"I worked in health care through SARS and H1N1 and this is like nothing I have ever seen before," says Carolyn Della Foresta, administrator of Almonte Country Haven. *TONY CALDWELL*

'I HAVE CRIED EVERY SINGLE DAY'

A look into Almonte Country Haven — the epicentre of the region's COVID-19 outbreak

ELIZABETH PAYNE

It is no exaggeration to say that Carolyn Della Foresta practically grew up at Almonte Country Haven. As a child, she spent almost every Christmas morning at the long-term care home, joining her mother, who worked as a nurse, her father, who often dressed up as Santa Claus, and her four siblings, all of whom worked or volunteered there at some point. Her grandmother and great aunt lived there.

So when she was asked to take on the role of administrator beginning in 2016, she didn't hesitate, even though it meant leaving a similar job at a larger, and newer, long-term care home in Ottawa.

"I knew I needed to come back home. This is where my heart was."

Today, 45-year-old Della Foresta oversees a home whose heart is broken.

Almonte Country Haven, where 18 elderly residents have died and 80 per cent have been infected, is the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region.

And the crisis is not over.

"I am not 100 per cent sure what is still ahead of us," she said warily. "But although this is very difficult, we remain prepared to manage what is ahead."

The deadly outbreak has devastated families and left the tight-knit community reeling. "We have lost parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers, our friends and our neighbours. These are people who contribute to the fabric of our daily lives and each loss ripples through the community," said Mississippi Mills Mayor Christa Lowry.

Members of the community have rallied around staff at Almonte Country Haven, sending meals and snacks, raising money so they can pamper themselves when life returns to some semblance of normal, sending protective gear and papering the home with posters of thanks and encouragement.

"We can't be there holding her hand and they are doing it, they treat her as if she is family," said Kim Smith, whose 99-year-old grandmother Irene Campbell (Robertson) lives in the home and has COVID-19. "It has got to be absolutely devastating for them."

For Della Foresta and her staff — many of whom have worked there for decades — each loss is a heartbreak.

"I can tell you that I have cried every single day," she said. "I don't know what kind of person wouldn't cry every day."

Kim Smith and Connie Jackson talk to their grandmother Irene, 99, through the window at the Almonte Country Haven long-term care facility on Thursday. *TONY CALDWELL*

One of the posters made to support staff and residents at the long-term care home. *ALMONTE COUNTRY HAVEN*

There are glimpses of how tough the situation is for staff members. Nurses and support workers, some of whom have held the hands of dying residents, sit in their cars during breaks and cry before wiping their tears and returning to work. In a hallway is a memorial with pictures of each of the residents who have succumbed to COVID-19. Its presence helps staff members grieve the dead.

"We have moments of emotion, we take care of each other and then we put our strong resolve back on and go and do what we have to do," she said.

That is just what Della Foresta has been doing, only taking one day off since the crisis began in mid-March — despite significant health challenges of her own.

Just over a year ago, she underwent 14 hours of surgery in Ottawa to remove a cancerous sinus tumour that had spread to her brain and had been causing headaches.

After surgery, she had 30 courses of radiation treatment, remaining off work until last October.

> *We have moments of emotion, we take care of each other and then we put our strong resolve back on and go and do what we have to do.*

Today, she feels fully recovered, but acknowledges that her immune system remains compromised. Still, she never considered stepping back during the outbreak.

"I feel an incredible responsibility, not only to residents and families but to my staff, to be here and encourage them and lead. I feel that being here and leading my team is helping them to continue," she said, adding that she and staff members are taking every precaution to protect themselves.

"I have to do everything I can to remain in my role. I am an essential worker and all of my staff are essential workers."

Just as COVID-19 began taking a toll on residents of Almonte Country Haven, it also struck Della Foresta's family.

Her husband, a pastor who works with the homeless population in central Ottawa, was hospitalized with COVID-19 and is now continuing to recuperate at home. One of Della Foresta's three teenage sons is also sick. She runs home during the day to check in on her family and make sure they are being fed.

Between her family illness and her own illness, Della Foresta said she has a new appreciation for what residents and families are experiencing.

Before she went into surgery last year, she went around to see residents, conscious that she might be saying goodbye.

One longtime resident took her hand and told her she would pray for her, adding that flowers need more than sunshine to grow — meaning adversity in life serves a purpose. She gave Della Foresta a blanket that she has used every night since.

Earlier this month, that same resident, 99-year-old Eileen Thompson, became critically ill with COVID-19. One personal support worker came in on her day off to sit vigil by Thompson's bed for seven hours.

In Thompson's obituary, her family thanked staff for "going beyond the call of duty assuring our mom was loved and looked after every single day."

It's a scene that has been repeated numerous times in recent weeks with Della Foresta and staff, dressed in masks, gowns and protective gear, taking turns sitting by the bedsides of dying residents when the risk is too great for their family members to do so.

"Holding our residents' hands as they leave this world is important to our entire team as they have become our family members and each one holds a special place in our hearts." Della Foresta said staff make sure family knows "that even though they can't be here, we have been here."

The outbreak is ongoing at Almonte Country Haven, but Della Foresta said she hopes health officials are learning lessons that could prevent other homes from experiencing the same devastation.

Among them is that symptoms present differently in older adults than originally indicated. Della Foresta said staff began noticing residents were increasingly confused about three days before they showed symptoms of COVID-19. She said the Leeds, Grenville, Lanark Public Health Unit added confusion as a symptom that would warrant testing, in addition to fever, shortness of breath, sore throat and other symptoms.

Staff also noticed that some patients with complex health issues bounced back from the novel coronavirus while others, who they expected to do better, died within a few days.

Public health officials are working to map out the spread of COVID-19 at the home in the hopes of better understanding it.

"I worked in health care through SARS and H1N1 and this is like nothing I have ever seen before," Della Foresta said.

She believes broader testing earlier on might have made a difference to the number of cases in the home. Everyone in the home has now been tested, but while the province has expanded testing it still has not mandated universal testing in all long-term care homes.

The long-term care home has done everything right, she said, even going beyond provincial directives and starting active screening of staff and visitors before it was required.

It still surprises her how badly Almonte Country Haven has been hit. "If this could happen to us, I know it could happen to anybody."

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