

# Survivor remembers how virus pushed him to the brink

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East Oregonian

PENDLETON — From his hospital room 200 miles away from home, Milo Abrahamson got on the phone with his uncle.

Through the phone, Abrahamson's uncle sang a song from Washat, the religion of the Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla peoples. In the Umatilla language, the uncle sang of light penetrating the body and the mind.

It was July 19. Abrahamson had been hospitalized for almost two weeks across two different facilities. He began to weep.

Abrahamson doesn't know exactly where he contracted the coronavirus. His best guess is at the Arrowhead Travel Plaza in Mission, a frequent stop he makes to pick up his favorite brand of bottled water.

But he already knew he wasn't feeling well by the time he went to his cousin's funeral in eastern Washington. His cousin died young when he swerved his car to avoid a black bear in the road and hit a tree.

Abrahamson, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, knew that travel was discouraged during the pandemic, especially when sick, but he felt too heartbroken not to go. There were precautions at the funeral that reassured him: Attendees wore masks and were socially distanced, and he checked into a hotel instead of staying with family.

But still, his mother, Sandy Sampson, worried about the symptoms he was exhibiting.

After returning home, he remembered accidentally spraying a bottle of cologne in his face while unpacking. He couldn't smell it at all.

He asked his mom to take him to the emergency room at St. Anthony Hospital, where they initially treated him for pneumonia. A test later confirmed he was positive for COVID-19. It was



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Milo Abrahamson, second from left, poses for a picture alongside Don Sampson, left, Sandy Sampson and Tysan Burns in December. Abrahamson, who was hospitalized for COVID-19, said support from those around him was pivotal in his recovery.

July 7.

Abrahamson's condition quickly deteriorated. Hospital workers administered remdesivir, an antiviral medication, but it wasn't able to prevent him from falling into a coma.

One of the last memories he had before losing consciousness was texting people he had been in contact with at the funeral to urge them to get tested.

On July 9, he was airlifted from St. Anthony to Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in the Portland area. Sampson went to St. Anthony to see him off, noting that it was his late father's birthday. The helicopter elevated through a gap in the clouds, the sun shining through.

Abrahamson was 39 years old.

## Isolation

As soon as he departed from Pendleton, Sampson returned to isolation.

She and the rest of Abrahamson's family split up to quarantine. Although exposed to Abrahamson, Sampson said only his

grandmother would end up testing positive for the virus and she quickly recovered.

By herself in isolation, Sampson spent her days working remotely as a treasurer for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees. But before joining the tribes' governing body, Sampson worked in health care, including stints as a hospital administrator in Alaska and as an interim director at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center.

In the evenings, Sampson kept track of her son by calling the nurses at St. Vincent. Even if she hadn't been quarantining, hospital rules would have prevented her from seeing Abrahamson in person.

Derek Primus was one of the few to get the closest to Abrahamson during his stay in Portland.

Primus had been friends with Abrahamson since junior high and the pair stayed close beyond their school days. When Primus learned that Abrahamson was in a coma in Portland, he went to the hospital.

It wasn't a long trip for Primus. He splits his time between homes in Adams and Portland, where he owns and operates a restaurant. He was in the area when Abrahamson landed in Portland.

The best he could do was talk to nurses in the lobby about Abrahamson's condition, and the news wasn't encouraging: Abrahamson's attendants gave him a 50-50 shot at survival. Abrahamson later said that he felt his odds were lowest during the nadir of his illness, closer to 30-70 or 40-60.

Don Sampson, Sandy Sampson's brother and Abrahamson's uncle, also went to Portland. For a few days, he went to the lobby to sing Washat healing songs. Don Sampson, a Walla Walla chief, said he felt like the power of the songs reached Abrahamson, even if he wasn't able to be in the room with him.

During his coma, Abrahamson could not comprehend the support he was getting from both sides of the state. With his life in the balance, he now credits his family and friends for making it

out of COVID-19 alive.

"Their thoughts, their prayers might have got me through it," he said.

## Intubated

Waking up at St. Vincent, Abrahamson thought he had already died.

There was a woman in the room who looked too young to work there and the room had an eerie yellowish hue to it, like he was in the middle of a film.

Abrahamson had been in a coma and intubated for about a week when he woke up, his only activity during that time came during a moment when he instinctively tried to remove the breathing tube from his mouth. A nurse put it back in place and he returned to unconsciousness.

The nurse in the room continued talking with him as he regained consciousness to the point where he realized he was still among the living. Reality was reinforced when the nurse began extracting fluids from his neck area, a process Abrahamson said was the most painful in his life.

He was eventually moved to a different ward, where the recovery wasn't any easier. He struggled to breathe and endured insomnia for three days, but the greatest test was to his mental health.

During his stay in the COVID ward, a patient in the bed next to him died while another screamed at night. The nurses who cared for him tried to offer him moral support, but it wasn't the same as seeing family and friends.

He was allowed to call loved ones on his phone, but with his breathing troubles, he communicated most by text.

"It almost becomes like you're in jail," he said. "The walls start closing in because you've been there so long. You want to see your family. You want to be able to go outside."

But by July 19, Abrahamson's condition was improving, his oxygen levels stabilizing without assistance from a machine. His doctors began talking about releasing him.

But his oxygen levels plunged again during a trip to the bathroom, and his discharge was put into doubt.

Demoralized, he connected by phone with uncle to seek solace through the Washat song. After the emotional call, Abrahamson hit a turning point.

"The next day I felt great," he said. "I was eating a little better. I was breathing. I got a good night's sleep. That was one of the first nights that I got great sleep."

On July 20, he was free.

Abrahamson has survived COVID-19, but the path ahead is unclear.

"I don't know if my quality of life is ever going to be the same," he said. "As hard as I try, as much as I work out, as much as I do, I don't think I'm ever going to be the same person. And that's scary, because, if I'm developing stuff like this at 40, what am I going to be like when I'm 60? Am I even going to live 'til I'm 60?"

## Specialty care, close to home

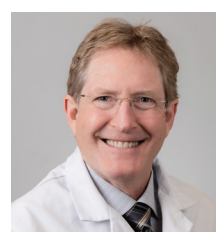
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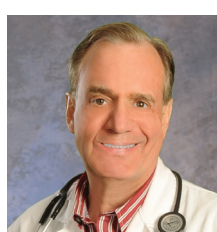
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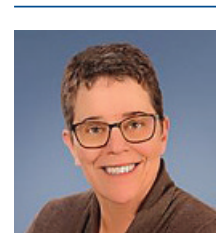


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