

Blood Brothers

Four Alpha Sigma Phi brothers contracted COVID-19 on a ski trip, and one became gravely ill. Could his brothers help save his life?

This spring, four Alpha Sigma Phi—**Norman “Randy” John ’70, MBA ’73, Roland Aberg ’73, Jack Lawlor ’73, MEng ’74, and Mark Twentyman ’73**—met up for their annual ski vacation. None of them imagined that within weeks one of them would be near death of COVID-19, with another brother trying desperately to save him.

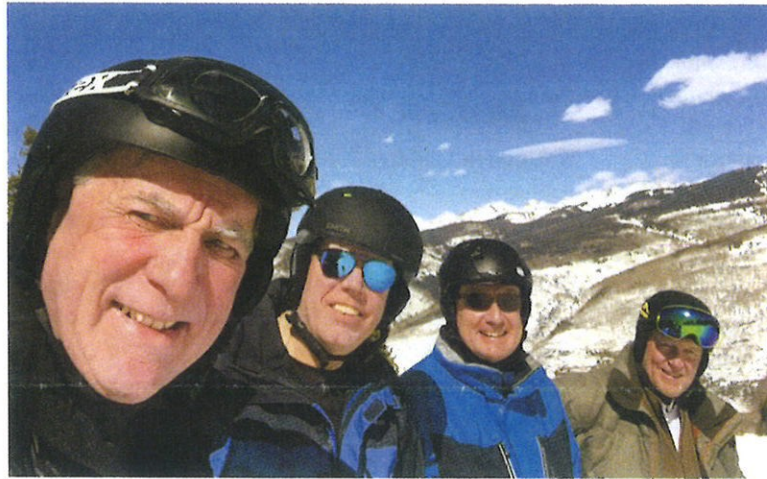
When the men headed for their excursion to Vail, Colorado, in early March, they weren’t particularly worried. At that time, the U.S.’s only known cases of COVID-19 were in California and Washington with no infections reported in Colorado or contiguous states. There were early rumblings, though. They heard reports of an outbreak in New Rochelle, New York on a lodge TV, but it seemed removed from where they were. On March 11, the lifelong friends said goodbye and went back to their homes.

Five decades of friendship

Roland Aberg, Jack Lawlor, and Mark Twentyman all became friends when they met as freshmen on the fourth floor of Sperry Hall. In the Spring of 1970, they were part of 32 undergrads who pledged to Alpha Sigma Phi. That group bonded quickly into a brotherhood that would last to the present day.

When they joined the house, they met Randy, a senior industrial engineering major with his own Alpha Sig story. His first few years at Cornell were solitary and “not enjoyable at all.” He considered dropping out for a year—a move that would have resulted in his being drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. His parents jumped into action, setting up a meeting with the dean of the engineering school. Randy decided that something had to change, and pledged to the house. He says that move turned around his whole college experience, giving him a home away from home. He made quick friends with the new pledge class, and then when he came back to the house to work on his MBA, they really jelled.

Over the five decades that have followed, they kept in touch. Today, they often plan excursions like this spring’s ski trip. “We



(Left to right): Jack Lawlor, Roland Aberg, Randy John, and Mark Twentyman in Vail in early March.

enjoy each other’s company,” says Jack, an engineering alum who spent much of his career in the construction industry and is now retired. “Stories that we laughed about last year, we laugh about again this year.”

COVID symptoms begin to set in

As each brother got back to his daily life, COVID-19 symptoms started to set in. For

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Jack, living in central Long Island, it just seemed like a cold. For Roland, a landscape architecture alum living in the Minneapolis suburbs, it felt like intense lethargy and fatigue. Randy, retired from a career in the industrial gas business and living just outside Philadelphia, was hit hardest in the beginning. He fought acute fatigue, low-grade fever, and aches. Hearing about his brothers’ ordeals, Mark Twentyman initially felt that he’d dodged a bullet. After a week in Albany, New York,

where he works in real estate, he packed up to visit his girlfriend, Linda Vault-Smith, in Cocoa Beach, Florida.

Along the way, though, Mark started to decline, reaching Linda’s condo tired and irritated. He got swabbed the next day and tested positive. He hoped to ride out the illness with Linda’s help, isolating as much as possible. He took prescribed hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, which doctors had initially hoped would

mitigate the impact of COVID-19, but they didn’t seem to help. Over the next few days, he worsened and started to show signs of oxygen deficiency: restlessness, headache, no appetite.

Mark called his son and daughter-in-law on FaceTime, and his appearance shocked them. His daughter-in-law, Evelyn Ford Twentyman, a medical officer with the Centers for Disease Control, told him to go to the hospital immediately. “She’s the one who kept me alive,” Twentyman says as he looks back.

The next 29 days were a nightmare. He was put on a ventilator and then given a tracheotomy. One of his lungs collapsed, and he had to undergo emergency surgery. Both lungs filled with clots, making it even harder to breathe. His son and daughter-in-law got a call from the hospital asking if they should continue, or stop treatment. They quickly opted for the lung-repair surgery.

“We have to do something”

Evelyn kept Mark’s Alpha Sig brothers in the loop with frequent text updates, which they passed on to numerous other Cornellians. Hundreds of people were following his rapid descent. Randy told Roland and Jack, “We have to do *something*.”

And he had a good idea of what that *something* would be. Years ago, he’d read a book about the pandemic of 1918. His mother had lived through it and told him stories about coffins lining the streets of her hometown of Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. Convalescent plasma, or plasma from a recovered patient, saved many people’s lives during the pandemic

FEATURED STORY

of 1918. He called Mark's daughter-in-law Evelyn with his idea. "Hey, it worked then," he said. "Why not now? Let's give it a shot."

Randy was no stranger to donation. He was not only a regular blood donor, but had also donated bone marrow to his daughter when she developed leukemia at age 17 (She's 35 now, and healthy. "We are so very, very fortunate," he says.)

Convalescent plasma was FDA-approved, but at that point in the pandemic, very new. "Getting him this investigational therapy was a hard won endeavor involving a massive team effort," Evelyn says. "I got the forms and the protocol texted to me from my friends from residency in New York City—they were the first physicians anywhere in the US to pursue this treatment. Then we had to get Mark personal approval from the FDA to receive the plasma—I still have the sticky note with the FDA's Dr. Witten's cell phone number on my fridge. Then, we had to negotiate with the directors of the blood banks in Pennsylvania, Orlando, and the board of directors at Mark's own hospital to allow Randy's donation. We tried to do this with Roland too, but could not overcome the barriers to donation in Minnesota at the time. There was never a guaranteed win here." (Jack Lawlor also tried to donate, but was not able to get a COVID test proving he had antibodies.)

Thanks to Evelyn championing the treatment, Randy was finally able to donate four 200-milliliter units of plasma; two went to Mark and two were kept by the blood bank to help local patients.

Mark says he had less than a day left at that point. He was still fighting blood clots and pneumonia. Bedsores had eroded skin to the bone. Time was running out. Within just twelve hours of receiving the first unit of Randy's convalescent plasma, he showed dramatic improvement.

"When Mark finally received the plasma, he had a more dramatic clinical response than the Infectious Disease team at Cape Canaveral had ever seen—not just in COVID, but ever. Period," Evelyn says. "Although I could not personally see him throughout this entire process, I shook my head in amazement as Dr.

Naik read me the stunning improvements in his vitals, in his oxygen demand, and in every lab marker of inflammation, which had all just



(Left to right): Jack Lawlor, Roland Aberg, Randy John, and Mark Twentyman in Vail in early March.

plummeted over a single night."

His fever broke, blood pressure stabilized and indicators of inflammation improved. As the days passed, however, he still couldn't be weaned from the ventilator, or wake from his

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induced coma. "The effect of the plasma did not last more than a few days, so when he needed one last surgery to enable him to get off his ventilator, we had to precisely time Randy's second donation, the flight of the plasma from Pennsylvania to Florida, and its delivery to Mark to ensure greatest effect at time of surgery. We did this in coordination with his entire hospital, including everyone from the pathology lab to the nurses on the floor," Evelyn says.

Randy donated a second round of plasma, and within three days, Mark was no longer sedated, and able to breathe on his own for extended periods of time.

The road to recovery

Now Mark was awake, and off of the ventilator. He'd had no idea of what happened over the past few weeks, or how his daughter-in-law and Alpha Sigma Phi brothers had fought for his life, making him the first in the state of Florida to receive convalescent plasma and one of the first in the US. What he did know, however, was that he was in bad shape.

"I'm amazed how fast the human body deteriorates," he said. When he moved to a rehab facility, one staffer said, "Clinically, you are like a quadriplegic." He couldn't move his hands well enough to send a text, couldn't talk due to temporarily

paralyzed vocal cords, and couldn't walk. "The first time, it took three men to stand me up, and I only stayed up for twenty seconds."

After weeks of grueling therapy, he gradually improved and regained strength. Vocal cord surgery brought back his voice. Nineteen of his Alpha Sigma Phi brothers cheered him on via Zoom, raising a toast to his recovery.

All told, Mark was in four hospitals for a total of 88 days before being discharged to home nursing, which has just ended. Today, he recovers in a temporary Georgia residence while he receives follow up care at Emory Medical Center.

He continues to fight the ravages of the virus, like scarring on his lungs. He's walking with a cane now and getting stronger every day. "I get tired often, but it's getting better," he says. So much better, in fact, that he recently made the drive up the coast to Albany, and stopped to see Randy on his way.

"We had a good hug, I'll tell you that," Randy says. "How could you ever put a price tag on friendship like that?"

You can read more about this story at cornellalumnimagazine.com/band-of-brothers written by Laura Power, wife of **Dick DeMarle '73** and mother of **Patrick DeMarle '12**.