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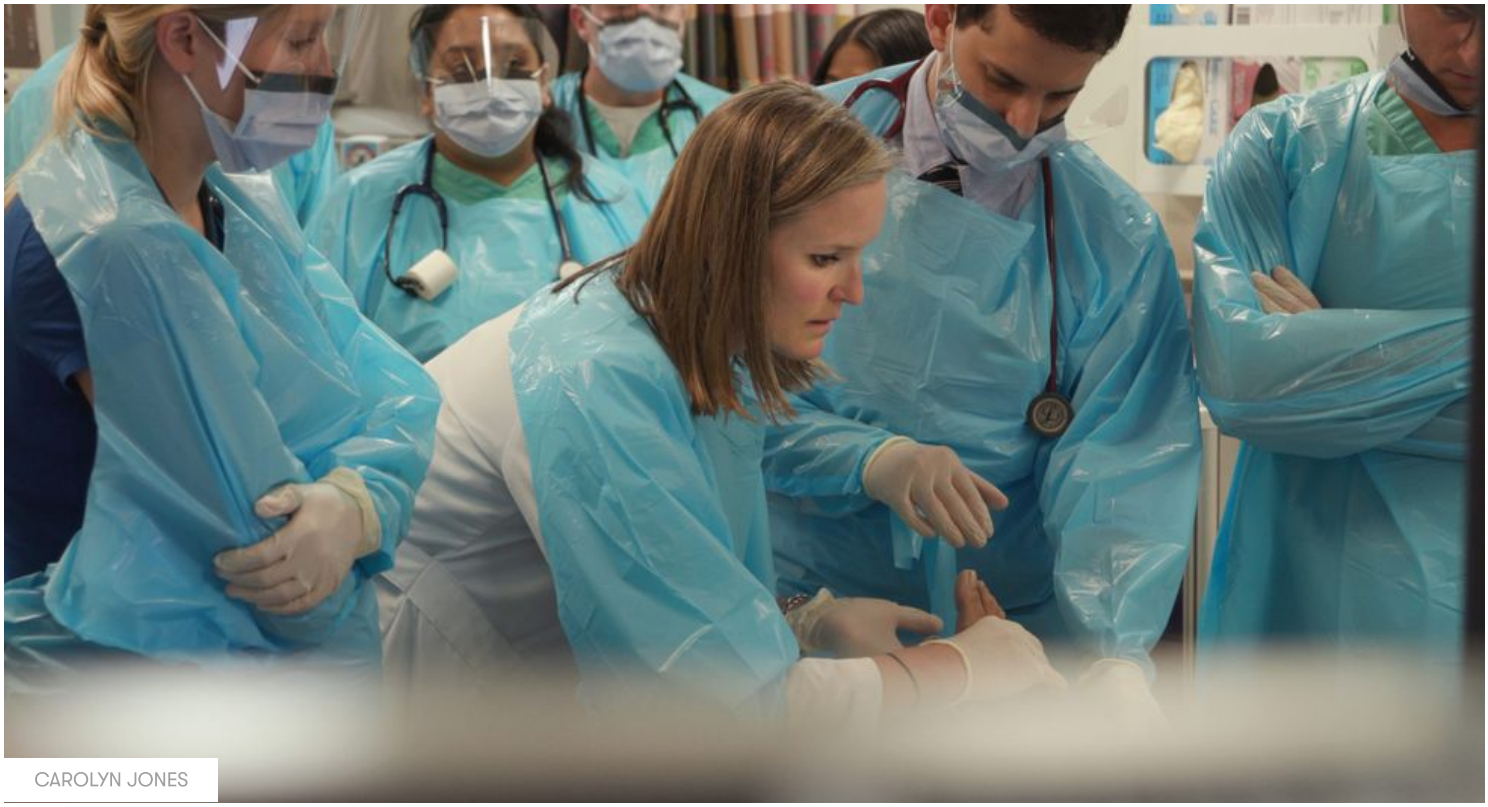
In ‘In Case of Emergency,’ Documentarian Carolyn Jones Looks at the Incredible Demands of E.R. Nurses

Shot over two years and into the Covid-19 pandemic, the film is a testament to the courage and strength of these essential healthcare workers.

By Madeleine Deliee OCT 15, 2020



CAROLYN JONES

Nurses have long endured a stereotyped image born from a hybrid of Florence Nightingale stories and stripper-ready Halloween costumes. The reality, however, which documentarian Carolyn Jones sets forth in her new film, *In Case of Emergency,* couldn’t be further from the truth. They are, as Jones says, “total badasses.”

Jones spent two years shadowing and filming E.R. nurses in cities across the country, from Burlington, Vermont to Dallas, Texas. She saw firsthand how, day in and day out, these medical professionals handled everything from ongoing struggles with behavioral health to the opioid crisis to victims of gun violence, not to mention the

constant stream of uninsured patients fearful of our healthcare system because they can’t afford to be sick or injured.

And then the pandemic hit.

Once Covid-19 took its grip on our country, Jones went back and shot several more months of footage. “I already felt we were at the brink before this,” she says. But she had to show what this crisis has done to those who have been and continue to be on the very front lines of what has now amounted to the loss of over 200,000 American lives.

In effect, *In Case of Emergency* is Jones’ latest testament to the courage, ingenuity, and strength of nursing professionals. Her previous films include *The American Nurse* and *Defining Hope*, both of which explored some of the biggest issues facing America — poverty, war, aging, etc. — through the lens of working nurses. Likewise, *In Case of Emergency*, which launches with a free preview on October 14 before going to on-demand, was supposed to look at the incredible demands made of those in the E.R., but she never expected the kind of siege presented by Covid.

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The film starts with a quiet morning, as Cathlyn Robinson, an R.N. in Paterson, New Jersey, gets ready in the dark for her daily battle with the pandemic. “No one really understood how overwhelming it would be,” says Robinson. Alone with her coffee, the camera catches her in a brief, unguarded moment. “I have to be strong,” she explains. “Not just for my kids, but for my coworkers.” The moment passes, and Robinson pulls herself back together to face the day.

Cathlyn Robinson 5:00am on her porch, before her shift during the COVID-19 pandemic
CAROLYN JONES

Recent months — which have seen hospitals at capacity and lacking in critical PPE gear — have thrown into stark relief just how overstressed and under-supported our healthcare system and its workers already are. But even before the pandemic, nurses experienced the incongruities in our healthcare system. “We put Band-Aids on a lot of big issues,” Michelle Lyon, an R.N. in Lexington, Kentucky, comments in the film. In

one scene, a mechanic comes to the E.R. after slicing his hand fixing a tire. He wasn’t going to come at all — he’s uninsured — but his coworker convinced him that he couldn’t just stick a gaping wound back together with Krazy Glue. “You can’t get sick or hurt,” he says, shrugging. “You’re better off trying to patch it yourself.”

That mentality, and the financial fear that keeps many people from getting needed care, mean that injuries and illnesses often go undiagnosed or untreated. According to a recent survey, almost a third of American families avoided medical assistance in the last year. The film shows the consequences: some of the patients in the film are clearly familiar to the staff. “You see the same people over and over again,” says Robinson. “Patients are so sick by the time they get to us, we’re basically chasing our tail. We are a catchall for people who have nowhere else to go.”

When she started production, Jones hoped that she’d find programs across the country where hospitals and communities partner for community improvement. She only found two: a drug intervention program in Paterson and a violence prevention initiative in Detroit. “It’s great, but it’s too much to ask,” Jones says. “We need to get more involved in our communities. We ask so much of E.R.s already. We won’t make it that way.”

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Kentucky nurse Michelle Lyon and “In Case of Emergency” Director Carolyn Jones.
JAKA VINSEK

Indeed, Robinson says that the need is at untenable levels. “It’s not working,” she says plainly. “Covid just amplifies where it doesn’t work.”

So why do these nurses do it, commit themselves to such an arduous task? Mieneke Meher, another RN from Burlington, says that, at least initially, the adrenaline rush is incredible. “The high you get when you start someone’s heart, that’s what gets you through,” she says. But even more, it’s the array of human need that pours through emergency rooms on any day, from birth to death and everything in between. Simply watch Meher, in one scene, calmly talk a senior citizen through stitching his finger back together after a run-in with a snowblower to observe the level of humanity these nurses bring to the E.R. experience.

Of course, there are also drawbacks. Meher says the environment has “become more aggressive” while Jones notes that violence in the E.R. is commonplace and everyday rudeness is nearly expected. She attributes a portion of this to an increased sense of entitlement — “A World War II veteran will say a heart attack is heartburn,” she says — and how that plays into a shift in our society’s expectations surrounding pain. “Hospitals are judged by patients. And when someone comes to the E.R., everyone thinks they’re an 8,” she says, referring to the pain scale, the tool you’re offered to indicate the severity of your discomfort on a scale of one to 10. If people don’t feel that they’re treated accordingly, they get angry.

That kind of demand takes a toll. Meher explains in the film that, as the concept of pain has changed, so have patients’ demeanors. “Every patient, you give of yourself,” she says. “Knowledge, kindness. If it’s just taking, taking, taking, you run out of steam.” And that danger of depletion is now greater than ever.

Nurses at St. Joseph’s University Medical Center in Paterson, NJ huddle before their shift during the Covid-19 pandemic.
CAROLYN JONES

Jones says she spent two years of filming hoping to catch an intubation. Suddenly, with the pandemic sweeping through, she was confronted with three in one day. “You see these very intense situations and it eats away at you,” says another nurse from Lexington. Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress are commonplace and Covid is only sending these responses to sky-high levels. A study earlier this year suggested that nearly half of healthcare workers are experiencing pandemic-related mental health concerns.

Part of that may stem from the relentless pound of death and loss, which isn’t what nurses expect. Usually, Jones says, there are the positive moments: a life saved, an illness diagnosed in time, a baby born safely. The pandemic has eliminated many of those bright spots and losing patient after patient has to have an impact.

Even so, what Jones hopes to ultimately illustrate is how “nurses are a wonderful lens to see the world,” she says. “They’re non-judgmental, non-political. They’re a tough bunch… I’m fascinated by the DNA of the people who do this work. It’s not one size fits all, but there are consistent traits.” Jones acknowledges the nursing stereotypes of boundless warmth and nurturing, but quickly identifies the limits posed by that idea. “The words we use are so Hallmark-y, but that’s reductive,” she says. “Caring for others is what’s important to them.”

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, *and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.*

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