

HEALTH + BEHAVIOR

COVID-19 patient thanks UCLA medical team that saved her life

Rare reunion brightens health care workers' spirits after year of pandemic darkness



Christina House / Los Angeles Times

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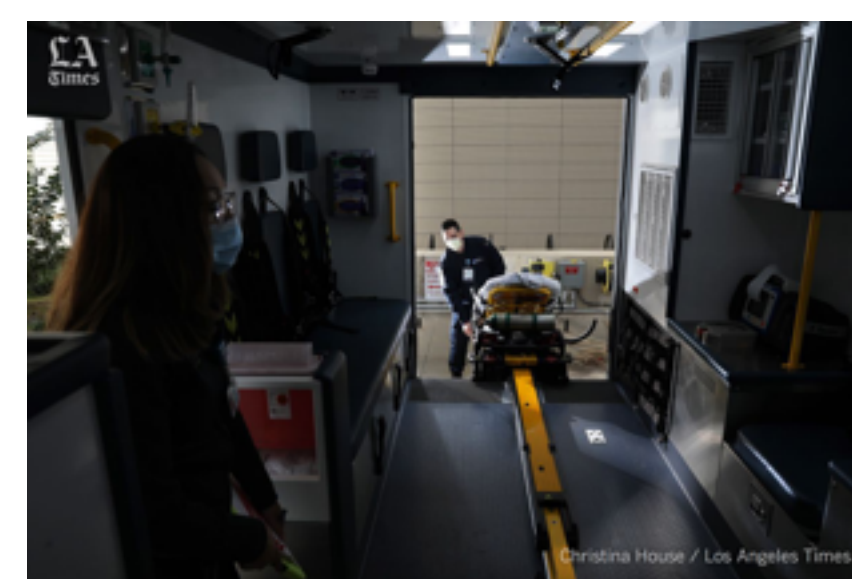
Blanca Lopez, who was hospitalized at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center with COVID-19, reunited with some members of the massive medical team that treated her.

Elaine Schmidt
March 12, 2021

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Christina House/Los Angeles Times

Blanca Lopez, 47, walked slowly through the gleaming lobby of [Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center](#), her brown eyes huge over her mask. Her teenage son, Criztiaan, pointed out landmarks where he used to wait for physicians' updates on his mother's condition during her COVID-19 hospitalization.

None of it looked familiar.

Outside a dozen health care workers huddled in the January night air after a 12-hour shift. Despite the late hour, the mood was festive. The doctors, nurses and therapists chattered with excitement, their masked faces animated in the warm glow of the courtyard's illuminated fountains.

When Lopez, radiant in a leopard-print vest, exited the hospital doors, the group's anticipation exploded into a joyful welcome.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) captured Lopez's emotional reunion, which provided a rare spot of brightness for UCLA medical staff after a grim year of death and pandemic darkness.

The front-page story chronicled Lopez's life-saving treatment with extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or [ECMO](#). The state-of-the-art technology filters the blood of critically ill patients, providing a reprieve to hearts and lungs failing from COVID-19 or other diseases.

UCLA Health oversees the largest adult ECMO program on the West Coast, treating up to 160 people per year. With the only ECMO ambulance in the region, UCLA's mobile team regularly stabilizes and transports patients from every hospital in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Ventura counties.

"Blanca is a miracle of medicine," said [Dr. Peyman Benharash](#), the surgical director who led the mobile ECMO team that sped a gravely ill Lopez from Glendale to UCLA in mid-August. "After so much sorrow and loss, tonight was something we really needed to see."

When Lopez awoke from 51 days in a medically induced coma, her arm muscles were too weak to lift a hairbrush. She remained at UCLA another 13 days before transferring in October to a treatment facility to tackle the hard work of physical rehabilitation.

On this cold night three months later, UCLA staff marveled to see the vivacious mother of three teasing her nurses and telling colorful stories of her hospital stay.

Critical care nurse Lindsay Brant stood rapt as Lopez reminisced about the week she awoke from her long coma. Brant crinkled her eyes in amusement as Lopez demonstrated how she'd shimmy her shoulders and make funny faces to coax Brant to slip her an ice chip. Doctors had restricted Lopez from drinking water for fear she'd choke.

"I'd do my little dance, and Lindsay would say 'you got me, girl.' Then she would fish out the biggest ice cube," Lopez said. "It was beautiful to see her again and meet the people who saved my life."

Memories flooded Lopez as she recognized more caregiver faces.

When Lopez saw [Dr. Vadim Gudzenko](#), medical director of the adult ECMO unit, she thanked him profusely. "Dr. Vadim gave me a UCLA bear," she recalled. "My son took it home to my daughter, and that teddy bear made her day while I was still in the hospital."

Gudzenko beamed as he posed for a photo with his former patient.

"Every patient, we believe in them," he explained. "It's an emotional investment on every team member's part. That's why it is so wonderful to see Blanca recovering. This was really a celebration."

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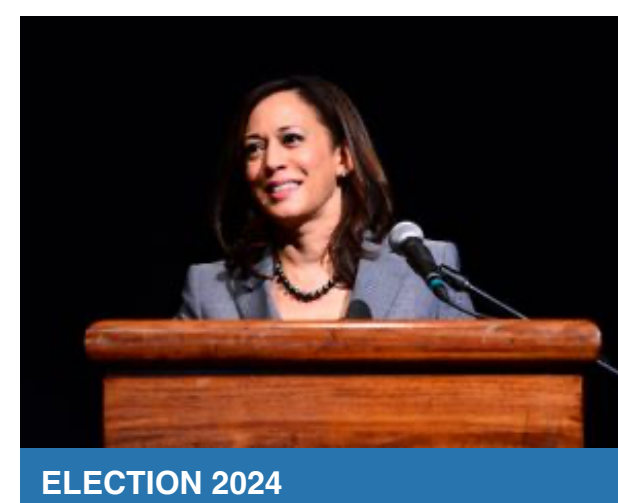
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