

Dying alone: Coronavirus keeps family from loved ones at end

April 13 2020, by Jay Reeves



In this 2008 photo provided by John Pijanowski, Pijanowski's father Don Pijanowski, who died of COVID-19 on April 1, 2020, poses during his first visit to Yankee Stadium in New York. Unable to be with their father during his final moments, Pijanowski's sons asked a nurse at a hospital in Buffalo, N.Y., to tell him they loved him. (John Pijanowski via AP)

Don Pijanowski was not surrounded by loved ones when he died.

Instead, the 87-year-old father of four, the blue-collar guy from Buffalo, New York, died in a hospital with only a nurse who stood near him and passed on his sons' final message.

"We asked that the nurse who was going to be by his side whisper into his ears that his boys loved him," said his son, John Pijanowski.

It wasn't a fitting end for the man whose family remembered him as a hard worker who never cut corners, a genuinely kind person who kept his late wife's greeting on his telephone answering machine so her voice would fill the house each time the phone rang.

But it was the only end possible for Pijanowski and countless others during a pandemic caused by an insidious new [coronavirus](#) that has been blamed for more than 110,000 deaths worldwide.

The virus is so contagious that health care facilities aren't letting spouses, sons and daughters gather around the dying for fear of spreading the infection. So family and friends are bidding tortuous goodbyes as best they can, often with the help of hospital workers.



In this March 19, 2019 photo provided by John Pijanowski, Pijanowski, left, poses with his son Jack and father, Don Pijanowski, in New York's Central Park. The elder Pijanowski died of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, in a hospital on April 1, 2020, without having his family at his bedside. (John Pijanowski via AP)

A New York physician posted on [social media](#) about holding a cellphone on speaker mode beside a hospital bed so a man could say a final prayer for his 100-year-old mother, a Jewish woman with numbers tattooed on her arm—the mark of a Holocaust survivor.

In New Orleans, a woman used a FaceTime call to say goodbye to her

husband in another part of the nursing home where they were separated because of the illness.

In Birmingham, nurse Shelby Roberts held a cellphone encased in a plastic bag as a host of relatives sang "Amazing Grace" and prayed for a woman dying of the virus.

"I just sat there and listened and held her hand, put on the gospel station on the TV," said Roberts, who works in medical intensive care at UAB Hospital. "I told the family that I didn't know what was going to happen, but no matter what I would make sure she didn't die alone. That's just what I would want."

John Pijanowski, who teaches in an educational leadership program at the University of Arkansas, said it felt wrong not to be with his father at the end.



In this photo provided by John Pijanowski, Pijanowski's parents Don and Kate Pijanowski pose in a picture booth photo taken near Lake Erie in 1949. Relatives gathered around Kate Pijanowski when she died of lung disease in 2007, but

Don Pijanowski couldn't be surrounded by family when he died of COVID-19 on April 1, 2020, in Buffalo, N.Y. (John Pijanowski via AP)

"There's this natural instinct of wanting to rush to their side. We want to be with them; we don't want them to be alone," Pijanowski said.

Children of the Depression, Don and Kate Pijanowski began dating when they were little more than kids. He had a shock of sandy hair, she had a shy smile, and both had bright blue eyes. They married young and had four boys.

Don tried to enlist in the military during World War II but was too young; he went on to work in machine factories and later repair equipment on the road, his son said. A natural athlete, he sometimes got jobs and good shifts so he could play on factory league athletic teams.

Kate Pijanowski, an author, was in declining health for years before she died in 2007. John went to Buffalo a few weeks before her death to help his father, and the brothers were able to support each other and their dad when she died.

"By the time it was time for her to pass we were all gathered around," he said.



In this Wednesday, April 8, 2020 photo provided. by UAB Hospital, intensive care nurse Shelby Roberts, who helped a family say goodbye to a woman dying of COVID-19 at UAB Hospital in Birmingham, Ala., works in protective gear. Loved ones typically are unable to be with patients suffering from the new coronavirus, meaning doctors and nurses are providing additional end-time care. (Amanda Chambers/UAB Hospital via AP)

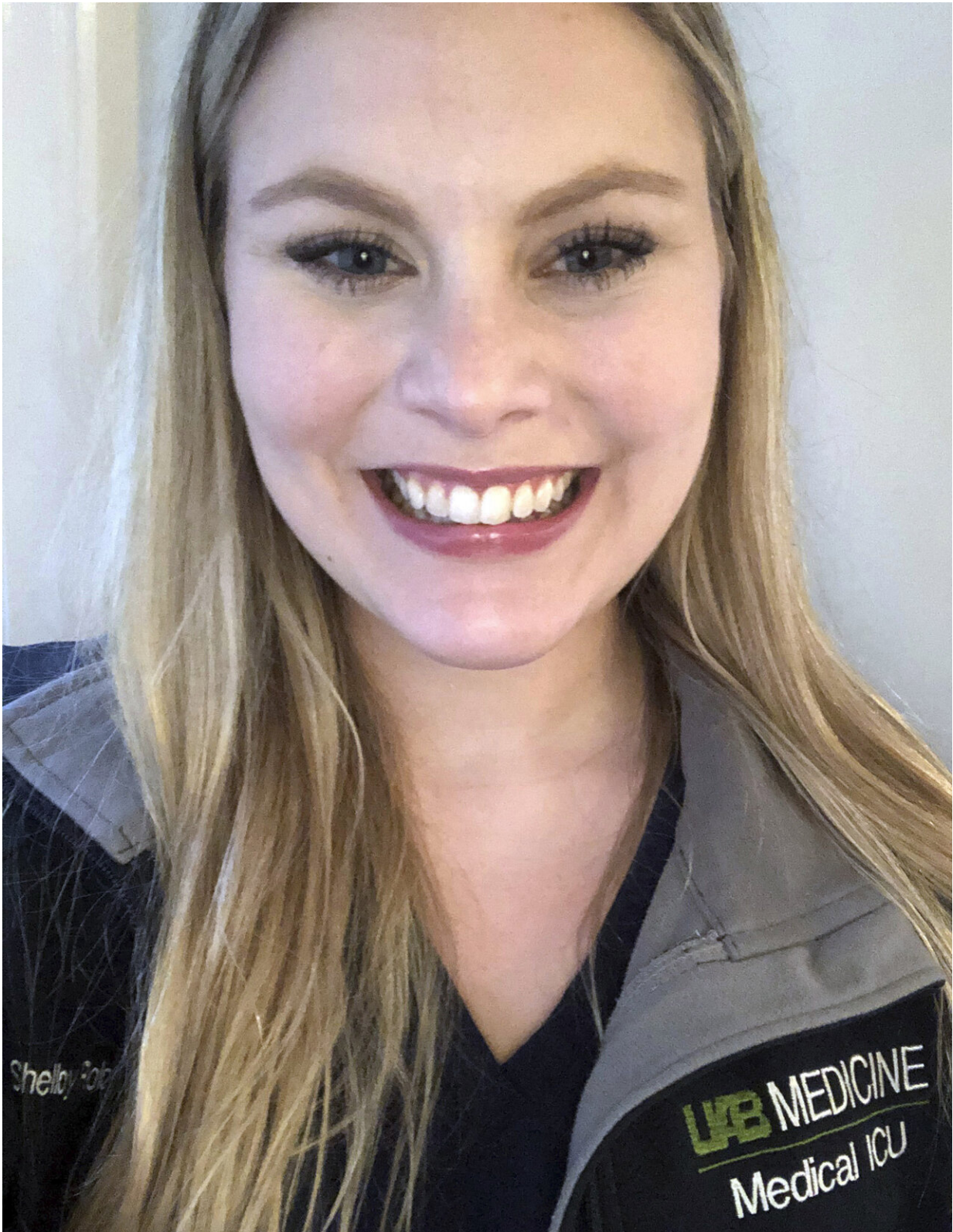
In contrast, their dad's quick decline and death felt like a bullet out of nowhere.

Pijanowski noticed his father coughing a little when they spoke by phone on March 26, but it's spring allergy season and nothing seemed amiss.

"It's not like he was out of breath. We talked for like 45 minutes. It was a good conversation. I had every reason to believe that he was OK," he said.

None of the brothers talked their dad the next couple of days, and Mike Pijanowski, who lives in Buffalo, went to the house when calls went unanswered on March 29. He found his dad on the floor in distress and called for help.

Doctors at a Buffalo hospital tested him for the new coronavirus; his condition was so critical he was quickly placed on a ventilator and slipped into a coma. Kidney failure led to a difficult discussion between the brothers and doctors, who said they couldn't do any more.



In this undated photo provided by Shelby Roberts, Roberts, an intensive care

nurse who helped a family say goodbye to a woman dying of COVID-19 at UAB Hospital in Birmingham, Ala., poses for a selfie. Loved ones typically are unable to be with patients suffering from the new coronavirus, meaning doctors and nurses are providing additional end-time care. (Shelby Roberts via AP)

Taken off a ventilator, Pijanowski died within hours on April 1. The brothers don't know if their father heard their final message as he laid unconscious and alone in a hospital bed, but a doctor told them everything went as smoothly as possible, and the message was delivered.

"We have faith that they did that for us," he said. "It's the best we can have."

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