

STUDENT ROUNDS

Taking PPE to the Streets

MEDICAL STUDENTS CREATE PANDEMIC “CARE PACKAGES” FOR CENTRAL NEW YORK’S HOMELESS

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, essential protective gear such as masks, hand sanitizer, and gloves became increasingly difficult to come by. And for homeless individuals with little to no resources, those items were simply out of reach. Helping that vulnerable population protect themselves and others was the motivation for Stephen Lucas ’22 and Summer Carbone ’22, Upstate College of Medicine students who organized an effort to provide protective pandemic “care packages” to the homeless in several Central New York communities. As of June, they had donated 1,000 bags to shelters in Syracuse, Utica, and Rochester.

Lucas spent much of last academic year organizing a “street medicine” interest group with the goal of launching an elective where students could work with David Lehmann, MD, an Upstate internist who regularly provides medical care to Syracuse’s homeless population. Dr. Lehmann’s House Calls for the Homeless program, launched in 2018, provides medical, psychiatric, and addiction services for the region’s homeless men and women on the streets where they live.

The student interest group had just gotten off the ground when the coronavirus hit Central New York, preventing medical students from engaging in clinical or volunteer activity.

Undeterred, Lucas was determined to find ways to help. With no television, phone, or Internet access, the homeless have a near total lack of access to information about the COVID-19 pandemic and how to protect themselves. Lucas put together an infographic sheet, which he had photocopied at Upstate’s Center for Civic Engagement and planned to distribute. The CCE staff told him that another student had similar concerns—

Carbone was planning to make hand sanitizer to donate to the homeless.

“The ability to wash your hands, something we take for granted every day, can make a huge difference to keep this virus contained,” says Carbone of her motivation.

Lucas reached out, and the duo decided to join forces. Together they were able to make a bigger impact than either had initially dreamed of.

Via Facebook, Carbone and Lucas solicited donations of supplies for their care packages and received an overwhelming response, including masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and socks.

“We just kept posting to Facebook and our friends and family would share the posts and people they knew would reach out and give us things,” says Lucas. “We got really great support from our own student body, which is something I didn’t even expect because we’re students—it’s not like we have a lot to give. A quilting company sewed masks for us; other businesses gave us deals on hand sanitizer and masks. The Department of Emergency Medicine set up a sock drive. It really, truly was a whole community effort.”

Carbone says her initial goal was to help 200 individuals. But with the outpouring of donations—including \$2,000 cash—and Lucas’s contacts with groups and organizations that distribute materials to the homeless, they realized they could do more.

Once a week, they would gather several of their friends in Lucas’s apartment and, sitting six feet apart and



Summer Carbone ’22

wearing masks, assemble care packages. Each bag contained a coronavirus info sheet, mask, gloves, hand sanitizer, a pair of socks, and some snack items.

When they had a couple hundred bags assembled, they would reach out and deliver them to an area shelter.

“When the pandemic began, we all felt sort of helpless,” says Carbone. “Because we’re limited in our clinical experience and our knowledge, there was really nothing we could do besides stay home and social distance. I wanted to use that extra time to do this.”

It was neither student’s first effort on behalf of the homeless. Lucas had shadowed Lehmann several times. That was how he knew socks would



Stephen Lucas '22

be a valuable contribution to the bags, even though not related to pandemic precautions.

"Socks are like gold to this population," Lucas says. When out with Lehman, he says patients often asked for socks.

Last year, Carbone attended a lecture on health disparities that touched on the lack of feminine hygiene products for homeless women. In response, she organized a feminine hygiene drive and was able to donate more than 5,000 individual products.

"These people are our brothers and our sisters; they're part of our community. If we are banding together as a community to fight this pandemic,



Lucas and Carbone prepare individual hand sanitizers for care packages.

we can't just leave these people behind," she says.

Carbone and Lucas will continue the project as long as they have supplies and there is need. Both are looking forward to the ability to resume clinical activities on July 1.

"We're really excited about finally, things loosening up and students actually being able to go out and experience street medicine without the fear of contracting COVID," says Lucas. "That's the most exciting thing, personally, to have an educational opportunity where you can see medicine being done, and at the same time, help people."

