

## Marrygold Ugorji



### ***Returning to work amid a pandemic***

Marrygold Ugorji was on leave from her job this spring with a sprained ankle when coronavirus case numbers began to spike in the Washington DC area. She watched the death toll rising on the news and worried about her impending return to work.

As a certified nursing assistant for Capital Caring Health, the region's largest non-profit provider of elder health, advanced illness, hospice, and at-home care services, Marrygold is one of many frontline care workers whose jobs are more essential—and more dangerous—than ever as they risk exposing themselves and their families to coronavirus while caring for the most vulnerable patients often until the last breath, holding hands and comforting when family can't.

"What we are going through now is bad and it's scary," says Marrygold, a mother of four grown children with 20 years of experience as a nursing assistant.

In the beginning she worried that she would not have the personal protective equipment she needed. But by the time she was back on the schedule in May, the trunk of her car was stocked with N95 face masks, a face shield and a "little pharmacy" of disinfectants.

She also wanted to feel supported in a broader way. "You don't ever want to get the feeling that, 'Okay, you knew you signed up for this: just go out and get the job done,'" she says of a job where just okay is never enough for Marrygold.

### ***Feeling part of a team***

Fortunately, the morning that she finally got the call to visit her first Covid 19 patient, a scheduler on the other end of the line—someone she had never met in person—put her at ease. She assured Marrygold that another certified nursing assistant would also be there, and that she was part of a team. "She was like a friend," Marrygold says.

So, she drove to the skilled nursing facility and steeled her courage in the car. She put on her foot coverings, an N95 mask and a surgical mask.

Inside the building, in a "clean room," she met her colleague and they helped each other with the rest of their protective equipment: a full gown, a head covering and a face shield. With both masks and the shield, it was hard to breathe, she says, but she continued on.

"I went in with a positive mindset," she says, "and we gave excellent care."

She left the protective gowns in the “dirty room” on her way out of the facility that day and drove home. Then she took a hot shower and washed her hair before facing her husband and daughter.

### ***Caregiving came naturally***

Being a caregiver has always come naturally to Marrygold. She grew up with a large extended family in the U.S. Virgin Islands and watched her aunt repeatedly step in and care for family members when they became ill or needed help.

When she was 16, she moved to New Jersey to attend a vocational school and study culinary arts. She got a job working in the kitchen of a nursing home. But she soon realized that instead of over the stove, she wanted to be in the dining room helping the elderly residents. So, she trained to become a certified nursing assistant.

She spent the next decade working in the geriatric unit of a New Jersey State psychiatric hospital. In 2010, love brought her to Northern Virginia. She married her soul mate, a spiritual and thoughtful man from Nigeria, and they joined their lives.

She started working in an assisted living community, where she encountered hospice care services more often. She recalls building relationships with residents and then losing them.

There was one man who was often angry with his caregivers, but who would calm down with Marrygold. During his last days, she would visit him and sit by his bedside.

“I remember holding his hand and giving him that sense of comfort and telling him it’s okay,” she says. “It was in that moment that I felt: This is where I need to be.”

### ***Love, too, is part of the job***

That was her gift to him—and his parting gift to her. Not long after, she went to work for Capital Caring, focusing her energies on people at the end of their lives.

The care plan she follows for each patient is only part of the care she provides, she says. She offers comfort in the form of a light massage or a listening ear or some calming music. She likes to sing to her patients, Caribbean songs she grew up with or inspirational music.

“My husband always tells me this kind of work is very easy for me,” she says. “I am very humble, and I am someone who shows empathy to others.”

Marrygold describes another patient who stands out in her memory. She went to say goodbye to one afternoon, not knowing if she would still be there the next time she came to work. The woman leaned in and whispered, “I love you.”

Love, too, is part of the job, Marrygold says.

“It’s okay to love your patients,” she says, especially in these troubled times. “God loves all of us. Why can’t we love each other?”

Everyone has a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, Marrygold says, and it's a privilege to be with them for the final chapter.

"I am always grateful that they trust me to be part of the end of their story," she says.