



Photo by Aristide Economopoulos

“I Have To Be Strong.”

VILMA SOTO

Housekeeper, Department of Environmental Services

In the throes of her difficult fight with COVID-19, Vilma Soto appealed to Our Lady of Guadalupe, praying with all her might, and cried, “You are a mother. You know how I feel. Please help me.” Soto pleaded for her 20-year-old son, who was also struggling with COVID at the time. “I did not want anything to happen to my son, he was so young.” Four hours later, at 7 a.m., Soto’s son came into her room, and said, “Mom, get up from the bed. Go take a shower and put some clean clothes on.” He wanted to let her know that his father was going to the store to buy them food, to which she replied, “I’m not hungry.” However, her son forged on, and said, “No, today we are going to start eating.” From that moment forward, Soto’s condition started to change for the better.

Soto says she felt she could have died from COVID, her condition got so bad at times. “I feel nervous just talking about it today — I start shaking.” A housekeeper with the Department of Environmental Services at Trinitas Regional Medical Center, Soto started feeling symptoms at the beginning of the pandemic one day at work in March 2020. After a visit to Employee Health, Soto was sent home, her condition only worsening from there. Soto’s son contracted the coronavirus from her. The two were isolated in separate rooms at home, and fell under the care of her husband. “We were both sick for five weeks, neither of us able to eat for over three of those weeks. We lost a lot of weight — it was so scary.”

Once her condition slowly started to improve, a visit to Employee Health at the end of April cleared her for a return to work within a few days. “I was scared to come back,” says Soto. “I kept thinking, ‘What’s going to happen to me when I’m there?’ To be honest, I said, ‘God, please, I wish I could go back home.’” However, Soto dug deep to pull the strength inside her to get through, and assured herself in that moment, “Don’t worry, everything is going to be OK. I don’t have to be scared — I have to be strong.” From there, Soto entered one of the patient rooms to begin the cleaning process, and from that day on, has continued to add a bright spot to many patients’ days throughout the floors of the medical center.

“I try to talk with them (the patients) and tell them that I hope they feel better and that I am praying for them,” says Soto. “I’m not a doctor, but I always like to talk with the patients — to be positive. I still start shaking before I go into a patient’s room, but the first

thing I do is pray, and that helps me push through.”

Despite her positive disposition, there are still days that are difficult for Soto, especially early on in the pandemic when so many patients lost their lives due to COVID. “I prayed often, and there were times when I was in some rooms, where the patient had just passed away. There I was, disinfecting everything, and crying at the same time.”

Aside from the loss she saw through the empty rooms at Trinitas, Soto also experienced loss in her own family, three of her cousins losing their husbands, one as young as 44. “This whole experience has impacted me, you know, because it’s very sad, something that you never would have imagined,” says Soto.

Finding strength through her three sons — ages 22, 28, and 34 — and the patients at Trinitas, Soto hopes to see better days ahead, especially with vaccination rates increasing throughout the country. “Last week, there were almost 18 COVID patients in the rooms, so you know the numbers are going down. I hope we continue like that, but we still have to keep protecting ourselves.”

When asked if she had anything to share with others from her experiences, Soto explains the importance of the COVID-19 vaccination, which she received early in March 2021. “We are seeing young people who never get sick come in with this — but they don’t have to take that chance,” says Soto. “After going through this, I value life more now, and I try to be the best that I can every day, because I want to help the patients. I am thankful for every day.”

— Charlotte Kelley

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