

WIDOWED BY COVID

A conversation with
Dr. Sandra McGowan-Watts —
mother, physician, and widow.



As of the summer of 2022, over 6 million people across the globe have died of COVID-19, including over 1 million in the U.S. What gets lost in these numbers are the actual people who died, and the family and friends left behind. Sandra McGowan-Watts is a mother, a physician, and a widow. Her husband Steven died of COVID-19 on May 8, 2020. Around the same time, Steven’s mother, Sandra’s Mother-in-Law also died of COVID-19. Sandra’s experiences are similar to so many others who have had family members die of COVID. Unable to be by their sides in the hospital, getting daily updates from nurses and doctors via the phone, navigating treatment options, making a heartbreaking decision to stop life support and grieving without the rituals and routines that we’ve come to expect when someone dies. We spoke with Sandra in May of 2021. What follows are excerpts from our conversation.

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And he was that person.

On what her husband Steven was like...

I always say my husband wasn’t my best friend — he was more than that. [Here’s] a good example of just the type of person he was — a few years ago, I was working for a big health care organization and kind of just getting burned out and tired of practicing medicine in a corporate type of environment and I decided I wanted to quit my job. I told him, “I want to start my own practice.” And, like, I can see the wheels turning when I’m telling him what I wanted to do. And before I knew it, he had come up with all these designs about how our office would look. He did everything behind the scenes, so that I could practice medicine and be the doctor. People always think that they have to do something big themselves and have their names in the light to be this big person and you don’t. It’s what you do for other people. And he was that person.

On what their family went through with COVID-19...

So first my husband’s mother got sick. My husband had been at her house a few days prior to her getting sick...

This is an excerpt of Dougy Center’s Grief Out Loud Podcast, Episode 194. To listen to the full interview with Dr. Sandra McGowan-Watts and to access our collection of resources for children, teens, and their family members grieving a death due to COVID-19, please visit dougycenter.org/covid.



and as the week went on he started feeling more and more ill. By Friday, he was still really sick, so I took him to urgent care. His vital signs were normal, so they sent them home. That Sunday, which was Easter Sunday morning, I could tell he was feeling sicker and starting to feel short of breath. After the day went on, he was more and more short of breath. And he came to me he was like, “Okay, I don’t think I can stay here anymore. I need to go to the emergency room.” [The next day] someone called me from his cellphone and said I want you to talk to your husband because we are about to intubate him. He said, “They’re intubating me, I love you, do whatever you need to do.” So, the last time I talked to him was that day, the last time I physically saw him was the day we left him at the hospital. Even as a physician, they still wouldn’t let me in the hospital to see him. Most of my communication was with the nurses and the doctors via telephone at least twice a day, some days, three or four depending on medically what was going on if they needed my consent. And I had a couple of Zoom visits. And a couple of times the nurse would put us on speakerphone in his room so that he could hear us.

On what it was like not being able to physically be with him in the hospital...

That was probably the hardest thing because you know, as a wife, you feel like you’re doing a disservice, you’re not showing love by not being there. And so for me, I was seeing it through two different views, one being a physician, and one being a wife and having to separate the two. So, it was hard to only be able to find out how he was doing via telephone. It was hard wondering if he wakes up and I’m not there — is he thinking that we don’t love him? Is he thinking that we don’t care about him? Is he thinking that he’s alone and abandoned? I can only imagine being in this hospital with all these machines beeping and then everybody’s walking around and what looks like a spacesuit. Like, how does that feel? For me, that was one of the hardest parts, is not being able to be there. Thinking as a wife, could I have comforted him more? But then as a physician, could I have done more as a doctor to say, “Hey, let’s do this. Let’s do that.” I had to separate Sandra wife from Sandra, the doctor.

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On talking with their 12-year-old daughter about her dad’s illness...

So, I’m very open. I didn’t sugarcoat anything. [She] is a very mature 12-year-old so it’s hard to hide anything from her. And because there was really no school, she was with me all the time. Whenever I was on the phone with the doctors, she was pretty much right there listening. So she heard everything. She may not have really known how severe it was, but she knew I would tell her, “Okay, Daddy’s not breathing well, they have to do a special machine. Daddy’s kidneys aren’t working so they have to put him on dialysis.” I was explaining everything to her in terms that she could understand.

On grieving during a pandemic...

Grieving during COVID, you don’t have people around, you don’t have the support that you may have had had this been different times. For me, the hardest part was being isolated from, you know, family, from friends, from loved ones. I think under any different circumstances, my father-in-law, my brothers-in-law would have been at my house or been here with us every day during this time, so we could support each other. And I just think losing a loved one to a pandemic...none of us have ever lived through a pandemic so you don’t really know what to do. You can’t be there. You can’t go to the hospital. You can’t go out the house. You can’t do this, you can’t do that. Because everybody is isolated.

On what helped in her grief...

So, I tell people all the time finding a support group was probably the saving grace for me. It was the one thing that helped me get through it because when I think about grief, grieving the death of a spouse is totally different than grieving the death of a parent or

Just be a friend and be there. And that being there could just be sitting there, or bringing some food, or listening, calling and listening, or even just texting...

friend. When you lose a spouse, you're not just grieving the loss of that person, you're grieving the secondary losses. So having a support group and being able to talk about those feelings with other women who understood, they don't just understand grief, but they understand the loss of a spouse.

On what her 12-year-old daughter needed in her grief...

It's really hard to say because she's so quiet and doesn't talk about it, but I got [her] in counseling very early, within a month of my husband's death. I think that has helped tremendously because it gives her an outsider to talk about her feelings with because I feel like she keeps a lot of her feelings in out of not wanting to hurt me or make me feel sad. I think the hardest part for her is being stuck in a house and being stuck with me all the time because her school is still pretty much virtual. She is a gymnast - she does gymnastics still. We didn't stop that. A lot of people kept saying, "You're letting

her go to gymnastics in a pandemic, aren't you scared, she's gonna get sick?" But I knew from a mental health standpoint, keeping her out of gymnastics would have done more harm than good, because that was her lifeline. That was something for her to get her energy out and to cope with it. And the other thing she started doing is cooking. My husband was the cook in the house and a lot of times she would be home with him. I found out she was watching him cook or helping him cook. So now she has become a cook. She like does these little tutorials that she puts on Facebook of things she cooks. And she's actually a really good cook. I noticed that sometimes she cooks more than other times. and what her therapist told me is that when she's cooking more, it's probably because she's grieving. And that's her way of expressing her grief.

On how to support others who have had someone die of COVID-19...

I would say, be gentle with them. Just be a friend and be there. And that being there could just be sitting there, or bringing some food, or listening, calling and listening, or even just texting and saying, "Hey, I'm thinking about you." So just being gentle and being kind. Offering a hand in whatever way you can. If it's someone with children, say, "Hey, I can take your kids today so that you can have a break." Just offering kindness and you know, listening.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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employeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund