

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAYLOR LORCHAK

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Taylor Lorchak, on March 19, 2021, with Kate Rizzi. I am in Branchburg, New Jersey. Ms. Lorchak, thank you so much for joining with me to do this oral history interview.

Taylor Lorchak: My name is Taylor Lorchak. I'm excited.

KR: Can you state for the record where you are today?

TL: I am in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania.

KR: When and where were you born?

TL: I was born at Lower Bucks County Hospital in Bristol, Pennsylvania.

KR: What year were you born?

TL: October 28, 1994.

KR: Let us start off today talking about some of your family history. What do you know or want to share about your family history, on your father's side of the family?

TL: My dad, he's a diesel mechanic, and my brother is a nurse. My grandpop was in the Marines, and my grandmom, she stayed at home, but when she was younger, she used to work at a factory. I think my great great grandparents came over from Russia. My grandparents met in, I think, Coaldale, Pennsylvania. That was after my grandpop already served his time and everything.

KR: What sort of stories got passed down in your family about your great great grandparents immigrating from Russia?

TL: They came to Coaldale, PA, that's where they first moved to. I don't know too many other stories besides that. My grandparents, they were Russian Orthodox, so I think that was just kind of a tradition in the family.

KR: What do you know about your grandfather's service in the Marine Corps?

TL: He was a mechanic. He worked on trucks, but when he was deployed, he was in the Korean War, so even though he was a mechanic, that wasn't his main job when he was in the war. He actually operated radio lines for pilots, so they would call in the air strikes between the ground and the actual air pilots. So, he knew a lot of pilots. He served for, I think, four years.

KR: Were you close with your grandparents growing up?

TL: Yes. When I was really little, my grandparents took care of me when my dad was at work, so I was pretty close with them. My grandpop, I think I was his favorite grandchild too. [laughter] So, I was pretty close with them.

KR: Did your grandfather talk much about his military service and his time in Korea?

TL: He didn't talk about it at all to me really. He's not here anymore, but what I know is pretty much from my dad and my aunt telling me about it. I think it's a lot different today because back in the day, those who served didn't really talk about it, versus today everybody who serves is a lot more open with it.

KR: Is there any family history on your mother's side of the family that you would like to share?

TL: That I really don't know as well. I don't really think that anybody on my mom's side was in the military, but they lived in Texas and the Louisiana area when she was growing up.

KR: Where did you grow up?

TL: I moved a lot growing up. I was born in Bristol, PA, and I lived in Levittown for a few years. Then, I lived in Philly. I think I lived in two different places in Philly, and then I moved to Glassboro, New Jersey, where I lived probably a good ten years, from the time I was about ten, and so that's why I went to school in New Jersey.

KR: What were some formative experiences for you when you were growing up?

TL: I think what influenced me the most was music. I was involved in a lot of different music activities. I used to play in the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra. I also played in Rowan Youth Orchestra, and I went to Settlement Music School from eighth grade, or maybe seventh grade, and then I went there for lessons and theory classes throughout high school. In my senior year of high school, I started studying with Denise Tryon, which she was the fourth horn player of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and I also studied with Kathy Mehtens, who's a teacher at The College of New Jersey.

KR: Tell me about your education and your schooling when you were growing up.

TL: Growing up, I was actually homeschooled. I think that it was an interesting experience, but it did definitely teach me how to be independent, which I think did help me in college. It's different in college versus when you're growing up and going to a school and they tell you everything, like you go to class every day, but in college, you have to be more independent and study on your own. So, I think it helped in that aspect.

KR: You were homeschooled K to 12?

TL: Yes. Then, actually when I was fifteen, I started classes at Gloucester County College, which is now known as Rowan, but I took two classes a semester there. So, I think that also helped me get ready to go, when I went to The College of New Jersey, it gave me a good experience of what it would be like when I go to college. I really liked the science classes. I took a chemistry class there, and the professor was Dr. Cathy Davies, so I remember really enjoying that class.

KR: The experience of being homeschooled was once unique, but I think since the pandemic, a lot of people are doing homeschooling. [laughter]

TL: Right. [laughter]

KR: Your experience homeschooling is the original homeschooling experience. Describe what it was like. What was your daily routine like?

TL: I mean, I kind of had to teach myself in a lot of ways. My parents were divorced. With homeschooling, everybody has a different experience, but I used the Abeka curriculum. I know some other homeschoolers use different curriculums. So, I would just have to make sure that I got my schoolwork done.

KR: Was your brother homeschooled also?

TL: No, I was actually the only one who was homeschooled. I'm the youngest child in the family. My brother, who is a nurse, he went to Truman High School in Pennsylvania. He's the brother from my dad's side of the family, and then I have another brother, Jason Harvey, he's the brother from my mom's side of the family. He went to the Philadelphia High School of Creative and Performing Arts.

KR: How did that decision come about that you would be homeschooled?

TL: I don't really know why. My parents were divorced, so it was pretty much when I was living with my mom. I guess it was just something she wanted to do. I'm not really sure.

KR: Outside of your homeschooling curriculum, when you were young, what sort of activities, clubs, sports, other extracurriculars, did you do?

TL: I didn't really do any sports growing up. Actually when I went to college, I did crew, so I was on the rowing team. But I mainly focused on music growing up. I was in, I think, a couple of homeschool co-ops, so I remember going one day a week to activities there. I took Latin. They offered different classes like Latin for us, and that was pretty fun to do. I did another science one, where we would do different science labs as well.

KR: Tell me a little bit more about how the co-op worked with who was teaching you. Was your mom teaching you when you were at your home and then other people were teaching you when you would go to the co-op?

TL: Pretty much. I mean, homeschooling is different depending on what family. I remember, as I got older, I was kind of pretty much teaching myself, but when I went to the homeschool co-op, it was usually other homeschooling parents who would teach.

KR: You said that you lived in Glassboro after you were ten years old.

TL: Yes.

KR: Describe your neighborhood in Glassboro and what your neighborhood was like.

TL: I guess it was kind of like a suburban area because it wasn't too too far from Philly. It had mixed different races. It was quiet. It wasn't like when I lived in Philly, how it was pretty loud there. We had a pretty good-sized yard, which was nice to play in as a child.

KR: What was your training like in music? You mentioned being in orchestras in Philly and then at Rowan and then the Settlement Music School. Take me through your training.

TL: I first learned when I was at home, and I think the first orchestra I was in was Rowan Youth Orchestra. Before that, they had a local community band called Hobo Band, so I would do that. That's a lot different from playing in an orchestra because it's more like band music. Then, I started taking lessons with Katy Ambrose at Settlement Music School. She was one of the private French horn teachers there. I studied with her in eighth grade through about eleventh grade, or between tenth and eleventh grade I think. Then, in eleventh grade, I started studying with Denise Tryon. That was around the time that I joined the Philadelphia Orchestra. So, I think that's what really inspired me to pursue music. For a while, I was indecisive of what I wanted to go to college for because I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to nursing or if I wanted to go to medical school eventually, but it just was something I really enjoyed. I think learning from Denise Tryon, she really made me a better French horn player, so it gave me the opportunity to audition for colleges. I also studied with Kathy Mehrrens. Like I said earlier, she's the horn teacher at The College of New Jersey.

I auditioned to a lot of different colleges in my senior year. I think when I applied, I applied to nine or ten, just because with music, it's really competitive to get into a good music school. Then, I got into a couple different schools, but The College of New Jersey was one that I had already been studying with the French horn professor there and it was a state school too, so it'd be a lot more affordable than the other schools I applied to, like the University of Delaware. Also, I forgot to mention, when I went to Settlement Music School, we would have recitals too, so that gave me good performance opportunities. It's a lot different performing in an orchestra versus playing a solo with a piano, and a recital too. Another thing that I would do is chamber music group. I was in a wind chamber group with five different musicians. So, it just gave me a good background for going to college.

KR: Before your college years, what are some highlights of performances that you partook in when you were playing for the orchestras or the chamber music group?

TL: I can't remember the name of the piece, but there was one piece that we played in the chamber music group that was a good arrangement of a bunch of different pieces and it had like the circus theme in it too, so that was really fun to play. Everybody laughed when we played it, so it was a funny song to play. I also really liked playing in the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra because we would have concerts in the Verizon Hall, which is where the Philly Orchestra played. I was really thankful to be able to play there because a lot of people don't get that opportunity.

KR: What was the camaraderie like for the members of the youth orchestras that you were in?

TL: It's a lot different in some ways than being in the military. A lot of the kids that were in the orchestras were really smart academically too. Some of them were really good at doing science. I think there's been a correlation between the medical field and musicians. There were some of them, they didn't go to college for music school, they went for sciences. I mean, it's different because it's not like a nursing school, where we can study together, because we kind of have to do our separate practice time on our own. But we all had the same thing in common, so that was nice in a way.

KR: What led you in the first place to decide to play the French horn?

TL: I liked it because it was different from other instruments and it was very shiny. I was, I think, in sixth grade when I started playing it, so I liked that it was shiny and it was different than just playing the trumpet. A lot of people play the trumpet, so I liked doing something different.

KR: It is a big instrument for a sixth grader to play, right?

TL: Yes. [laughter] It's not as big as the tuba though. [laughter]

KR: When you were growing up, what did you do during the summertime?

TL: I didn't go to any sports. I would play outside usually. Sometimes, I would do schoolwork, read. I like to read for fun. I like to read. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* was one of my favorites, and also *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In high school, I went to Kendall Betts Horn Camp and Barry Tuckwell Horn Camp, which was actually at The College of New Jersey. One year, when I was around seven or eight, I think I did, I don't remember what year it was, but I went to Mount Gilead, which was a summer camp for girls, and they taught us how to horseback ride. I really enjoyed that.

KR: What were the summer camps like, the horn camps?

TL: They would do chamber classes, so they would do a lesson in front of all of us and we would listen and learn from it. Then, we would do a French horn choir too, which I really enjoyed. So, everybody who went, we would all play an arrangement for a bunch of French horns. We had recitals at the end of it for everybody. We would also do horn quintets as well.

KR: When you were in your high school years, I am curious, how much time do you think you spent playing the French horn on a daily basis? How much did you practice?

TL: Probably, on my own, aside from the days I went to orchestra, usually two or three hours. So, it was a lot of time.

KR: That discipline to dedicate yourself to something so much, to practice something for that amount of time, how do you think that discipline has influenced you as you have gotten older?

TL: It helped a lot when I went to nursing school because I was already used to having to spend a lot of time on my own working on something, whether it be music or studying for nursing. I think it even helped when I went away to join the Army, because I was already disciplined. It's different in a way, but in a sense, there's still discipline.

KR: How much travel did you get a chance to do when you were growing up?

TL: I didn't really travel a lot growing up besides from just moving because I moved quite a few times growing up. I really didn't travel a lot. That's something I want to do more of once this pandemic slows down more, which it seems like it's starting to slow down.

KR: What role did religion play in your upbringing?

TL: I was pretty religious growing up. I went to a church, and I also was in Missionettes. I did Awana for some time as well. So, I think it was a big part of my life growing up. I think it gave me a good background for principles to live by. [Editor's Note: Now called National Girls Ministries Girls Clubs, Missionettes refers to the girls ministries program of the Assemblies of God. Awana is an international evangelical Christian nonprofit organization dedicated to child and youth discipleship.]

KR: You mentioned a couple things you did associated with religion. Can you explain those? I am not familiar.

TL: I did Missionettes. We met once a week and we had a workbook that we would work through. With each [level], they have different names, like middle school is called Friends and then high school was Girls Only. In high school, you earned different charms for a necklace, and in middle school, we earned, I'm trying to remember, I know one of them was patches. I think it was patches in middle school. So, it was a nice activity to do. That got me out of the house too since I was at home a lot.

KR: What religion are you?

TL: Right now, I'm not religious like I was growing up. I guess I'm more agnostic. I would consider myself more spiritual right now, between that and being agnostic.

KR: I am sorry, please, go ahead.

TL: Well, I forgot to mention, I was raised Christian though.

KR: What historical events stick out in your mind when you were growing up?

TL: I think I was about seven when 9/11 happened. That one I remember the most because I was at home and I remember seeing the news. I was so young that, in a way, it made me kind of scared because I lived in Philly at the time, so I wondered, "Oh, we have a lot of tall buildings here. I wonder if that'll happen here."

KR: What was your family's expectations for you regarding college?

TL: Neither of my parents went to college. My dad just wanted me to do the best that I could do. He wanted me to go to college because he didn't get the opportunity to go, but he would always tell me to do whatever I would be happy doing. He didn't pressure me to do anything one way or the other.

KR: I want to circle back to something you talked about earlier. You talked about your college search, the application process, doing auditions. As someone who is going into music and performance, what was that whole process like of choosing a college?

TL: A lot of it was knowing, from the different orchestras I went to, knowing which ones had a good program or a good French horn teacher because the main thing was to have a program with a really good French horn teacher. It's a lot different than choosing a school for academics, because you focus on whatever your main instrument is. It's different because they don't focus as much on SAT scores. They focus on your college audition. There's always a long line of other people that are auditioning, other seniors. In a way, that's intimidating, I guess, because you're just waiting there and you see other people going in to audition. Then, when you do audition, it's not only the French horn teacher, but it's also like the Dean of Music and usually a couple of other professors listening to your audition.

KR: How do you prepare yourself to go into an audition, or how do you prepare yourself right before a performance?

TL: Now that I'm working on nursing, I don't really play as much as I used to, but I remember doing deep breathing exercises. By the time I got to auditioning for colleges, I was already used to playing in recitals and in an orchestra. In that sense, it wasn't that much different. It was definitely a little bit more intimidating though because the room was usually smaller, so you were closer to your audience, versus on a stage they're further away. So, you can kind of look somewhere in the back, where you're not really focusing on anybody. I mean, I was already used to performing.

KR: Traditionally, in music, women would be more steered towards the strings. A couple generations ago, it wasn't common to have women horn players. Were there a lot of women horn players when you were growing up?

TL: Yes. I think even when I was growing up, it was probably more male dominated in a way, but there were plenty of other female French horn players. But usually the brass section was probably more so males. There was still a good amount of females that played too though.

KR: You talked about your teachers, Denise Tryon and Kathy Mehrtens. Tell me about each of them and how they influenced you.

TL: Well, Denise Tryon was a low horn player, which is something that I really enjoyed. Fourth horn and second horn play low notes, especially fourth horn, so I think that inspired me to

become really good in that range. Then, Kathy Mehrrens, she was really good at every range, but she was very knowledgeable at teaching me as well.

KR: Before we go into your years at The College of New Jersey, are there any stories that you want to share from your childhood, anything that we skipped over?

TL: I'm trying to think. I don't think so.

KR: Okay.

TL: In college, Kathy Mehrrens was my French horn teacher in college. She wasn't just my French horn teacher; she was a mentor too. I could always talk to her about school and even if I had anything personally that I was struggling with. So, I really liked having her to talk to as well.

KR: When you went to The College of New Jersey, did you live there?

TL: Yes, I lived in the freshman dorm. I lived in the Wolfe Tower my freshman year, and then my sophomore year, I lived in New Residence Hall. My junior year, I lived off campus in one of the college houses, and my senior year, I commuted from my dad's actually. So, I lived in Croydon, PA, for a little while. That's where he lives.

KR: Your freshman year, what was that like transitioning to college life?

TL: I definitely learned a lot, especially because my siblings are so much older than me. In a way, I was kind of like the only child growing up. I always had my own bedroom. So, it was my first time actually having a roommate. I had to learn how to deal with having a roommate and how to be respectful of their space too. I definitely learned a lot. It was a big adjustment from being homeschooled, but I think it's what made me who I am. I was really excited to go away to school and have that experience. I think that every person should have the experience that they go away and live in a freshman dorm because that's how you really grow and you learn who you are as a person.

KR: How well prepared were you for your course of study at The College of New Jersey?

TL: School was never an issue for me. I think I was pretty well prepared academically. I always got really good grades. I think I graduated, my first degree, with like a GPA of 3.48 or something, and then my nursing degree, I graduated with an even higher GPA of 3.89. So, I think I was well prepared.

KR: You said that major was in performance.

TL: Yes.

KR: What was your course of study like?

TL: I was really busy. A lot of people hear music degree and think that it's just not the same as any other degree, but you take a lot of classes. Most semesters, I ended up taking eighteen credits, and a lot of the orchestra or chamber music, any type of performance ensemble that you play in, is usually actually only worth one or two credits, so you actually take more classes. Then, I took theory, music theory; I think those were like four-credit classes. I took a couple of semesters of that. I also took my liberal learning classes, since The College of New Jersey is a liberal learning school. So, I did take a science class and a history class as well and religion classes and also a class on race and gender too.

KR: You mentioned Kathy Mehrtens as being one of your mentors. Who are some other memorable professors from your time at TCNJ?

TL: I'm trying to remember names. Some of the nursing professors there were pretty memorable. I took a lot of my nursing prereqs [prerequisites] there. I remember my "Anatomy and Physiology II" professor was Dr. Uzwiak--it was a really hard class, but I think it gave me a good background for nursing.

KR: You mentioned taking some of the nursing prerequisites at The College of New Jersey. What were you thinking about career wise?

TL: It was really in my junior year of my music degree that I kind of decided I really like music, but I wanted to do something that I could actually help people a little bit more. So, that's why I chose to do nursing. But at that point, I didn't want to just give up on my music degree and just change majors. That's when I decided to do nursing prereqs and then just finish my music degree because I knew that I wanted to do the accelerated program after I graduated.

KR: When you were at TCNJ, what sorts of activities, clubs, ensembles or orchestras did you participate in?

TL: I did the TCNJ Orchestra for pretty much every semester I was a student there. That was my favorite, I think. Also, I did wind quintet for a couple semesters, and I did brass ensemble. I was in wind ensemble, which is similar to band repertoire. In my junior to senior year, I was in crew, rowing. So, I did rowing. Actually, I only did that for a semester, it was one of those semesters in my last two years, but that was a lot of fun. We would have practices every day from five AM to seven AM, and then I would have to do workouts on my own as well.

KR: What was that like, the life of a crew person? Those are very early mornings.

TL: Yes, it was really dark outside when we would meet, but it would be really nice on the water when the sun came up and I really liked the aspect of being part of the team. So, it was a lot of fun. I didn't do sports growing up, so I think that was around the first time that I really started to work out. Working out has become a big part of my life. It's something that I can do to cope with anything in life in general.

KR: Tell me a little bit more about crew. What were the competitions like? Did you get to travel to other colleges?

TL: I did a regatta in Philly on the Schuylkill River. There were other colleges that did that as well. It's a lot different from another sport because whenever you're not rowing, you kind of have to wait until it's your turn to row. You stand and then you wait for the boat to come by. So, it's a lot different than watching a baseball game or anything like that. But we would have to bring our own boats. They had a trailer, and we would put the boats onto the trailer and transport them to wherever the race was.

KR: Was this club crew?

TL: Yes.

KR: The music groups that you participated in at TCNJ, what sorts of performances would you give?

TL: It was usually like classical music or Baroque music. Do you want to know the names of the composers?

KR: Would you perform at alumni functions? Would you give special performances around campus? Would you travel to other places, that type of thing?

TL: We didn't do as much traveling. I think I traveled, I can't remember anymore, but I remember we traveled a couple times, but usually we performed at TCNJ at their music hall or at the theater hall.

KR: What else sticks out in your mind from your time at TCNJ?

TL: Mainly just the transition between doing music and nursing probably sticks out to me the most because I was really busy. I studied a lot, and when I decided to do both, I was doing not only music classes but also nursing prereqs. So, I think that that gave me a lot of discipline as well, and I probably remember that the most.

KR: How did you find out about the accelerated second-degree program?

TL: I don't remember specifically. I think I remember hearing about them because I knew other people that were wanting to finish their degree, but they were so close to graduating they also decided to do an accelerated program as well.

KR: Your brother is a nurse, and you talked about wanting to help people. A lot of times, nurses talk about a calling. What specifically interested you in going into the nursing career field?

TL: It was actually mainly my brother. He is an ICU [intensive care unit] nurse manager at Saint Mary's. He both manages the cardiac ICU and the general ICU. But at the time, he was one of the cardiac ICU nurses, so he wasn't a manager yet. I think just from watching him, it really inspired me, and also his wife Katie is a nurse too at the same hospital. I was really inspired by how well they're doing in life, and they would tell me about how rewarding it was.

That was my main influence to choose nursing. My dad has a lot of heart issues actually. So, it was nice to have my brother be a cardiac ICU nurse and able to help my dad in a way. So, that really inspired me. [Editor's Note: Saint Mary Medical Center is located in Langhorne, Pennsylvania.]

KR: Where did your brother and sister-in-law go to nursing school?

TL: My brother went to Wesley College in Delaware, and my sister-in-law, I can't remember the name of the school that she went to because she had started going before my brother became a nursing major. My brother started in exercise fitness. He was football. He did football. So, that's what he started in at Wesley.

KR: After your graduation from The College of New Jersey, what came next for you?

TL: That was when I enlisted in the Army actually, in the National Guard. I enlisted partly because my grandpop was a Marine and that inspired me. I also enlisted because I wanted to do something different, and I liked that being a combat medic would give me the opportunity to have a good background before going into nursing.

KR: Why did you choose specifically the Army National Guard?

TL: I thought of doing active duty too, but I liked that with the National Guard, it's a good part-time option to be able to balance both a civilian life, like nursing school, and also military. It's different than doing Reserves because we get to do the state activations, so I liked that concept as well.

KR: Describe what your enlistment process was like and what your training was like.

TL: Enlisting, it takes a while to enlist because there's a lot of paperwork that you have to do, and you have to be approved to enlist. A lot of people want to enlist, but they can't because of medical reasons. So, they have to clear you medically to be able to join the military, and then you have to go to MEPS [Military Entry Processing Station]. So, I went to MEPS at Fort Dix, and that took all day, where you're just waiting in line and going through different stations. They have to check your bloodwork, and you have to see a doctor too and paperwork. Then, you swear an oath at the end of it too, once you're approved for everything. [Editor's Note: A Military Entry Processing Station [MEPS] conducts prerequisite evaluations of military recruits and enlistments. Located in New Jersey, Fort Dix is officially known as Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.]

KR: What was training like?

TL: I went to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. That was ten weeks long. That was my basic training, and then I went to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas for my combat medic school. That was sixteen weeks. In basic training, they take away your phone. So, I didn't have a cell phone throughout it, but we were allowed to write letters. Now, he's my husband, but at the time he was my boyfriend, his name is Mike Krantz, he would write me every day. We

would get our mail about once a week, so I would always look forward to that because I would have seven or eight letters from him usually. [laughter] Also, we would have really long days, so we'd be working every day and I always really looked forward to getting the letters from him. I was already in really good physical shape when I went, so it was never a struggle for me that we had to do a bunch of push-ups because I already liked working out. I already lifted a lot. We got to shoot for four weeks. That was, I think, one of the most fun things to do. I really liked having that experience because a lot of people don't get the opportunity.

KR: What year was this that you were at Fort Leonard Wood and then Fort Sam Houston?

TL: I enlisted in 2016, so I was at Fort Leonard Wood in '16, and then I had a Christmas break in between and I was at Fort Sam Houston in the beginning of 2017.

KR: At basic training, how integrated was it in terms of men and women?

TL: Well, nowadays, there's a lot of females that join the military. So, it's still mostly males, but it was different being in basic training versus medic school because combat medics, they used to be more male dominated, but today, there's actually more females that do it. Basic training, I'd say, was probably more males, but there was still a good amount of females. So, I liked the fact that we have the opportunity to enlist today. It's not like it was back in the day, where it was all male dominated.

KR: Were the drill instructors men and women?

TL: Yes, they were. The females had a separate bay. Then, there were also the female drill sergeants, they would sleep somewhere at their own house, of course. They would be able to go up and help us with our hair because they're really strict on hair regulations, like putting our hair into a bun, so they would be able to show us how because some of us didn't know. I had my hair cut short, so I didn't have to worry about it. For the other females that had long hair, I remember one of them showed us to do a proper Army bun.

KR: Which now has changed.

TL: Yes. Now, if we have hair that's too short to put in a bun, we can actually put it in a ponytail. The Air Force has always been able to wear one earring, but now the Army's finally allowed to wear an earring too. So, I think that that's nice. I noticed that at my unit though, we're so used to the, "Put your hair in a bun and don't wear earrings," I noticed that we haven't really started to do it yet, just because we're so used to being that way. But I think over time, maybe once the new people come in, it'll become a lot more popular. [Editor's Note: In January 2021, the Army announced new appearance and grooming standards, which took effect in February 2021.]

KR: At basic training, how was it getting acclimated to the discipline of the military?

TL: I think I already had a lot of discipline. It was more so just getting used to not really getting a day off and waking up at three AM, but since I did crew before, at five AM, I was already used to waking up really early.

KR: I would imagine that at basic training, there were people from all over the country.

TL: Oh, yes, definitely. That's one of the things I really like about being in the military, not only just at basic training, but if we have to go on orders away anywhere, a lot of times it would be people from all different states. So, we're all willing to make friends with each other and help each other out. I think that that makes the military a lot different from any other type of career.

KR: Are there any funny stories from basic training that stick out in your mind?

TL: One of the drill sergeants couldn't pronounce my name, so he would call me the Lorax and he'd always yell and be like, "Lorax, how many trees did you save today?" I would have to stand at parade rest because he was a drill sergeant, and I remember answering, "I don't know, drill sergeant, none." Then, he would be like, "You'd better come up with a higher number tomorrow." [laughter] [Editor's Note: This refers to the title character in Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*.]

KR: What was the training like at Fort Sam Houston to become a combat medic?

TL: It was similar with the discipline of waking up early every day, but it was a lot different. We were learning more combat medic stuff, versus basic training, you're learning about the military in general. But for the Sixty-Eight Whiskey Combat Medic Course, the first two months was getting our national EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] certification. So, that transfers over to civilian jobs pretty well. Then, the last two months of it, we'd focus on our combat medic stuff. We'd do IVs on each other pretty much every day, and we did combat casualty assessments, so focusing on treating major life threats from specifically combat casualties, like gunshot wounds. We learned how to stop life-threatening bleeding. We also learned how to do a cricothyrotomy in case somebody has severe facial burns and they don't have an airway, so we can put one in their neck basically. I learned a lot of things that as a nursing student, it gave me a really good opportunity because in nursing school, we can't do IVs on each other. It helped me for nursing in general. [Editor's Note: 68W, or sixty-eight whiskey, is the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) for the U.S. Army's combat medic.]

KR: I am curious about something, your instructors at Fort Sam Houston, were any of them war combat veterans? Had any of them served in Iraq or Afghanistan?

TL: I think probably most of them did, yes.

KR: Did the instructors talk about what it was like in a wartime setting?

TL: Yes, they did a little bit, and then they would simulate the same environment for us. There was a building that had different rooms and there would be a dark room, where they would play a soundtrack with the sounds of war, like gun shots and grenades. There would be a mannequin that was covered in fake blood that would have different injuries. We would have to treat them

like being in a combat zone basically. I think them knowing what it was like in a combat zone gave us a good opportunity to train us as if we were deployed.

KR: Is there anybody who is in your current unit now that was with you at Fort Sam Houston?

TL: Not in my unit now. Since I moved to Pennsylvania, I switched units. But before, when I was activated for Covid and last year, I was in a unit in Jersey City that one of the soldiers there, we both went to AIT [Advanced Individual Training], which was combat medic school. She was in a different company though, but I would see her there at the same time. She also went to RSP [Recruit Sustainment Program] with me, which is what you do before you join. Well, it's after you join the military but before you go away to basic training. It's a drill one weekend a month in New Jersey, specifically at Sea Girt, where they prepare you for what it's going to be like at basic training. I forgot to mention, there was another soldier that we went to both basic training and AIT together too that was from Jersey City. It was nice that when I got there, there were people that already knew. [Editor's Note: The Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP) is conducted by the New Jersey Army National Guard for new enlisted personnel at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt, New Jersey.]

KR: Is there anything else that you would like to share about your time at Fort Sam Houston?

TL: Towards the end of training, we have to earn the opportunity to go off post, which you can't do in basic training, but in tech school, you can. I remember going to San Antonio to the River Walk, which was really fun. I would go with my other battle buddies. I went one day. Usually, I was studying because I studied a lot, but that was really fun being able to go off post. In tech school, we were allowed to have our phones too, which was nice. We had to leave them in our barracks during the day, but we could use them at night, so I enjoyed being able to talk to my family at nighttime. [Editor's Note: Tech school refers to Advanced Individual Training (AIT).]

KR: You mentioned studying. How rigorous was Fort Sam Houston and the training there?

TL: The classes were every day, like eight or ten-hour days, I can't remember. So, I wouldn't really have much time to study on my own, but I do remember staying up late sometime to study. It was pretty intense.

KR: What came next for you after Fort Sam Houston?

TL: After that, I started going up to my unit once a month in Jersey City, and because they gave me my EMT certification, I also worked as an EMT while finishing my nursing prerequisites. So, I did that for about a year and a half, and then I applied to the accelerated nursing program at Rutgers.

KR: What unit were you in when you were in Jersey City? What was your National Guard unit?

TL: I was in 250th [Brigade Support Battalion], Charlie Company.

KR: Describe what it is like being a member of the National Guard and what your routine was on a monthly basis.

TL: Drill every month is always different. There's not really always a set routine because sometimes, some drills we do classes or we teach other and then other drills we do annual PHA, which is the Periodic Health Assessments. So, they use the combat medics to draw blood from other soldiers because every year they do a whole [checkup], they check your dental, they check your blood and your vitals. So, they utilized combat medics for that. Then, we'd also give flu shots and other immunizations. Drills are usually Friday to Sunday. Some months, it's only Saturday and Sunday, but in the Army, we do a lot of Friday to Sunday drills. It's one weekend a month. Then, every summer, we do a two-week annual training. I've always been in a 'Charlie Med,' so we support the infantry units. During annual training, we usually are there in case they get injured. We do that sometimes for drill, too. Anytime that they go to do any drills, we're there to support them. [Editor's Note: 'Charlie Med' refers to Charlie Company, which provides medical readiness and care for the battalion.]

KR: The two-week annual training in the summer, where would that take place usually?

TL: When I was in the Jersey Guard, it was usually at Fort Dix. Now that I'm in Pennsylvania, I haven't done their annual training yet because I only joined [recently]. I just moved to PA, but I think they go to Virginia. I can't remember.

KR: During the time that you were in the unit in Jersey City and working as an EMT in your civilian life, where were you an EMT and where were you living?

TL: I lived in Delaware actually. I lived in Claymont, Delaware, which is fifteen minutes from the Philadelphia Airport, and I worked as an EMT at Urgent Ambulance in Newark, Delaware.

KR: What was it like for you when you were working as an EMT?

TL: It was a good experience. It was my first opportunity to actually have patient experience, so I got to deal with a lot of different types of patients. I actually didn't do 911. I did transport. Most of the patients would be going to dialysis or doctor's appointments, but occasionally, it was for an emergency and I had to take them to the emergency room. It definitely prepared me for being a nurse because I already had patient care experience by the time I got to nursing school.

KR: Why did you choose the School of Nursing at Rutgers-Camden?

TL: Where I lived, it was the closest school with the accelerated program that I wanted. I didn't want to do a traditional nursing program because I had already been in school for a while, and I knew that they had a really high NCLEX rate. Also, since I was in the New Jersey Guard, even though I lived in Delaware, if I went to a New Jersey school, they would pay for my nursing tuition too. Rutgers in Camden had a brand-new nursing building that I really liked too. [Editor's Note: The National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) is a nationwide examination for the licensing of nurses.]

KR: Describe the nursing program in general at Rutgers-Camden.

TL: Since I did the accelerated program, all of us already had a bachelor's degree. It was really accelerated and fast. In general, all of the professors there were really helpful. They would always be willing to answer questions or set up a meeting with us if we needed to [ask] more questions. They had really good clinical opportunities with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Virtua Hospital. I also forgot to mention, one of the things that sets it apart from other schools is the fact that Dean Nickitas, she was a major in the Air Force, which I didn't realize when I was applying actually. When I was activated, that was really helpful to have her as a dean because she knew what I was going through. [Editor's Note: Dr. Donna M. Nickitas has served as the dean of the Rutgers School of Nursing-Camden since July 2018.]

KR: How accelerated was the program? What was the timeframe for nursing school?

TL: It was fifteen months long, and it was straight through [the summer]. The only break we got would be a week between semesters, but we would go straight through the summer. Then, our longest break was the winter break, a good three or four weeks, like a typical winter break. It was pretty accelerated because we got our bachelor's in fifteen months.

KR: What was the cohort like in the accelerated program in terms of gender and race?

TL: We had all different types of genders and races in the program. I liked having a wide variety of people to talk to and work with.

KR: How challenging was the accelerated nursing program?

TL: It was really hard. I didn't do much outside of nursing and going to drills. It was hard balancing drill and nursing school. I studied a lot, but one thing I did do was I would make sure I'd go to the gym pretty much every day because that was my way to de-stress if I was stressed with having a hard exam or long day.

KR: What were your clinical experiences like in nursing school?

TL: One of my clinicals was at CHOP [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia], which was a really good opportunity because a lot of schools don't get to do their peds [pediatric] clinical at CHOP. My med-surg [medical-surgical] clinicals were at Virtua Hospital, and my maternity clinical was at Inspira Vineland. I really had good clinical opportunities though. All of our clinical professors were very good to work with, and they were really helpful, like if it was our turn to pass meds, they would always answer our questions and show us different types of medications or different procedures that the patients might have gone through. So, I really liked having that opportunity to work with great clinical instructors.

KR: You mentioned the academics being challenging. How well prepared were you for nursing school because you had this experience in the military as a combat medic and then also your experience as an EMT?

TL: I think that it set me apart in a way from some of the other students, but a lot of the other students, since it was an accelerated program, they had prior medical experience as well. But just the fact that I had EMT and combat medic experience, I was already used to giving flu shots and drawing blood or giving IVs. Anytime that we were in clinical, if we would be doing those things, I already knew how to use a needle safely without hurting somebody. Also, when I went to clinicals, I already knew how to talk to different patients and to do vital signs. But it was different than doing EMS [Emergency Medical Services] because in EMS we don't do the bedside care. We don't change a patient's bed or help a patient get dressed or clean, like give them a bath or anything. So, that was something I had to learn how to do in nursing school.

KR: Were other people in your nursing school cohort in the military?

TL: Yes, there was one person, not anymore, but she was in the Army. She did active duty. So, I was friends with her. She understood what it was like to go to--she didn't do National Guard, but she understood what I would go to do drill for.

KR: Before the pandemic, are there any National Guard experiences that were especially memorable to you?

TL: One of my favorite experiences was when I did driver's training on the HMMWV [High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle] and the FLA [Field Litter Ambulance]. I went to Fort Dix, which has an obstacle course. It has a bunch of different hills and mud pits that we could drive through. I also used night vision goggles, so we drove at nighttime. That was particularly memorable having that experience because you can't really see as well with night vision goggles and everything looks green. So, it was pretty fun having the opportunity.

KR: You mentioned Dean Nickitas at the Rutgers-Camden School of Nursing. Are there other administrators or professors who you interacted with when you were there? Who sticks out in your mind?

TL: One of my favorite professors that I had was Dr. Cresse. She was a nursing of aging professor. I learned a lot from her, especially now that I'm a nurse with most of the patients are aged. So, I think a lot of what I learned in her class applies to being a nurse now in my field. That was one of the classes I took when I was activated. So, I remember all the professors I had that semester were really understanding of the fact that I was activated. So, that really sticks out in my mind. [Editor's Note: Nancy Jaskowak Cresse is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the School of Nursing, Rutgers-Camden.]

KR: Before we get into your senior year at Rutgers-Camden and getting activated, are there any memories about your time at nursing school or your Guard service that you would like to share?

TL: The biggest memory I have is when I was activated. Are you saying before my senior year though?

KR: Yes, before your senior year.

TL: In general, I remember the nursing cohort that I was in were all really helpful. We studied together. I think it was different than doing a first-degree nursing program because all of us had a lot of different types of experience and we already had a degree. It was just interesting in class, when we would have any class discussions, I liked hearing all the different experiences everybody had.

KR: You mentioned the professor that you had in the aging class. Are there other classes you took that you were interested in or that taught you about different fields of nursing?

TL: I really liked my complex med-surg class with Dr. Avallone. I learned a lot in that class, and then also my peds class and my maternity class. My favorite clinical that I went to was actually at Cooper Hospital and I got to do my senior rotation in the ICU [intensive care unit]. I really liked having that opportunity because most students don't get to go to the ICU. I learned a lot from that clinical experience.

KR: What was that like working in the ICU?

TL: Since I was a student, I couldn't do as much as what one of the nurses could do, but since it was my senior clinical, my capstone clinical, it was different from the other clinicals that I had done prior. All of us would go to a different floor of our choosing and then we would meet back up for a discussion hour at the end of the day with our clinical professor, but our clinical professor wasn't watching over us as much. He would just float around the different units that we were on. I was able to work with one of the nurses, like I had a preceptor. It was nice having the opportunity to focus more on what it would be like to be a nurse. I actually got to see and follow them more closely.

KR: I meant to ask this before, how big was the cohort in the accelerated nursing program?

TL: It wasn't very big at all. I can't remember how many there were. I don't remember an exact number, but for my accelerated cohort at least, it was pretty small.

KR: Small like a hundred people or small like twenty-five?

TL: Yes, like maybe a hundred. I can't remember the exact number. Probably even less than a hundred, but not as small as twenty-five.

KR: Okay. Let us shift to talking about the pandemic. What are your first memories of hearing about Covid-19?

TL: One of my friends moved here from China several years ago, but her parents still live in China. I remember her parents were supposed to come and visit her because she was having a baby, but it turns out they couldn't come visit because China was on lockdown. That was before it really became a big thing here. I remember thinking, "Well, hopefully, it doesn't become a big deal here."

KR: What was your "uh-oh" moment, when you realized that Covid-19 was a pandemic that was going to change everything?

TL: Probably in nursing school, when we stopped having in-person clinicals and we stopped having in-person classes and everything became online.

KR: Tell me a little bit more about that. What were your experiences like when Rutgers-Camden switched to remote instruction?

TL: The only clinical I really missed out on going to in person was my community clinical, because it was the second half of my last semester. I actually already completed my capstone clinical in the ICU. But that was a lot different doing a clinical online. We had simulated online clinicals. That was kind of like a video game, but we had to decide what to do with the patient. It was definitely not the same as having an in-person clinical though.

KR: How did your professors handle that transition from in-person to remote instruction?

TL: I think that one of the main things they did was they had Zoom classes, so we wouldn't miss out on class. We had a video class instead. Then, we also used one of those testing softwares, where they take a video of you while you're testing. They had discussion groups online too. I think that they made themselves pretty available in comparison to other schools. I remember hearing of other schools not being able to graduate or finish their semester. I think that Rutgers-Camden overall really did a good job with giving us an opportunity to finish our semester.

KR: How did you feel? You are a senior. You are expecting to finish out your time in nursing school in a regular format, and then all of a sudden, it switches to virtual. How did that feel to you?

TL: It was stressful. In a way, it was nice, before I was activated, to be able to at least stay home and kind of get a little bit of a break from traveling. In a sense, I was thankful that that didn't happen earlier. At the time, I didn't know that Covid would keep going on forever. Now that I look at it, I know that there's a lot of students that that was their sophomore year or junior year, so there's a lot of students who missed out on more clinicals than I did. In a way, I'm thankful that it didn't happen earlier in my schooling.

KR: Tell me about the process of you getting activated. How did you find out that you were going to be activated and what your assignment was going to be?

TL: I was actually doing a phone interview for my nursing job, which I'm at now and I got accepted, and they were texting me. It was a phone interview; because of Covid, they stopped doing in-person interviews. Then, at the end of the interview, they told me that they wanted to hire me. Then, as soon as I hung up, I saw that they told me, "Pack your bags, you're going. You guys have got to be here tomorrow." That was definitely something to get used to.

KR: That message came through text message or email?

TL: Yes.

KR: It was a text?

TL: Yes.

KR: Where were you told that you had to be the next day?

TL: I think it was at my unit. No, it was actually out in Menlo Park, yes. It was actually at Menlo Park, because that's where we in-processed.

KR: Were other members of your Guard unit activated and sent to Menlo Park?

TL: Yes. Pretty much most of us were activated and sent there, if not all of us, and then there were also people there from other companies as well.

KR: What was that initial in-processing like?

TL: It was a long day. They were checking our vital signs and making sure that there was no medical reason that would put us at risk for being there.

KR: What is the timeframe of when you were first activated?

TL: I was there in April. It was pretty much the very beginning of April, and then I was there for about a month.

KR: Describe what it was like at Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home in April 2020.

TL: It was a nursing home, but it's just for veterans. All the patients there either were veterans or were a spouse of a veteran. Specifically because it was a nursing home, all of the patients there were immunocompromised because of their age. That's really where Covid hit hard was any nursing home in general. Every nursing home was short on staff, was one example, so it wasn't really different from other nursing homes in that sense.

KR: The residents of the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home, you mentioned them being elderly. Did some of them have disabilities resulting from their military service?

TL: Yes.

KR: On a typical day, how many Guard members would be working at the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home?

TL: I don't really know a specific number offhand, but all of us would work there pretty much every day. They would split us into different groups for each different unit. They had a bunch of different units and wings there. So, a couple of us would be on one unit and then a couple of

us would be on the other unit, but we pretty much stayed, whatever unit we started with, we stayed there the whole time.

KR: Where were you living? After your shift working at the veterans nursing home, where would you go and stay at night?

TL: They put us all in a hotel, a nearby hotel. Each of us, because of Covid, we did not have a roommate. So, we got to have our own private hotel room, which was nice to have.

KR: Would you be bussed to the veterans nursing home every day?

TL: They let us have our own civilian car. I would drive, but it was really close by. So, it wasn't like I was driving far.

KR: What was daily life like for you at the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home? How long were your shifts? You talked about working in these units. What would you specifically do?

TL: Since all of us were combat medics, we would basically function as assistants to the nursing assistant. It was pretty much the same thing I did as a nursing student in clinical. I would help with patient hygiene. Also, we were in our uniform every day, so I think that [for] the veterans there, definitely it was a morale booster for them to see us there. We would basically just help both the nursing assistants and nurses in whatever way that we could.

KR: What unit did you work in?

TL: I don't remember the name. They had different names for different units, but I wasn't on the Covid unit actually. There was only a couple of people that they volunteered to be on the Covid unit. The unit I was on, they weren't necessarily diagnosed with Covid.

KR: What were your experiences like interacting with or bonding with the veterans who were living at this nursing home?

TL: Most of them, as soon as they saw us there in uniform, it automatically brought a smile to their face. That generation, they don't really talk about their military service as much as people do today, but I think that the fact that they saw us there in uniform made them a little more open to sharing some of their stories that they had or what rank they were, or if they were the spouse of somebody, they would talk about their spouse.

KR: Are there any anecdotes that are particularly memorable to you?

TL: I remember one patient in particular--I don't remember too well because it was a year ago--but he would talk about how he was a sergeant major of the Army. He would always make us laugh anytime we would hear him talk about his time in the Army.

KR: At that point in April 2020, how readily available were Covid tests?

TL: They weren't that available back then, not like they are now, because now you can go to CVS and just get one. Back then, there really wasn't as much testing available, unfortunately.

KR: How about personal protective equipment? Were there adequate supplies of PPE for the residences and for the nursing staff and the National Guard soldiers activated there?

TL: Being in healthcare prior to Covid and now that I'm still in health care, I still don't think there's enough PPE, as well as there was not enough back then. [laughter] Before Covid, I volunteered at Nemours duPont [Hospital for Children]. They would have masks, a box of masks, outside of every patient room. Every time you'd go in, you'd put on a new mask and throw it away. But that's something that really changed when Covid happened. In general, you didn't get to wear a clean mask every time and throw it away. You had to wear the same mask every day or for one day. But I think that in comparison to other facilities, they did give us a new N95 to wear every day, versus I know some of the other hospitals or nursing homes around, they would have to wear their N95 for a whole week. So, I think that in comparison, they did a good job for us.

KR: What did you do to protect yourself?

TL: Every day, I would come back to my hotel room, I would make sure to wipe off my phone and my keys and take a shower and change my clothes. That was, I think, the biggest part that I did. Our higher ups would also tell us, "Make sure you do that every day when you go home, wipe off your phone," or to your hotel room, I should say.

KR: Covid is still scary, but back in April 2020, how scared were you?

TL: I think it was more so just the unknown. I wasn't on the Covid unit, so I think I would've felt differently if I was on the Covid unit and seeing people die every day, because the unit I was on, I didn't necessarily see that. I think I wasn't as scared as I would've been if I were on that unit.

KR: The Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home was particularly hard hit by Covid-19. What precautions were taken by the staff and by the National Guard soldiers who were there to stop the spread within the nursing home?

TL: The main thing was each unit was on lockdown, so the patients could no longer go to the common areas and just hang out and talk to each other. They had to stay on their unit. There was a common area on the unit that they had to stay in that unit. They couldn't go out to the main lobby. They also had to wear a mask, once they would go in the common area on the unit, and social distance, as well as the staff. We had to wear a mask and a gown as well--and a face shield. I forgot to mention that, a face shield too.

KR: I know you were not on the Covid unit, but what was the process like for treating residents of the nursing home who got Covid?

TL: Back then, they didn't really have any particular treatments for it yet. I think that was before they really had the antibodies for it, so I think that it was more so just supportive care, like hydration and nutrition, and general nursing care, like comforting them.

KR: Would Covid patients, if their cases got really bad, be sent to an emergency room in a hospital?

TL: Yes.

KR: I asked you how scared you were. In your interaction with the veterans at the nursing home, what were their reactions to what was going on?

TL: I think some of them were sad because their family could not visit them. But something that we would do is there was a window that the family could wave to them through the window. Anytime that they had a family member that could do that, it would make them really happy. So, I think that that was one of the positive things that they could hold on to.

KR: How do you think all of your training, your nursing training, your combat medic training, how do you think your training prepared you for working at the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home?

TL: I think that nursing school in particular, especially since I was nearing the end of my nursing school, that helped me because I already knew how to do bedside care, versus combat medic is more focusing on treating a trauma patient. In a sense, I was able to help the other combat medics and teach them, "This is how we help change the patient's bed without moving them out of the bed." Or, "This is how we help clean them." So, I think that that definitely prepared me and gave me a good opportunity to teach others how to complete nursing care.

KR: What was the camaraderie like in your unit while you were at the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home?

TL: My unit was pretty supportive of me because they knew that I was in nursing school. They knew that at the end of the day, I would have to study. We were all really supportive of each other because all of us had to drop what we were doing in our personal lives, so it wasn't just me with school. There were other people that were in school too or other people that they had other things going on in their personal life. So, I think that that made us all able to support each other and even boost each other's morale.

KR: What did you see as the challenges of caring for residents in a three-hundred bed facility during a pandemic?

TL: One of the biggest challenges is because, just like any other facility, the staffing was suffering too because staff were getting sick. They were getting sick, and there just wasn't as much staff. We really had to learn how to be efficient with our time to take care of the patients and do the best that we could. Unfortunately, with any hospital or nursing home during a

pandemic, you're not going to have as much staff, so you have to learn how to prioritize what's the most important thing to take care of and just do the best that you can.

KR: You mentioned staff getting sick. Did you get Covid, or did any members of your National Guard unit get Covid?

TL: I didn't get Covid then. I actually got Covid this year, but I don't really know who had Covid. I think for the most part, my unit, we did pretty well with our PPE and keeping clean, like wiping off our phone off at the end of the day. So, I think that it could have been worse.

KR: Was it difficult working in the environment that you faced at the Menlo Park Veterans Memorial Home?

TL: I think it was difficult having to work every day, yes, and see that these people want to see their families, but some of them don't really have the mentation to understand what's really going on in the world. So, it was difficult seeing those that wanted to see their families, but you couldn't really figure out a way to explain that they would understand. So, that was definitely difficult, but that also just gave me the opportunity to listen to them and let them talk about whatever they were frustrated with. That was one of the main things we were there for was to boost the morale and help them and just offer our assistance to them.

KR: How about for you emotionally, how did you cope?

TL: Even though it was hard doing school and being activated, school was one of my ways that I coped with it because it gave me something to do at the end of the day. Even though I'm away from my family, I can't really focus on that too much because I have to do schoolwork and graduate at the end of the day. I forgot to mention too--I think that I had a better advantage compared to some other schools because Fred Davis, he's the VA [veterans affairs] rep at Rutgers-Camden, and he actually spoke to my professors on my behalf and he had meetings with Dean Nickitas. The professors were able to give me extensions on my assignments and waive certain assignments for me, so that made it a lot less stressful. So, I didn't have as much schoolwork to focus on at the end of the day. I think that that really helped me a lot.

[Addendum to interview: My entire Rutgers nursing accelerated class donated Panera Bread to all of us activated at Menlo Park Memorial Home, which was a morale booster for us. We were really thankful that they thought of us like that.] [Editor's Note: Fred Davis serves as the Campus Director of Veterans Affairs at Rutgers-Camden.]

KR: In terms of your schoolwork, how did you balance being activated and then going back to the hotel at night and doing your schoolwork? What was that balancing act like?

TL: Even though being activated was a priority, school is also a priority, but I think that the main way I balanced it was ensuring that I got enough sleep, which is something that I was thankful that my professors realized, that if they overload me with these work assignments, I'm not going to get sleep and then I'll get sick. So, I was thankful that they gave me extensions, because I did make sure I got enough sleep every night. I wasn't staying up late to do schoolwork.

KR: Were there other members of your National Guard unit that were also students?

TL: Yes.

KR: For some of your fellow National Guard students, was it more of a struggle for them in balancing their schoolwork and being activated?

TL: I was the only one from Rutgers-Camden. I think it was more of a struggle for the ones who may have not had as good as a VA rep from their school. Even recently, I was on orders, and there were other students there too that didn't have as good as a VA support program. So, I think that I really had an advantage over some of the other students that didn't have the same support of their school.

KR: You mentioned previously your fiancé.

TL: He's my husband, yes.

KR: He is your husband now?

TL: Yes.

KR: Okay, congratulations.

TL: Thank you.

KR: What was it like being apart from your family and your loved ones during April 2020?

TL: I missed them. I definitely missed them a lot. I was already in school, so I didn't really have as much time as I would to go and just hang out with them. My husband, Mike Krantz, is in the Air National Guard. I had already been away from him before and my family for training, so I already knew what I was getting myself into basically.

KR: How do you think your service during the pandemic in April 2020 has shaped you as a person and a professional?

TL: It helped me give the patient care experience that I would have otherwise missed out on because of clinicals being virtual. So, it definitely made up for that, and I think it taught me how to work under pressure. I learned that even though there might not be as much staffing, I have to figure out a way to prioritize and know what's the most important thing to do for this patient because I obviously can't do everything I would normally want to do. That helped me know how to cope with my nursing job that I have now.

KR: What else sticks out in your mind from your time being activated at the Menlo Park Veterans Home?

TL: I think that having the opportunity to teach the other medics how to do nursing care sticks out in my mind. I like to teach, so it makes me think that maybe one day--I like to learn about all different kinds of nursing--but one day, once I have a lot of floor nurse experience, I might like to teach because I enjoyed teaching them.

KR: What was your graduation like from nursing school?

TL: We didn't have an in-person graduation. We had a virtual graduation. They had tried to reschedule our in-person one, but that got cancelled because Covid has really prolonged itself. So, maybe one day, we'll get to do an in-person graduation again. I'm glad that I at least had a graduation at TCNJ, so it's not really quite as big of a deal for me to miss out on graduation.

KR: You talked about the support that you received at Rutgers, and what I want to ask you about is the media coverage. You received media coverage for your service in Rutgers publications and in New Jersey and regional media outlets. What did you think about that type of publicity?

TL: I'm thankful for that. I never really thought that I would have that opportunity. I think that if I have kids one day, it would be really cool to show my kids and say I have something for them to be proud of. Maybe they'll join the military too and do something that I could be proud of as well.

KR: What academic distinctions did you earn upon graduating from nursing school?

TL: I graduated magna cum laude with a GPA of 3.89. I was also invited to Sigma Theta Tau, which is an international society for nursing.

KR: Congratulations.

TL: Thank you.

KR: Have you taken your exam to become a registered nurse?

TL: Yes, I'm a RN. I took it last July.

KR: Okay. What were your experiences like battling Covid?

TL: Do you mean like when I had Covid this year?

KR: Yes, when you got Covid.

TL: I had Covid in January. My job did actually a really good job--I had the quarantine that I was supposed to have and I still got paid, which is nice because I count myself very fortunate for still getting paid. I know that some different jobs, people lost their jobs, so I think that I'm very fortunate. I didn't have to go to the hospital for Covid, which also I count myself very fortunate. I had pretty much every symptom of Covid though and my husband had it too, but he didn't get

as many of the symptoms that I had. We did a pretty good job of quarantining ourselves, and none of my other family members had Covid.

KR: Which symptoms were particularly pronounced when you had Covid?

TL: Mainly the shortness of breath. I remember I was fine one day, and then it started with a little tickle in my throat at the end of the day that I thought was just allergies. Then, I woke up the next day and I was starting to cough and I just felt like I got hit by a train. It was more progressive over that day. I became short of breath. Yes, it was mainly the cough and shortness of breath that I remember the most.

KR: What did you do to self-treat?

TL: I took a lot of Vitamin D. That's what my doctor recommended and I took Mucinex DM. I focused on rest and hydrating and Vitamin C.

KR: Did you get a high fever?

TL: Yes, I had a fever of, I think, 102.

KR: I am curious, have you been vaccinated?

TL: Yes, I have actually. That makes me feel a lot safer to be around my family, especially because I work in a hospital now.

KR: Which vaccine did you get?

TL: I got the Pfizer.

KR: Tell me about the type of nursing that you are currently doing.

TL: I work on a medical-surgical telemetry floor. Telemetry means that a lot of them have heart monitors on. Part of our unit is also a short-term cardiac obs [observation] unit, so I go there sometimes, but usually I'm on the med-surg floor. We get a wide variety of different patients. We get some alcohol withdrawal patients, some drug withdrawal, some people with bowel obstructions. It's a wide variety. Sometimes, they come there with chest pain. Usually, if I'm on the observation side, they have a scheduled heart cath [heart catheterization]. It's a nice variety. I see a lot of different things.

KR: Do you work the night shift?

TL: Yes.

KR: What is that like, working the night shift?

TL: I work from seven PM to seven AM. The most difficult part is just my days off, because I'm always kind of flipflopping my schedule, so that's definitely a challenge. Pretty much, every new nurse has to start on night shift, so I knew what I was getting myself into. [laughter]

KR: What does your husband do in his civilian life?

TL: He works as a budget analyst for the Army, for Aberdeen. That's his civilian job. So, he's been working from home still because of Covid. They haven't determined a set time for him to actually go back to the office yet. [Editor's Note: Aberdeen Proving Ground is a United States Army facility in Aberdeen, Maryland.]

KR: You mentioned being on orders recently. What were you activated to do?

TL: That was a two-week. It was for my combat medic refresher. It was a continuing education class. It was two weeks of refreshing my EMS education, as well as my medic education. It was similar to when I was in tech school. We did combat casualty assessments on each other and on the mannequins, and we gave each other IVs. The first week though was mostly in-class education, but we also learned the different updates to the combat medic MOS in general. They're actually moving more toward [what is] similar to nursing care, so I got to learn about the different changes with that and how maybe in the future they'll change up the MOS a little bit, because whenever you're deployed, you might have the patient for a lot longer before they get transported to a hospital.

KR: That recent service, was that a part of the New Jersey unit or your new Pennsylvania unit?

TL: My new Pennsylvania unit.

KR: What rank are you?

TL: I'm a sergeant, which is an E-5.

KR: I want to ask you something because I truly do not know. You are at a non-commissioned officer rank, but you are a college graduate.

TL: Yes.

KR: How come you are not an officer?

TL: When I joined the National Guard, I could have joined straight as an officer too, but I decided that I wanted to try enlisted first to see what that was like. I don't think I'm going to go officer because I like being a combat medic but also having nursing experience. I feel like I can offer the other medics something that I wouldn't be able to if I were an officer.

KR: Now that we are a year into the pandemic, compare and contrast March-April 2020 to March 2021.

TL: I think the biggest difference is now we know more about the Covid vaccine because last year, a year ago, we didn't really know very much. I think the most scary thing was just the fact not knowing the side effects of if we do get a vaccine one day or how long will it take to get a vaccine and not knowing the long-term effects of Covid. Now, we know a little bit more, and we've developed antibodies and plasma, because a year ago, we didn't really have that. Now, we have a little bit more of a treatment for it, as well as the vaccine. From working at my hospital, I noticed that things are finally starting to slow down. I think that the vaccine is definitely helping with eliminating Covid.

KR: The military played an important role in the early days of the pandemic in responding to the medical emergency. What does it mean to you to have been a part of that, to have served in that capacity?

TL: To me, it makes me feel like I was a part of something bigger than myself, and if I have kids one day, I am going to be really proud to tell them that I was a part of that. I'm also really happy that I decided to go into that. I liked music a lot, but I feel like from my medical career I have now, I'm able to help people more. So, I'm really thankful that I was able to help them in whatever way I could at the time.

KR: You said you were considering maybe teaching in the future, so I wanted to ask you, what are your future plans?

TL: I like to learn. I want to learn about and maybe eventually try different units in the hospital, and then I might be interested in being a clinical educator. So, I think that that's my long-term goal.

KR: What are your military goals?

TL: As far as military goes, actually I only have a year and four months left in my contract. I really enjoyed my time in the military. I don't think I'm going to reenlist because now I have my nursing job. I think right now, my immediate goal is just to use my nursing experience I have to be able to teach the other medics so that they know a little bit more than just being a medic.

KR: I have reached the end of my questions. At this point I want to ask, what did we skip over, or what else would you like to share?

TL: I think something I forgot to mention is, you were asking about what I think about being a part of the pandemic. My grandpop, he's not alive anymore, but he was a staff sergeant in the Marines and that was a big part of my influence in wanting to join the military. I'm really proud to be Sergeant Lorchak, like my grandpop was Sergeant Lorchak. I hope that maybe he's looking down and he sees what I've done in my life. I hope that I can be an inspiration to other people in the way that he was to me.

KR: Well, thank you so much for participating in this interview, and thank you so much for your service.

TL: Thank you.

KR: I am going to stop the recording, and then we can just talk a minute off the record.

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