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GWU School of Divinity Alumnus Comforts Families in COVID-19 Hotspot

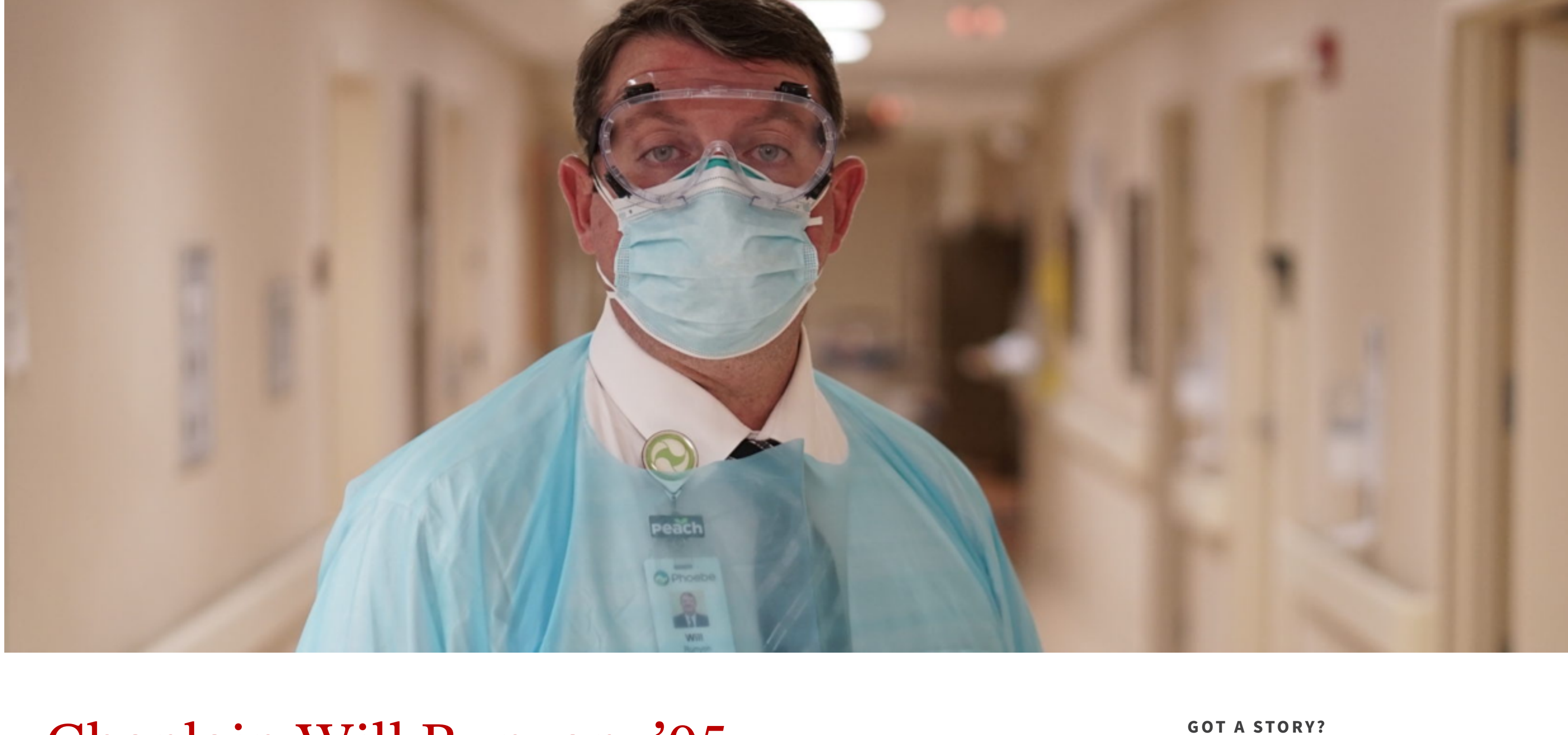
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ALUMNI

GWU School of Divinity Alumnus Comforts Families in COVID-19 Hot Spot

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2020



Chaplain Will Runyon, '05, Serves in Albany, Ga., One of the Hardest Hit Areas in the World

Despite protective masks and gowns designed to keep him and his patients safe, Will Runyon, chaplain director for Phoebe Putney Health System in Albany, Ga., found a way to offer comfort in agonizing circumstances. The 2005 School of Divinity alumnus of Gardner-Webb University became a bridge between dying patients and their families in a COVID-19 hot spot.

"Albany, Georgia, and Phoebe during March and April were one of the hardest hit areas in the world," Runyon stated. "At one time, we were third per capita for deaths behind only Wuhan, China, and France. Just like New York, we were seeing more patients die than we had ability to handle."



Will Runyon

Many people in the town of about 74,000 lost multiple family members. "At the height of our local crisis, the emotional toll on our team was enormous," Runyon described. "We are blessed to have a robust Employee Assistance Program as well at Phoebe. Our therapists and I worked six and seven days per week during March and April and into May supporting staff as well as holding virtual visits for patients and families. Most of the virtual visits we were doing were limited to those patients who were imminently dying due to the sheer number of deaths we were seeing every day."

In May, ABC broadcast journalist Diane Sawyer filmed a special report that included the crisis in Albany. She interviewed Runyon and one of the hospital's ICU nurses who had lost nine patients that week to COVID-19. Runyon's story and photos were also featured in an article in USA Today.

The Albany outbreak was linked to two separate funerals that were held before stay-at-home and physical distancing orders were instituted. "Many of our staff had been exposed, several of whom became sick, several of whom died," Runyon related. "By March 15, the hospital was forced to lock down our facility to all outside visitors. This also meant that all volunteer services were suspended, including my team of chaplains. Myself and my program coordinator were here to provide emotional and spiritual support. It was a very scary time. It quickly became a very lonely time for us as well as for our patients and families."

Because of the isolation, Runyon and the staff quickly saw the need to connect dying patients and families. "Several nurses started using their personal phones to FaceTime with patient families, as well as myself and other staff," he commented. "Our CEO gave us permission to commandeer several iPads from our information services department to use for this purpose."

During the most difficult days, he vowed not to let anyone be alone. "There is no manual or playbook for what we were experiencing across the nation and the world," he stated. "Chaplaincy today does not look how it did even six months ago. Being a chaplain means having to adjust and adapt to new infection control measures, visitation policies, and supporting families virtually."



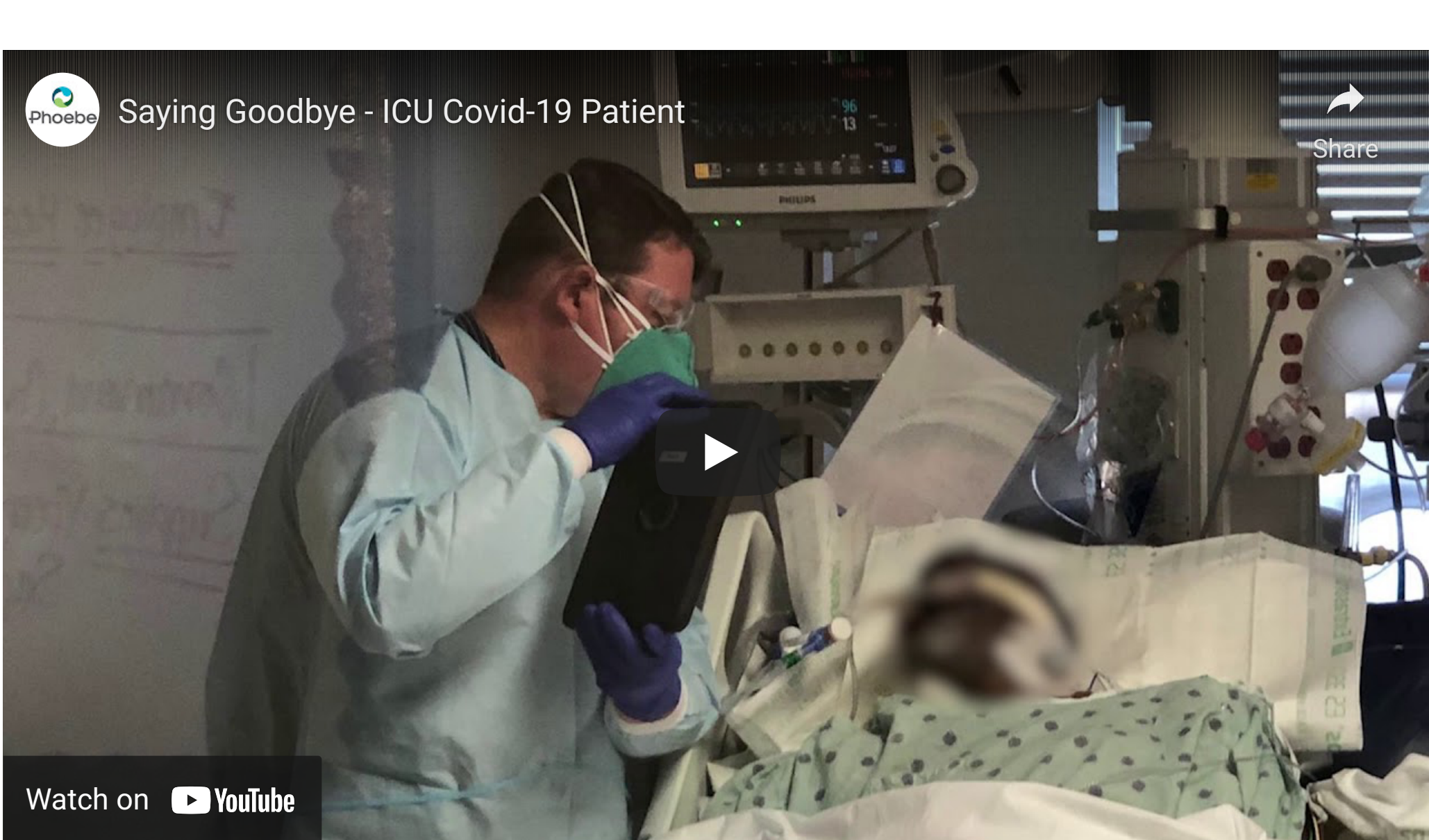
During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Albany, Ga., Chaplain Will Runyon (second from left) led some of the volunteer chaplains on a prayer walk around the main hospital. (Photo courtesy of Phoebe Putney Health System)

The crisis subsided in Albany through May and June, and Runyon's hospital started allowing limited visitation to patients who were not sick with COVID and visitation allowances for end-of-life situations. However, they were steadily caring for around 50 patients with COVID-19 every day.

While navigating the global pandemic, Runyon experienced some unique blessings as well. "During the height of our crisis at Phoebe, I had a patient with COVID-19 who was rapidly declining. This patient was in her 90's, alert and able to make her own health care decisions," he informed. "She did not want to be placed on a ventilator. Her family was spread across the country, from Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, South Carolina and Florida. Because we used iPads and Facetime, we 'gathered' this family, spread across thousands of miles, all at the same time and place to allow them and this patient to see each other. She expressed her desires to her family. Her children and grandchildren pleaded with her to allow the medical team to intubate her, but she talked to them about her wishes. She told them, face to face, what she wanted and why she wanted to forego aggressive treatment. Most importantly, she was able to tell her family goodbye face to face."

Runyon started the Master of Divinity program at Gardner-Webb in 2002 and met his wife, Mary, when he came to Boiling Springs. He felt called into chaplaincy for several reasons. "I grew up with some health issues and spent quite a bit of time as a patient in the hospital, and my mother and several aunts were nurses," he reflected. "I was comfortable in the hospital setting. My growth into chaplaincy was largely experiential. I loved classes with Doug Dickens (GWU professor) and my classmates. But we had several life events that taught us as much about pastoral care as did our class time and work. Mary's father passed away six weeks before our wedding. That was also the semester I was taking Grief, Loss, Death and Dying. Doug worked with me to allow our experience to become part of that semester's curriculum. During my time at GWU, I also experienced the death of a beloved 41-year-old aunt from breast cancer and a high school classmate who died in an automobile accident. My time at GWU helped me grow into a pastoral clinician, a professional chaplain."

Runyon concluded, "2020 has been an incredibly difficult year for me, Mary, and our three children. It has been professionally challenging—and personally devastating with the sudden and unexpected death of my brother, David. But this year has taught me that it is OK to question God and whatever plan He may have for our lives. In hindsight, I can absolutely see how God worked to place us in Albany for times such as these. It's the getting there, to the other side, to be able to see with hindsight what challenges us, stretches us and frankly tears us down and rebuilds us. We go with the knowledge that our past has shaped us and built us for the present. The support and love we've received from our Gardner-Webb family has sustained us and for each of you, we give thanks. Mary blessings as our journeys continue!"



Video from Phoebe Putney Health System

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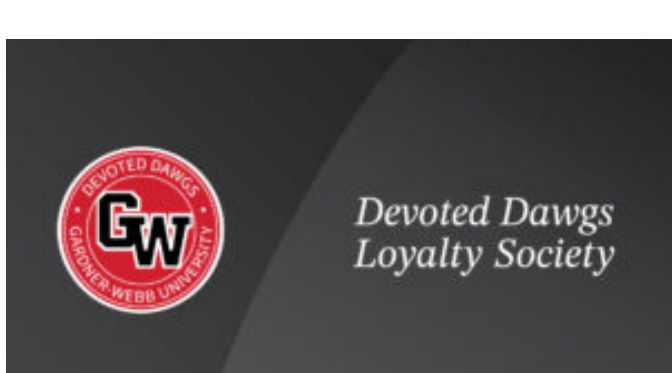
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