

'Fighting for you,' a home health hero for National Nurses Week

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Home-care nurse Ruth Caballero, RN CONTRIBUTED

This week marks National Nurses Week (May 6-12), a time to recognize the men and women who have dedicated their lives to the field of nursing. And this year, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, home-care nurses are among those healthcare professionals bravely fighting, day-in and day-out, here in New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States. For one nurse, the coronavirus public health crisis is more than a medical battleground, it is a true calling.

Ruth Caballero, RN, a home-care nurse with The Visiting Nurse Service of New York, knows firsthand how this global crisis has impacted our city during an unprecedented time of need. Every day, she suits up with her mask, gloves and other personal protective equipment, and boards the bus to Washington Heights, where she visits patients who have recently been discharged from hospitals after suffering for weeks from COVID-19.

A Harlem resident, Caballero has been a visiting nurse for nearly two decades, caring for New Yorkers of all ages and all walks of life, helping them return to strength so that they can live their best possible lives. "I never expected in my

lifetime to experience a pandemic,” said nurse Caballero. “But the COVID-19 crisis has challenged me to give 100% of myself. I tell all my patients that they have a fighter walking this walk with them and they can depend on me.”

Most of Caballero’s COVID-19 patients are extremely weak and fatigued and it will take them weeks to recover from the virus that has ravaged their bodies. “But they are alive,” she said. And Caballero knows the physical and emotional struggle they’ve gone through to get home. “The patients we’re seeing are fighting to regain strength after weeks, if not months, of severe illness. Many of them are worn out, and filled with fear and uncertainty.”

What continues to bring tears to Caballero’s eyes is when a COVID-19 positive patient comes home and they’re afraid they’ve been discharged home to die. “I tell them they’ve come home with VNSNY to LIVE, and they’re not alone. I am in this fight with them, and every week we will work to see an improvement in their medical condition.”

The isolation that patients have endured, not being able to see their families, has taken a huge toll on both the sick and their family caregivers as well. Caballero’s visits help those in her care begin to make sense of what has happened and understand how to protect themselves and their loved ones so they stay safe.

Caballero and her colleagues are standing at their patients’ sides for two battles: the battle of physical recovery, and the battle of mental wellness. “If there is one thing I know for certain, it’s that New Yorkers, much like nurses, are tenacious,” said Caballero. “Our fight is far from over, but we will trudge on and continue to be our patients’ shields until this COVID-19 crisis is defeated. We’ve chosen this field to help people, and our help is required now more than ever.”

She continued, “It is critically important for everyone to follow all the needed precautions to decrease the chance of spreading this virus. When I see people on the bus or the sidewalk without a mask, I tell them they need to get with it! My prayer is that we will be more prepared for the second wave and that it will not have the type of devastation that the world is experiencing now.”

“I know that I was born to be a nurse and I was born for this time,” Caballero explained. “I hope never to have to experience another pandemic, but if one arises again I can be counted on to give my all to assist my patients and NYC to overcome the health crisis and heal.”

For a frontline health hero like Ruth Caballero, “Them’s fightin’ words!”

For more information on National Nurses Week, visit www.nursingworld.org/nnw. For more information about Home Health Care services from the not-for-profit Visiting Nurse Service of New York, or to be directed to COVID-19 resources, please visit www.VNSNY.org or call 1-800-675-0391.