

“Nurses have gone from heroes to criminals”: Nurses speak out in defense of Michelle Heughins

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Former county detention center nurse, Michelle Heughins, is scheduled to enter a plea this coming Thursday. Her legal representation has informed reporters that she plans to plead “not guilty” to charges of involuntary manslaughter in connection with the tragic death of inmate John Neville on December 2019 in the Forsyth County Jail in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

According to the medical examiner’s report and body camera footage from the event, John Neville died after being restrained forcefully by five detention center officers in a prone position while he was suffering a medical emergency. Heughins, who was the only staff member attempting to stop the restraint and save Neville, is the sole individual to be indicted for the death. Charges against the five officers were dropped on April 4 after a secret grand jury meeting.

Nurses have been quick to speak out in opposition to the unjust charges against Michelle Heughins. In statements, many nurses have referenced the recent RaDonda Vaught conviction and the precedent set by this case whereby health care workers can be scapegoated for systemic issues, including short staffing and overwork, that put workers into impossible and unsafe positions.

Several nurses spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their support for Ms. Heughins and to share their own experiences of the unsafe conditions that predominate in all hospitals and prisons.

Dianne, a North Carolina nurse with 22 years of experience, said, “I couldn’t go to Tennessee for Vaught or to D.C. for the nurses march because I’ve been struggling financially ever since I had COVID. But I really defend nurses and want to make sure I can use my voice to defend our profession.” She also said that she stands with RaDonda Vaught, DQ Beasley and other nurses who have faced victimization on the job.

“I was watching the bodycam footage. I was watching and imagining the agony that Mr. Neville’s family must have gone through. I watched, and I cried. And it hurt me too that

Michelle had no voice. [The corrections officers (COs)] didn’t let her use her voice. She asked him to put his legs down, and then they pushed him down. Then they sent her out of the room.

“From what I’ve seen, she should have had the power and authority in that moment, but the CO in charge just took her power away. You could hear [Neville’s] voice get weaker. You could see his legs and arms getting weaker. No one did anything because they were too busy making fun of him. They took a behavioral event and made fun of it when it was a serious medical event.”

Dianne then described her horror that the corrections officers were not indicted, while Heughins remained charged with manslaughter. “The whole RaDonda Vaught case has set up this way of scapegoating nurses. The jail and different hospitals can just make themselves look better by throwing a nurse under the bus. You can see from the footage that she isn’t responsible. It breaks my heart as a nurse. Nurses have gone from heroes to criminals, and that’s wrong. That’s not what we are.”

Dianne also discussed how worsening conditions in hospitals make nurses more likely to make errors. “The more and more patients you get, the more common mistakes are going to be. The administration of these big hospitals don’t care.”

“The CEOs are making millions upon millions, and we are struggling to survive.”

While Dianne did not work bedside during the pandemic, she experienced the dire levels of short staffing and poor conditions as a patient. “I tested COVID positive in November 2020. I was on a ventilator for five days, and my sats [oxygen saturation] dropped as low as the 50s. A doctor told my sister it would be prudent for her to make end-of-life plans for me.” Dianne would remain in the hospital for multiple weeks.

“I thought I was going to die, and there was no one there for me the way I had been there for my patients. The

pandemic has done this to bedside nursing. The nurses would come in sweating, wearing PPE, so apologetic. They would say, 'We wish we could do what we want to do for you.' Towards the end, the apologies would go away because they were just so burned out."

Mila, a nurse who has worked across multiple specialties, including in corrections, spoke about the conditions in the jails and prison nursing and her support for Michelle Heughins. "The nurse does not get to decide when she goes in. It is 100 percent custody's fault. I just hope she did documentation. You have to document everything to protect your license and cover yourself."

One of the jails Mila worked for was also staffed by Wellpath Care, the same health care company that staffed Michelle Heughins' current employer, Forsyth County Jail.

She explained how conditions at many Wellpath locations are unsafe. "We are supposed to have 12 nurses on staff. We are usually six or seven nurses short every night. The night charge nurse would perform multiple tasks: draw blood, do vital signs, do med pass. For 12 hours, I would run and run. When I asked additional employees for help, they didn't do anything. Every nurse is doing two and a half people's jobs. We didn't take lunch for months and months. It is not safe when you are missing one-third or half of your staff and performing multiple tasks. Wellpath would assign LPNs as a charge if there was no staff, even if it was above their scope of practice.

"The latest med pass should start at 8:00 and end at 10:00. Our nurses would be passing meds until 12:00-2:00 am. The medical staff in jails is extremely short-staffed. You would do 2.5-3 nurses' jobs and get paid for one. Then they would blame you if something goes wrong."

Mila then spoke about the Michelle Heughins case. "They just needed to sacrifice Michelle. The officers just cover up for each other. They do it all the time. If you are a contractor, you are their guest and you need to follow their rules. You can provide medical care to the inmate after officer approval, or they will complain."

A new nurse in the California Bay Area, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "I've only been a nurse for a few years, and I've already seen this pattern emerging of nurses being victimized at work when they are just trying to do their job.

"RaDonda Vaught and Michelle Heughins are just two of the big names, but we don't hear about all the times this happens on a minor scale. I got in trouble at work by the administration because I made a medication error. I reported it because you're supposed to do that; you learn in nursing school that you must report errors so the hospital can make appropriate changes. I got in trouble, and the error was added to my file at work, which means maybe it will come

up when I apply for a new job.

"The only reason I made the error in the first place was that I had a really high patient load, all of them were really sick. When I told management this, they just told me I should slow down, take a deep breath next time I feel stressed.

"I do not think Michelle should be prosecuted. I don't know a lot about what it's like to work in corrections, but from social media and talking to other nurses it seems clear that these facilities are terrible work environments. There is never enough staff, never enough resources and you are bullied by the corrections officers.

"When I watched the body camera footage, I was shocked to see that it looks like she was the only nurse at this incident. That was what made me so upset. No nurse should deal with emergencies alone! You need so many hands to save someone. Sometimes you don't think clearly if it's your patient and they are coding. That's just one of the reasons why you need other nurses to step in and help. And how was she supposed to think clearly when the corrections officers were yelling at her, telling her to leave the room?

"I think all nurses and all health care workers need to take these cases extremely seriously. We have to find a way to fight back against it too. In my opinion the fight against this victimization is a much larger fight against the entire way health care is run. It's all about profit, not about our safety or our patients' safety.

On Sunday, May 22, at a meeting hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site Healthcare Workers Newsletter*, nurses from throughout the US met to discuss the situation facing health care workers and the scapegoating of nurses for the consequences of short staffing and overwork.

Nurses at the meeting adopted a resolution, founding a national health care workers steering committee to assist in the building of rank-and-file committees at every hospital and workplace to defend nurses and health care workers and to connect opposition to victimization to a struggle to advance the interests of nurses and patients against the for-profit health care system.

Send in your statement opposing the victimization of Michelle Heughins and the conditions at your hospital or workplace using the form below.



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