

Pine-Richland alum working on team searching for covid-19 vaccine



TONY LARUSSA | Thursday, October 29, 2020 2:01 p.m.



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Kathy Strauss, a 1974 graduate of Pine-Richland High School, is working with a team of scientists at the University of Maryland who are racing to develop a vaccine to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Kathy Strauss has always pretty good at math and science. But the 1974 Pine-Richland graduate didn't necessarily envision a career in the medical profession or ever imagine that she would someday work on groundbreaking research in the mission to find a vaccine for the coronavirus.

But Strauss, 64, recently was asked to serve as one of the laboratory specialists working with researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine who are conducting covid-19 vaccine trials on behalf of the pharmaceutical company Pfizer.

“Before entering my senior year of high school I was planning on getting into something related to biology, but I didn’t have anything specific in mind,” said Strauss, who lives in the Baltimore area. “I thought maybe I would become a veterinarian. But honestly, I was more interested in having fun my senior year, so I took some art courses and played flute and drums in the marching band.”

Those art courses helped Strauss uncover a hidden talent — and a burning passion that she pursues today.

While studying at Westminster College, a professor suggested that Strauss consider pursuing a career in art.

“My immediate response was that my mom will hand me my head if I major in art,” she said. “So I studied biology and art with the thought that I could get into illustrating medical books and publications as a way to earn a living.”

While Strauss has found success in the medical profession since relocating to the Baltimore area, her initial reasons for going there had nothing to do with the type of work she would do.

“Baltimore is a lot like Pittsburgh, and I had friends from up there who were teaching sailing,” she said. “So I decided to come here to do that until I found a real job.”

Strauss’ mathematics studies at the University of Maryland’s University College helped her land a job in a laboratory classifying nuclear waste from chemical plants.

Strauss said her entry into the medical field was something “I totally lucked into” when she was hired by the University of Maryland’s pediatrics department.

That post was followed by a five-year stint in the epidemiology department, which studies the spread and control of diseases.

Before joining the covid research team, Strauss worked for scientists developing a malaria vaccine at the university’s Center for Vaccine Development.

Strauss said she “just happened to be at this place with the right skills” when the invitation came to join Dr. Kirsten Lyke’s covid vaccine research team.

“I worked for Dr. Lyke for years and would have been devastated if I hadn’t been asked to join her,” Strauss said. “You have to be as hard-charging and focused as she is, which is one of the reasons I love working for her.”

Strauss said while there are similarities between the covid vaccine trials and the work she did on the development of a malaria vaccine, there is one major difference that can’t be overstated, she said.

“With malaria, if we catch it, we can treat it,” she said. “There’s no threat of death hanging over you like there is with covid.”

An in-depth story about the team working on the vaccine trials recently was published in Rolling Stone magazine.

Strauss said her role in the covid trials is to test people before they receive the vaccine to ensure they are not infected with the coronavirus and are simply asymptomatic.

“We can’t give the vaccine to people if they already have the virus,” she said. “It has to be perfect, so I’ve never known such pressure.”

To help deal with the stress, Strauss turns to her art.

“It’s saving my life,” she said. “It helps me calm down and deal with the excess energy that builds up from working on the trials.”

Strauss’ works have been displayed in a number of Baltimore-area venues, including Maryland Art Place, the Creative Alliance and at Baltimore’s annual arts festival ArtScape. She also has exhibited work in Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and New York. She has produced art for textbooks and publications that are in the permanent collections at the Institute for Genome Sciences and Notre Dame of Maryland University.

Strauss also has demonstrated and lectured on fiber art techniques for the staff at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

Some of the pieces she has created can be viewed on her website.

While Strauss no longer has close family ties to the Pittsburgh area, she has returned a number of times for class reunions and holds fond memories of growing up here.

“My experiences at Pine-Richland were great, and I’ve enjoyed visiting the area and seeing how much it has changed over the years,” she said.

Pine-Richland spokeswoman Rachel Hathhorn said sharing stories about district graduates “is a great way to connect with the district’s past while highlighting the success our future graduates can obtain.”

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