

Rebels with a Cause ::
Fighting for What's Right

For the Sake of Humanity

SUSAN MANGICARO REFLECTS ON WAGING BATTLE IN
CORONAVIRUS-TORN NYC



It was a whirlwind. Her only son was to be married in California. Family and friends climbed aboard planes to swing in for the celebration of a lifetime. March 13 marked the nuptials of her son, Eric, to his betrothed, Madi.

In hindsight, Susan Mangicaro calls it the "we're going to be OK phase." But something bugged her in those celebratory moments, like an incessant itch you can't scratch.

She'd listened to the news reports. She'd been advised by her peers.

"This isn't going well," she thought as she boarded the plane back to Southwest Florida.

Two weeks later, she would embark on a lifealtering trip of an entirely different kind.



A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Susan Mangicaro lives in Naples. As an employee of Hillrom, a provider of medical technologies for the health care industry, she feels fortunate to be able to work from home, here in paradise.

She's a determined woman: born to be one, she'd probably say.

"I always wanted to do mission work," she says. "It's something I felt called to do."

She earned a degree in nursing and an advanced degree in public administration. But as a single mom for many years, she realized she'd have to wait to exercise her global humanitarian calling.

In 2010, when Eric was in college, she had a chance to deploy with the International Medical Corps (IMC), a nonprofit humanitarian organization dedicated to saving lives. She volunteered and then worked full time as the senior advisor of the emergency response unit for IMC, responding to disasters, crises, outbreaks and epidemics in Haiti, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, the Congo and other



far-flung parts of the world. When not responding, she traveled to Washington, D.C., and to Los Angeles, conferring and reporting. Because "global" is the operative word at IMC, calls came in around the clock.

In her time off, Mangicaro, a self-described "high-energy person" relaxed by swimming, biking, running and competing in triathlons.

She loved her IMC work, but after several years, she needed greater work-life balance. She set up her Naples home office for Hillrom and her daily routines becoming more tenable. Life rewarded her with wonderful things, like attending the marriage of her son, and soon after, serving her fellow Americans in ways she never could have imagined.

DRIVEN TO HELP, TO HEAL

"I'm very passionate about humanitarian work," Mangicaro says. "I can't stand to see anyone suffer, so whenever there's a crisis or a major disaster, I feel that's where I need to be."

And she *was* needed. IMC reached out at the end of March. New York City was approaching the apex of the COVID-19 pandemic. Would she be "on loan" to lead the response team? You bet she would, and her employer, Hillrom, gave its blessing.

"It takes a special skill set and personality to function effectively," she says about leading disaster response projects. And IMC was more than familiar with her record of success.

On April 2, when she stepped off a plane at John F. Kennedy International Airport, the stillness was almost deafening.

"This is the city that never sleeps, right?" Mangicaro asks. "It was eerily quiet."

She stood alone at an airport kiosk, waiting for the next taxi to take her into the city. It took 15 minutes for a cabbie to arrive.

"No one was in the tunnel. It was just surreal."

And everyone wore masks and gloves, in stark contrast to the flight she'd taken from California just two weeks before.



There, in New York, she would remain on the frontlines of the epicenter of the virus for three weeks, helping the most vulnerable — including hospital systems on the verge of collapse — through the worst times they'd known.

FRACTURED SYSTEMS, FRACTURED LIVES

As an expert in medical management and disaster response, Mangicaro works fluidly between state and federal agencies with the support and oversight of IMC. IMC has the global emergency response infrastructure. Mangicaro has the hard-earned, boots-on-the-ground experience.

For three weeks in New York, she worked 20-hour days with hospital management, heads of emergency rooms and critical care units. She made daily rounds wherever IMC staffers were assigned, and met with hospital department heads to assess needs. She was asked to consult with the Manhattan overflow hospital established at the Javits Center. She worked in hospitals in Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

"Patients were dying regularly," she says.

"One paramedic I had worked with in Liberia and in Mosul, Iraq, said he bagged more bodies at a hospital in Queens than he had in the war. He said seven times more people died there than in a war zone. I've served in crises all over the world, but in our own country..."

She pauses, her voice trembling. Trying to hold back tears, she says, "I'm sorry." She explains that she thought she had overcome the emotional impact, but sometimes it catches her by surprise.

"To see what was happening in New York was just heartbreaking. Doctors, nurses, CEOs in tears," she says. "We're not accustomed to this: patients coding and in respiratory arrest left and right ... tents set up for screening, hospital overflow, ER overflow ... We had to relieve overwhelmed staff because 25-30% of them were out sick with COVID-19 or suspected they'd been infected. It put such a strain on the existing staff."

She ticks off the overwhelming circumstances: an endless stream of gravely ill patients, entire hospitals transformed into all-COVID-19 units, securing PPE and supplies, and the time she set up a hospital in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens.

"Ambulances kept pulling up. Every single patient was critically ill. On one side were ambulances, five deep. On the other, refrigerated trucks — two, three, then four — for the bodies. It was surreal that it was happening here in our country," she says, "but disease knows no bounds and has no barriers."

COMING HOME

After three weeks battling the invisible enemy, she returned to Naples.

"It's bizarre on the other side," Mangicaro says. I often say I have PTSD when I come home to my little bubble."

She took care of practical matters, including two weeks of self-isolation, antibody testing and having food delivered to her door.

"You go through a transition phase, and you want to go back because the work isn't finished. You've developed lifelong friendships on a very deep level."

On June 1, she reconnected with the people she'd worked alongside in those New

York hospitals and learned there was only one COVID-19 death that day.

"You could hear the relief in their voices."

THE HERE AND NOW

In addition to her full-time work for Hillrom, Mangicaro continues to work with IMC 50 hours a month to help solidify its presence in Florida.

She reflects on the pandemic and the ongoing strife surrounding racial injustice and political infighting.

"All our lives are so changed. It's different for everyone, but there's been a major shift. We can choose to be defeated or choose to better our lives and that of others," she says.

"I've seen the worst, but I've also seen the best. Whenever there's a crisis in the world, it's joyful to see people helping other people.

"I wish humanity would see that. We'd all be better for it."

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