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Professor Susan Goncalves Donates Plasma to COVID-19 Patients

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Donating plasma is as easy as donating blood

Susan Goncalves, a professor in Sacred Heart University's Dr. Susan L. Davis, RN, & Richard Henley College of Nursing, has been a nurse at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Bridgeport for 35 years. On March 23, when she began experiencing chills due to a fever, she knew she needed to be tested. Three days later, her results came in COVID-19 positive.

"As a nurse, we're the caregivers. We treat the people. We care for the people. We don't become the people," Goncalves said of her diagnosis. "I don't think I panicked when I tested positive, because I didn't have shortness of breath. If I had, that would have been a different experience. By the time I received my results, I had begun to feel better."

While recuperating at home for the prescribed 14 days, Goncalves received word that her father, Thomas Simanavage, who lived in a nursing home, was also diagnosed with COVID-19. Five days after receiving this news, he lost his fight and passed away.

"The hardest part was not being able to be there for him," she said.

Once Goncalves recovered and returned to work, she was approached about donating convalescent plasma. After people recover from COVID-19, antibodies to the disease remain in their blood. It is thought that one donation of plasma could save up to four lives, said Goncalves. She was the first nurse at St. Vincent's Medical Center to donate plasma.

Hartford HealthCare asked Goncalves to donate plasma at a Rhode Island blood bank that would then send it back into the Hartford HealthCare system. "It took me about 30 seconds to agree," she said. "It was a no brainer. It was only a question of when I could get there."

The process is as easy on the donor as donating blood, according to Goncalves. "If you don't look behind you and focus on the machine, it's

exactly like donating blood. They hook you up to the apheresis machine, which separates out the plasma and gives you your blood back.”

Since donating, four of her nursing colleagues have called her to ask about the process. She told them that it wasn't a bad drive to get there, and donating was simple.

“It gives me solace to have something good come from the terrible loss of my dad,” she said. As a caregiver it helped to “feel useful that you, yourself, could possibly help relieve the suffering of another family or patient. With this donation, I might have helped keep another family from suffering the same loss.”

“Dr. Goncalves’ generous gift of donating plasma is just one more example of how she lives her life as a caring nurse who is dedicated to serving others,” said Mary Alice Donius, dean of the Davis & Henley College of Nursing at Sacred Heart. While recovering from COVID-19, Goncalves continued to teach her nursing classes online.

According to the American Red Cross, to donate plasma you need to be at least 17 years old, weigh 110 pounds or more, be in general good health and have a prior, laboratory-verified diagnosis of COVID-19. You also need to have been fully recovered for at least 14 days. Survivors are encouraged to fill out a form for plasma donation on the Red Cross website’s [plasma donation information page](#). Donation information is also available from Hartford HealthCare on their [Convalescent Plasma Donation web page](#).

Goncalves has one message about her experience: “If you are eligible to donate convalescent plasma, don't be afraid of it. There is nothing to it. You could relieve someone's suffering or even help prevent a death. I encourage all eligible people to do it.”