

When Shaquilla went into labor on April 5, 2020, it triggered a frenzy of intense activity. She was the first expectant mom with COVID-19 to arrive at McLeod Health Clarendon in South Carolina. Everyone was on high alert.

“The doctors and nurses were there for me. They prayed for me and held my hand,” said Shaquilla, who could not have her mother or her sister with her because of the risk of spreading COVID. “They were very supportive and helpful.”

Still, it was scary – for everybody.

There had not been a lot of cases of COVID among pregnant women at that stage of the pandemic, so doctors and nurses were on their own to monitor her health status, identify risk factors and determine the best ways to treat potentially life-threatening complications from the illness.

“Shaquilla was my first one,” said Alison, a Nurse-Family Partnership nurse at McLeod who had been working with the then 26-year-old mom since she was about two months pregnant.



Shaquilla gave birth to her daughter Aubree at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A year later, they are both doing great.

“““

WHEN SHAQUILLA WAS DIAGNOSED, THERE WERE NUMEROUS CASES IN HER HOMETOWN OF SUMMERTON AND SURROUNDING COUNTIES. WE WERE ALL TRYING TO FIGURE EVERYTHING OUT. IT WAS ALL NEW TO ME, SO I LEARNED FROM HER.

-NURSE ALISON

And there were so many challenges.

Access to COVID tests was limited. Treatments were not well established. And the pandemic protocols nationwide limited NFP nurses to remote visits, so Alison was monitoring Shaquilla's condition through phone calls. She had to listen carefully and try to diagnose her from a distance.

When she got sick, “her symptoms were like the common cold, but she was just getting worse,” Alison said. She urged her to see her doctor.

Shaquilla arrived at a regular obstetric appointment coughing and obviously sick, so the receptionist sent her to the emergency room immediately.

There her lungs were X-rayed and a COVID test was administered.

“They said I had acute bronchitis and sent me home with two pills for my cough,” she said.

Three days later she got a call informing her that she had tested positive for COVID. She was 38 weeks pregnant and had a persistent cough.



I CALL HER ABOUT BASICALLY EVERYTHING. IF I DON'T LIKE THE WAY AUBREE IS LOOKING, I JUST CALL [NURSE] ALISON. SHE'S ALWAYS THERE FOR ME.

-SHAQUILLA NFP MOM

"Something told me she might deliver before her due date," said nurse Alison.

Sure enough, Shaquilla's water broke that day. Her mom called an ambulance.

"I told her, 'Don't be scared. They'll know how to take care of you,' " Alison said.

Aubree was born healthy and beautiful, but Shaquilla was only able to be with her for about 10 hours.

"When they realized how sick I was and that I wasn't getting better, they asked me if I was willing to separate myself from Aubree," Shaquilla said. "It was very tough to make that decision, but I didn't want anything to happen to my baby."

Aubree went home with Shaquilla's mom and Shaquilla was transferred to the Medical Intensive Care Unit at McLeod Regional Medical Center in Florence, where she spent three days on a ventilator.

"It was all kind of a blur," said Shaquilla. "I don't remember everything that happened."

Shaquilla was worried and very sick. When she finally spoke to Alison by phone, she said, "Please take care of my mom, my sister and my child."

"That was the last time I talked to her until I was out of the ICU," Shaquilla said.

Finally, on April 14 Shaquilla had recovered enough to leave the hospital and was reunited with Aubree.

She was still weak and was trying to breastfeed and care for a demanding newborn. Even talking would leave her out of breath, so Alison stayed in close contact, answering questions and offering support.

"A couple weeks after she got home, we had a telehealth visit," nurse Alison said. "Shaquilla was worried that Aubree was not responding to her. I could see that she was doubtful that bonding was not going on between her and the baby."

"I told her not to worry, that she did nothing wrong. She was so tired and not 100 percent yet. She needed a lot of encouragement."

Soon the bond between Aubree and Shaquilla was strong and life slipped into a comfortable routine.

"Thank God for my support team," said Shaquilla.

Now at 11 months, Aubree is a smiley good-natured baby, who loves to dance.

"Her favorite word is 'Hi,' " Shaquilla said. "I think she's going to be a little character."



Aubree will soon celebrate her first birthday in April.



Shaquilla, who had been studying early childhood education in an online college course until COVID and the imminent arrival of Aubree, is set to resume her studies in the fall.

Through this disruptive pandemic year, she has been working full time from home for a call center.

“My goals in life were to graduate college and become a preschool teacher in my hometown,” she said. “When I found out I was pregnant with Aubree, I was more determined than ever to pursue my dream.

“With more people being vaccinated it gives me hope for the future, and motivation to achieve these goals for both Aubree and me.”

Nurse Alison said she learned a lot from the experience with Shaquilla.

“Now with pregnant moms, I’m very cautious if they get sick and I encourage them to be seen by a doctor right away,” she said.

“Shaquilla had a beautiful pregnancy, and I learned that this can happen to anybody. When moms don’t feel right and are unsure what to do, I encourage them



Aubree is a smiley good-natured baby, who loves her mom.



Nurse Alison worked with Shaquilla to develop a strong bond with her daughter Aubree.

to see a doctor. The experience with Shaquilla opened my eyes to how serious this is.”

When Aubree was 4 months old, she and Shaquilla were featured in an [episode](#) of Today on NBC about mothers who had experienced COVID-19 during their pregnancies. Shaquilla said that she knows people often are embarrassed about having contracted COVID-19, but a lot of young moms contacted her after the show aired, seeking advice and reassurance.

Maybe the best part of being on national TV, Shaquilla said, laughing, “was that they gave me a year’s worth of Pampers.”

The whole traumatic experience has made Shaquilla and nurse Alison very close.

“I call her about basically everything,” said Shaquilla. “If I don’t like the way Aubree is looking, I just call Alison. She’s always there for me.

“She’s part of the family.”

*Shaquilla was enrolled in NFP as part of the SC Pay for Success project.*