

## **Opinion/Commentary: Caring for others – on the front lines, if necessary**

**Allison McDowell**

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**I**'m a nurse at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville. I was working when the white supremacist neo-Nazis came to town. I do not work in the emergency room and did not have to care for any of the victims of their violence but I *was* directly affected.

Tensions were high that day, and for many days before. We were asked to prepare to stay overnight if violence ensued and we were needed to care for the victims. We were encouraged to make sure our pets and families were taken care of in the event we could not make it home. We could not park in our usual area so there would be plenty of parking spaces for families of victims if needed.

On the morning of Aug. 12, there was a tense quietness in the air. We watched the news whenever possible in between caring for patients so we could be prepared for multiple trauma patients. I helped the nurses in one of our trauma units prepare for the worst. They were used to caring for victims of accidents, not victims of domestic terrorism and hate. I watched nurses and support staff of every color and nationality prepare to care for the injured ... even injured white supremacists if need be.

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I asked one of those nurses how she was feeling about the events unfolding that day and she broke down in tears. She was concerned for her safety if she had to care for one of the protesters (she is a black Haitian American). But more disturbing to her than the thought of caring for one of them was the idea that a human being could hate another human being just because of the way they look.

She said to me, “In my country, we have poverty and hunger but we do not have that. It makes me lose faith in human beings.”

It made me embarrassed to be an American, and all I could say was “I am so sorry.” We both had tears in our eyes as we returned to caring for our patients.

For weeks leading up to the rally, there were many discussions among the citizens of Charlottesville as to the best way to tell these hateful protestors that we did not want them here and we were disgusted by their intolerance. Do we just ignore them? Do we show up in protest? Do we organize peaceful rallies in another location?

I leaned toward ignoring them because I believed that what they wanted and needed was attention, and I was hoping even the media would not give them that attention. So I went to work. And followed the events on social media and the news.

I watched most of it with a co-worker who just happens to be a black woman who grew up here in Charlottesville in the 1960s and '70s and has felt the sting of racism her whole life. As we were watching, she turned to me and said, “I’m just glad that there are a lot of white people out there protesting the white supremacists, because if it were just black people it would not mean as much.”

And she’s right. And the fact that that is true is wrong in every way.

And that is why, if those hate filled, morally corrupt, neo-Nazi, white supremacists *ever* come back to my town, I will be there in protest. Heather Heyer stood up for what was right, and she lost her life because of it. But I believe she would've showed up even if she knew she might die. And so will I. I will show up as a person of the white race and the human race.

It is not enough anymore to just proclaim "I am not a racist." It is time to stand up and be counted.

Allison McDowell of Albemarle County is a nurse at the University of Virginia Medical Center.