for each of the patients I work with as well as the healthcare professionals I interact with and learn from."

During her time at UNH, the Jaffrey, New Hampshire, resident served as a peer academic mentor, student nurse mentor and student nurse ambassador, roles that she says allowed her to "give back to the nursing department and come alongside my peers to advise and encourage them in their own college/nursing journeys.

"I love that the field of medicine is always changing and allows me to keep learning new things all the time," Howard says. "I love being a nurse. I love that it doesn't end when I leave my shift. I can care for my loved ones and community in and out of the professional setting. I hope to contribute to a field that has brought hope and healing to so many."

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COLLEGE OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

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