

Comilla Sasson:

So, there was a night in July of 2012 that my life really changed, and that was the night of the Aurora shooting. I was actually not supposed to be working that night, but I was called in for a backup call, because a colleague of mine had called in sick and had never called in sick for 30 years. This was really his second time ever. So, I went into work at 11:00, thinking that it was going to be just like any other overnight shift. I hadn't slept. I hadn't really prepared for it. But, whatever, I can push through.

Comilla Sasson:

And just after midnight, that's when everything really changed, and we started hearing this chatter over the police scanner that there had been a shooting. I don't think any of us really prepared for what was coming, other than just knowing, "Gosh, there's gunfire. We should probably be ready in case we get a few patients." We actually ended up getting 23 patients that night, all within just a couple of hours, very, very sick patients who had been shot, multiple gunshot wounds, different levels of having to be taken almost immediately to the operating room versus even some folks who were able to be discharged home.

Comilla Sasson:

But I think it was the night that I realized how important it was to have people and friends and colleagues. About 2:00 in the morning out of nowhere, all of these people just showed up and started helping. And I had been so overwhelmed. I think all of us had been so overwhelmed we didn't even know to call for help, and these people just came because we needed it. To me, that was what really sort of spurred me to say, "Look, same thing in New York City. I'm going to pay it forward. I want to be that person that shows up at 2:00 in the morning and just helps not because you called me but because just so that you know there's people here who care and who want to help."

Comilla Sasson:

My name is Dr. Comilla Sasson. I'm the vice president for emergency cardiovascular care for the American Heart Association. I'm also an emergency medical physician and just spent a month out in New York City helping to take care of patients with COVID-19. I'm also a mom to three children, Logan who's five years old, Madeline who's three years old, and Manny who is eight years old and a 90-pound Labradoodle that was our first fur baby.

Comilla Sasson:

The flight when I landed in New York City, and then even just driving through the streets of New York City at 11:00 at night on Sunday, was really eerily quiet. I mean, I've been in New York City multiple times, and I've never not seen people. So, there was nine people on my flight. I walked into the airport, and it was essentially those nine people who got off the flight, and there was literally nobody else. It was just this really weird sensation of just eerily quiet.

Comilla Sasson:

I think the anticipation of what I was thinking it was going to look like ... I thought I would get off the plane, and there would be people on the sides of the street who were gasping for air, just thinking about this almost like a wartime scenario. Literally driving around that night, there was no one to be seen. There was no other cars. There was no other people. The only folks I interacted with really for the first 24 hours were kind of the folks that I was working with, and everyone was just ... I think scared is

probably the biggest adjective that I could use to describe kind of that fear, that sense of "I don't know who you are. I don't know where you've been. I'm going to help you right now, but I'm going to keep my distance."

Comilla Sasson:

I think that to me was kind of the most striking then going into New York City. Then I think the first time just suiting up, because you do, you have to be very careful about how you put on all this personal protective equipment for the first time, especially in making sure you do all the right steps, and you put your mask on and your goggles on and your gown and your gloves. I think, again, there was just more of a feeling of I think that fear of uncertainty. That's what's palpable in the air more than anything else. I think everyone is just a little bit afraid of what they're going to go into. To me, that was ... The sights and the sounds were really just quiet, and I think it sort of amplified this feeling of "I have no idea what I'm walking into."

Comilla Sasson:

Having to weigh the kind of balance between being a mom and being a doctor and contributing to my community here in Colorado, and then sort of taking off on a whim, if you will, and moving to New York City for a month to help strangers, people who I literally never met, colleagues who I know of but had never actually worked with before, I think it was a difficult decision in the sense that I felt a lot of guilt, of course, for leaving my family, especially my three-year-old and my five-year-old and my husband who, at that point was working from home. We don't have daycare, so he's primary caretaker, trying to work 40 hours a week and trying to be dad and mom all at the same time.

Comilla Sasson:

Then at that same sense, trying to balance that with this feeling inside that I just really had where I felt like I literally could not be at home, and I couldn't see suffering. I couldn't see people needing help and having a skillset that could be helpful and just sitting back and sort of saying somebody else can do it. So, it was really hard to say, "Look, I'm going to go into the line of fire. I'm going to go do this in this uncertain, unknown place. And oh, by the way, I hope I don't get sick and end up out there for longer," or "Oh, by the way, I hope I don't get you sick when I get home." I think there was that other side of that too as well.

Comilla Sasson:

But ultimately, I think I have the most amazing spouse in the world, and he understands that need that I have to sort of help and to be where I can feel useful. He knew that sort of ... It was a little bit of a surprise to him that I had actually already volunteered to go. When I got the "Hey, guess what? You're going in two days," I had to kind of go back to him and say, "Hey, honey. So, guess what? I have an interesting idea. What do you think?" He thought I was crazy, as usual, as he does for most of my ideas, but ultimately he and my sisters, who are my closest confidantes, said, "You know what, you have a calling. You feel like you have to go do this. So, we're going to support you, even though we don't necessarily agree with you. We're going to support your decision, and we will ..."

Comilla Sasson:

I feel so thankful, because we have a community here in Colorado that literally came together to help my family when I was gone. So, I think my husband and kids probably ate much better for the last four weeks than they ever have while I've been home. So, they've probably been better taken care of in

some ways since I've been gone, but I think, again, it's really shown me that it's about ... Me going to New York City in some ways was a selfish decision, because I felt like I had to go there and I had to be there, but in so many ways I'm so, so grateful for the people in my life who were willing to sort of come together to make sure that my family was taken care of in a way that I couldn't do for that month.

Comilla Sasson:

I think what drives me is always a sense of wanting to make things better, and that's always kind of been my thing, even as the youngest of three daughters and sisters and always wanting to kind of make whatever it is better. So, that's what drew me to being a doctor, that's what drew me to being a mom, that's what drew me to even working for the Heart Association was that I always could see things and say, "Gosh, maybe there's a better way to do this. Maybe there's a better way to engage people. Maybe there's a way in which we can make our communities healthier."

Comilla Sasson:

I think I'm just always kind of striving to look underneath the hood and try to see things hopefully that other people don't see. But I think I care deeply and passionately about people in general. I think my relationships hopefully with folks are genuine and deep and they feel that caring side of me, because I think that's really what I've always tried to both portray but I think also just live and teach my kids as well.

Comilla Sasson:

I grew up in a single-parent household with a mom with three children. She worked very long hours. I was a latchkey kid, so I can remember my earliest memories of being in first grade, coming home and letting myself in at 2:30 in the afternoon, and nobody else was there until about 4:30 when my sisters got home. We always struggled growing up, and so part of me I think always kind of sees that struggle that people have. I think everyone's got their own struggles. It doesn't matter what socioeconomic class you are. It doesn't matter what race you are, what religion you are, what gender you are. I think everyone has their own personal deep struggles. So, to me, that's what I've always kind of felt deeply about.

Comilla Sasson:

Having sort of ... I don't want to say overcome my own struggles growing up. But having to sort of be my mom's husband because my dad wasn't around, having to sort of raise myself because my sisters were nine years older and six years older, it gives you a different sense of kind of what it means to be an adult at an early age. I think for my personally it's just always been a passion of mine to look at people and to hopefully see beneath the exteriors and say, "Gosh, everyone's got their own fight. So, what can I give them, or what can I do to help that?" Sometimes it's being a doctor. Sometimes it's being a friend. Sometimes it's just listening to them. Sometimes it's something as simple as just saying hello. I think that's what I've always kind of strived to do.

Comilla Sasson:

So, when I see something struggling, like ... So, for example, when I saw that there was a struggling happening in New York City, it felt like that's where I had to be. It wasn't a "Hey, should I think about this?" I kind of just sort of said, "I need to go." I think my husband, who I've been with now for over seven years, I think just knows ... He knows that about me. He said, "Okay. I know you have to be there right now, and that's the place you have to be. So, we'll make it work." I think for my personally that's

the reason that I probably do a lot of the things that I do is that I feel like I want to make an impact. I want to do something good for people. Whatever that is, I want to go do it.

Comilla Sasson:

I'm relentless about making this world a better place for the people that AHA serves. I think that takes understanding that there is a lot of uncertainty. It takes a lot of being flexible and willing to change. It takes a lot of energy and drive and passion to say what we have today may not be what we need tomorrow. So, what are we going to do to make sure we are adaptable and we help make our communities adaptable to the new normal that we're all living in right now?

Comilla Sasson:

I think the relentless force that is AHA really is very all-encompassing, because it serves so many different audiences. I think that's what makes it so powerful and it makes it such an important organization to be a part of, because it's not just about being a health care provider. It's not just about being in a faith-based community. It's not just about being a hospital system. It's about bringing people together, finding that common ground, and then trying to make this world a little bit more certain in a time of a lot of uncertainty.

Comilla Sasson:

About 9:00 at night to say one of my phenomenal colleagues, who I think has called in sick twice in his entire 30-year career, was sick. So, I rolled in at 11:00 thinking this'll just be another night, and it's okay. I haven't slept; it's fine. We'll push through. It'll be fine. 7:00 AM will be here soon. Everything kind of changed right after midnight when we started hearing the first chatter over the police scanner about the shooting. Within a few hours, we had treated 23 patients who had had gunshot wounds at our hospital at the University of Colorado Emergency Department.

Comilla Sasson:

I remember right around, I think it was 2:00 in the morning, all of these people kind of appeared out of the woodwork. We hadn't called them. They were surgeons. They were nurses. They were OR staff. Just people that came out of the woodwork and just said, "Hey, what can we do to help?" I remember just thinking to myself, "Oh my gosh, this is amazing." We were so overwhelmed with taking care of so many sick people that we didn't even know to ask for help.

Comilla Sasson:

At 4:30 in the morning, I remember almost everybody had cleared out of the emergency department, because they had either gone upstairs to the operating room, they had gone to their floors. We had kind of taken care of everybody within less than five hours. I remember at 7:00 in the morning, my colleagues came in and said, "Hey, how was your night?" Because they hadn't watched TV in the morning.

Comilla Sasson:

It was just one of those moments. It's those moments in life where you have the opportunity to do something incredible and to work with a team of people who selflessly worked literally all night long and all throughout the next few weeks to save as many lives as possible, not just at our hospital but all throughout Colorado.

Comilla Sasson:

I think that night had a huge impact on me professionally and personally. I know for myself and many of my colleagues and many of the first responders, police, fire, EMS, we all had some level of PTSD from that night, because, even though we had prepared for that night, we had never thought we would actually do it, if that makes any sense. You live your life, thinking "Okay, I can take whatever it is that my profession gives me," but I don't think any of us were really prepared.

Comilla Sasson:

I kind of carry that forward to COVID-19 and this pandemic that we're in. I think about eight weeks ago, I just remember thinking to myself, "Okay, I'm an ER doctor. I have the skillset. And, look, there's people suffering in New York City." Whether that's my colleagues who haven't taken a break in a day, in weeks. There's people in the hallways lined up. There's a huge need, and I'm sitting here just waiting for something to happen.

Comilla Sasson:

So, to me, that was the moment where I said, "I have to pay it forward." Those people that appeared at 2:00 in the morning to help me, I feel like I have to go to New York City and be those people and do the same thing for those folks as well, and so appear out of nowhere, if you will, but be the cavalry, the backup team, to say, "Look, it's okay to take a few days off. It's okay to not feel overwhelmed. You've got friends. You've got people who've got your back." That was really what drew me to going out to New York City.

Comilla Sasson:

I think even in the time of COVID-19 where everything is so uncertain, it for me personally felt very satisfying to say, "Look, I'm going to go do something," because that whole concept of pre-PTSD, which is sort of that anticipatory anxiety, panic-driven kind of feeling of "I don't know what to expect," it really helped me personally just being able to go there and say, "Look, I'm going to do something, whatever it is. Is it taking care of people in the ER? Is it teaching people how to get back on their feet and go walk home? Whatever it is you need me to do, I'm here to do it."

Comilla Sasson:

I will say COVID-19 has probably stirred up a lot of feelings for me and probably for everybody out there, feelings that maybe you didn't even know you had until recently, or could have, I should say. I think my biggest fears of COVID-19 really as a physician, so just putting on my medical hat right now, is that it's the first time in my career really where I'm dealing with a disease where I don't know how to prevent it. I don't know the pathophysiology of how it works or how it creates the havoc that it wreaks in some people's bodies but then nothing in other people. We don't know how to treat it completely. We don't know how to prevent it. We don't know how to prevent the spread.

Comilla Sasson:

So, to me that just uncertainty of all of that, it's so disconcerting as a research scientist, as a physician to feel like you don't know the answers. I think I was in a very dark, anxious panic-stricken place really about eight weeks ago, and that was just that feeling of "I'm not doing anything. I don't know the answers. I don't feel like I'm getting any answers. No one seems to know. So, I want to go out and find those answers." I think going to New York City for four weeks and just really working in a COVID positive

patient hospital, being able to see patients who, according to all the statistics, shouldn't be walking out, but here they were, 96 years old, 82 years old, 72 years old, walking out, walking home, going back to their families and to their lives. To me, that gave me a sense of hope.

Comilla Sasson:

And seeing the literature, the research, the evidence all unfold as I was sitting in New York City just completely focused on COVID-19, I mean, literally with no distractions, no family, no friends, just patient care. That was all we were doing. I think to me that really helped me sort of get a better sense of "Look, I can understand what ... To some degree, I can understand what's going on with patients who have COVID-19." I think that brought me a sense of light and a sense of hope and a sense of just feeling a little less uncertain.

Comilla Sasson:

So, I think coming back, to me, the biggest gift I can give to people hopefully right now is just giving them that sense of "Hey, look. It's going to be okay. We can do this. We can work together. As long as our system doesn't get overwhelmed, as long as our health care resources are available to everybody, we can get through this."

Comilla Sasson:

I think the patients that I was primarily taking care of in New York City were primarily immigrants, people of color, people from lower socioeconomic status, people who didn't speak English primarily, and they had very different living situations. They were living in houses of two-bedroom apartments with 14 people, and they had issues with whether or not their families would take them back, because they were afraid of catching COVID-19. Or they had four or six family members who had actually died from COVID-19 in their own house.

Comilla Sasson:

So, you think about the health inequities that we deal with the Heart Association, and you think about how COVID-19 has really not even just amplified them but has really brought them to light in a way that I think we've never seen before. To me, that's what coming back from New York City has really reignited, that passion and that need to do is to say, "Look, we have to take care of patients, but more importantly we have to do a lot of public education, and we have to make sure that communities especially who have maybe some residual feelings of distrust in the health care system or even the political system around us ..."

Comilla Sasson:

How do we get through the noise and get through to those folks and say, "Look, you have to get care. You have to get willing to let us take care of you." And, if your family member gets sick, you have to let them back in. I mean, there's a stigma that's attached to having COVID-19 now. So, I think if we don't recognize that, if we don't start thinking about that and if we don't start addressing it, we're going to have all these unintended consequences that we're seeing already playing out in New York City. And I worry about how that's going to play out across the rest of the US.

Comilla Sasson:

My first patient that I personally took care of from start to finish who was discharged from our hospital, on the last day, we were getting him ready to go. We started asking him what kind of song he wanted. He had actually had this get well card that had been drawn by an eight-year-old who ... They had sent a box of these cards randomly to New York City, and he had gotten one of these. On the back of it, he wrote in Spanish, "Thank you so much. May God bless you." That was one of those moments that you're like, "Oh my gosh. We've done something different here."

Comilla Sasson:

I think as an ER doctor we're good at fixing things, and we're good at kind of sending people on their way, many ways, and this was the first time that I really felt like, from start to finish, I got to take care of somebody and help him kind of enjoy the journey that he'd been on, but more importantly the journey that he was going to be taking, which was going back home.

Comilla Sasson:

I think for so many of these patients they haven't had visitors. They may have been by themselves for anywhere from two to six weeks. So, we became their family, right? Because we were the people that they would see every day, multiple times a day. As a doctor, I was doing physical therapy, because we didn't have a physical therapists. So, we had to get these patients up, and we had to get them walking, and we had to get them exercising so that they could actually get back to their lives. You do the things that you need to do to get these patients back to their communities and to their homes.

Comilla Sasson:

So, to me that was that moment where you kind of go, "Okay, we're making a difference." It was in a way that I didn't necessarily imagine as an ER doctor. Sometimes it's just being there, especially when people are lonely and isolated with COVID-19 and they can't be with their families. So, we just had to sort of be their family, be their doctor, and their physical therapist, and their nutritionist, and whatever else they needed at that point, and then just celebrate their return back to their lives.

Comilla Sasson:

It's very personal in a way. So, I think we all take kind of a personal success in being able to help somebody leave. I mean, no other disease process have we ever really been blaring music across the hospital when somebody leaves the hospital. I think these are victories that we take very personally, and I think that's because the folks that we're taking care of end up having us as their support system. Because of the disease process, they can't have anybody else there. I think it's just a very personal thing for all of us, much more than it's ever been for most of the other things we've ever treated. So, it's just very different.

Comilla Sasson:

I think all throughout, almost every single hospital system now has kind of a song that they play when a patient with COVID-19 is leaving the hospital. So, for our field hospital we actually bought a speaker online so we could play whatever song our patients wanted. We would kind of pick the song ... We would let them pick what song they wanted to leave the hospital with. I think it's just funny, because never before in my medical career have we played a song when somebody leaves the hospital.

Comilla Sasson:

It becomes a victory for the entire hospital where you've got the tunnel of all the health care workers giving people high fives as the patient leaves. I think it's a totally different perspective, and it becomes a win for the entire medical team that has taken care of that patient. I think we're sharing in the success in a different way than we ever have for any other disease process.

Comilla Sasson:

We had a Frank Sinatra one, New York, New York, which was really kind of fun. Then we had for my patient who I was talking about with the get well card, he wanted Rocky, the Rocky theme. So, that was kind of a fun one that we did too. Then we had a couple other folks that picked Let's Get this Party Started by Pink. They were some of our younger folks that were getting ready to get out and were ready to get their lives back on track. We actually completely left it up to them. We had some that picked more of kind of gospel songs as well too, just because I think this has reignited their faith in God and humanity.

Comilla Sasson:

It literally became like a tunnel that you'd see at an athletic event, a sporting event, like a football tunnel. That's what we would have when every single patient would leave. I actually have some video of it. He was one of our favorite patients, Professor Khan. He actually gave us an address at the end of his stay with us, just really talking about how his experience at our hospital had just kind of changed his entire life. Again, it just tells you about some of the gratitude and the ways in which we're all kind of celebrating the success and the win.

Comilla Sasson:

How are my colleagues and I doing right now? I think the question is it's a little bit unknown. I had a lot of conversations with my colleagues in New York City who had been through the surge, who had worked in these very high volume emergency departments, who had literally seen the worst of the worst. I think by the time we got there, it was right after the surge had happened. So, they were starting to kind of go back to more normal times, if you will. I remember each time I would ask them, "Hey, how are you feeling? How are you doing? What are you thinking? What can we do to help?", and I think we're all still processing. I think especially for them, they're processing what they've seen, what they've experienced.

Comilla Sasson:

We've lost some colleagues already who went through the surge in New York City. We lost a very prominent emergency department director in New York City to suicide just after the event. So, I think to think that this doesn't have some long term mental health impacts, not just on the health care professionals who have lived through this, but also through all of the families and the friends and the people who've been affected by COVID-19, I think we would be grossly misunderstanding, misrepresenting the scope of the problem.

Comilla Sasson:

I think a lot of folks have this panic and this anxiety about the uncertainty that is our lives right now, whether that's if I'm going to have a job, am I going to have food tomorrow, will I have health insurance in the middle of the pandemic. I think these are all real questions that not just the folks in the community are thinking, but even health care professionals who are losing their jobs too.

Comilla Sasson:



To me, I think the biggest thing we can do is just ask and ask a lot, to the point where you're almost maybe a little bit annoying to your friends, to just check in and say, "How are you doing?" Because I think with the social distancing comes some sense of isolation. Like we had kind of talked about before, I think everyone's got a struggle. You just don't know what that struggle is until you ask or you dig in deeper. And sometimes we have the opportunity to do that. Sometimes we don't, and it's too late when we do.

Comilla Sasson:

I think it's just kind of recognizing that, no matter how well put together somebody looks from the outside, they probably have something deeper that's going on the inside, and so taking a moment and just asking "How are you doing?" and checking in and reminding people that it's okay to not feel normal, because nothing about right now is normal. I think the more we can kind of reiterate that, that it's okay to feel scared, panicked, anxious, angry, upset, happy, in despair, all of the above all in the same minute, is okay, and it's normal. And that's our new normal.

Comilla Sasson:

My final closing thoughts are be kind to each other. Be gentle. These are not normal times, and we will have much uncertainty and much change coming. We have to be kind to one another and treat each other with grace, because that's the only way we're all going to get through this together, and we're all in it together.