



Photo by Aristide Economopoulos

“Everyone Was Always Asking,
‘Hey, Are You OK?’”

NILGER CAMEJO

Lead Mammography Technologist, Connie Dwyer Breast Center

For Nilger Camejo, lead mammography technologist for Trinitas Regional Medical Center's Connie Dwyer Breast Center, speaking fluent Spanish had always been helpful when translating for doctors to non-English speaking patients. However, her proficiency became even more imperative to the Trinitas community at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"My parents immigrated to the United States from Cuba, and in Elizabeth, where I live and work, it's a mixed community, so we have a lot of Hispanic patients," says Camejo. "We were deployed into other areas during the first year of the pandemic, and I was in the command center a couple days a week, answering phone calls from patients' families since patients in the hospital couldn't see family members due to COVID. I took a lot of phone calls from family members (who solely spoke Spanish) and it was very sad because they wanted to talk to their loved ones, to be there for them. It was just such a difficult time."

For Camejo, knowing the importance of family in her community made her work assisting patients' relatives over the phone even more crucial. "Hispanic people, when family members are in the hospital, everyone comes together, so they don't leave each other alone, they take care of each other," she says. "So it was very hard for this community to not be able to be there with their family members. I was just glad I was able to be on the phone with them, to let them know that their loved one was going to be OK."

A mother of four, Camejo's first reaction at the start of the pandemic, in her home life, was fear. "I have one son who has allergies and asthma, and my other kids have asthma, so I was nervous," she says. "I was even afraid to hug my own children at some point when it first started. Plus, I have an elderly mother, so I was afraid to be around her, too. I would even take my scrubs off before I got into the house after work." However, it was Camejo's mother who helped taper her fears about being around her family. "I was literally alienating myself a bit, and I remember my mom saying, 'You can't do that. You can't alienate yourself.'"

Camejo's comfort level in her work life at the breast center never changed though, not even at

the start of the pandemic, as she explains: "I felt safe because we knew what we had to do. We were already washing our hands before each patient and wiping down our areas. The only big difference was we started wearing masks and shields, plus we also limited patient appointments for only those needing diagnostic mammograms or biopsies in the beginning." Once the center reopened appointments to all patients, Camejo was comforted to see that fear did not hold most patients back from scheduling their annual mammograms. "As soon as we opened back up and announced that we were ready, I felt that most of our patients did come back. Our center, although it's in the hospital, it's still its own facility — we even have our own pink gowns, and it feels very spa-like, so you don't really feel like you're in the hospital. We also took the time to answer any questions they had before coming in for their appointments, so for the most part, patients felt really comfortable about coming back."

Aside from reassuring patients, Trinitas staff, as Camejo describes, also has supported each other by coming together during the pandemic, checking in on colleagues throughout the medical center. "Constantly, you would be in the halls and people would say, 'Stay safe,' and, 'Make sure you're wearing your mask and have the correct one,' and, 'Do you need anything?'" Everyone was always asking, 'Hey, are you OK?'" As Camejo further explains, this supportive spirit lives within her direct team at the center, too: "We get along really well, and we help each other out — we don't ever say, 'But I can't do that because it's not my job.' At the end of the day, our main priority is the patient, and we want to make sure that they're taken care of," she says. "We always help each other out, and that's important, because it takes a team to get something done. You need each other."

— Charlotte Kelley

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Winter 2022, Vol. 103, No. 1
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