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Shelton working in New York City fighting COVID-19.

## On the front line

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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON APRIL 23, 2020

COMMUNITY

*Local emergency nurse, Marine serves on COVID-19 medical team in New York City*

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In these days of self-quarantine and stay-at-home orders, amid a pandemic unprecedented in modern times, Fred Rogers's advice to "look for the helpers" has proliferated social media, as well as everyday conversation. Chesterfield resident Joey Shelton has taken the advice a step further. He is not only looking for helpers; he is among them.

Previously, Shelton worked at the emergency department of Chippenham Hospital. Today, the 2003 Clover Hill High School graduate finds himself on the frontlines of the battle against Covid-19: New York City.

Shelton on the front line in New York City fighting COVID-19.

Sgt. Joey Shelton

Shelton providing medical support in Iraq.

Shelton providing medical support in Iraq.

Through faith-based disaster relief organization Samaritan's Purse, Shelton is working to save lives in one of the hardest-hit cities in the United States. "I'm an emergency nurse on their international response roster," Shelton said. "I responded with their 'first wave' disaster response team to the Covid-19 crisis in New York."

Shelton's workday is a long one. He arrives on site at 6:30 in the morning for a shift that will run 13 hours. "I work every day for four weeks straight, and then take a week off before starting another response assignment," he said. On a daily basis, Shelton provides care for five to six "acutely ill patients suffering from Covid-19. It's nonstop, all day." He encounters patients suffering from acute respiratory issues, many of whom require life saving interventions. "The patients are sick, all with varying grades of respiratory distress, all the way to acute respiratory failure," Shelton said. "It's like being in an austere ER with all breathing-complication patients."

The work is tough, and "every day we are fighting to keep people alive," Shelton said, but one of the most encouraging experiences he's had was "seeing a sweet Latino-American brother praying for the other patients around him while he fought for his own life."

Shelton's path to helping save lives in New York was not a linear one. A Marine who turned 18 in boot camp and completed two tours of duty in Iraq, Shelton returned to Virginia in 2007 and worked as a Powhatan sheriff's officer. He left his job in law enforcement and went to nursing school to become a paramedic. "Because God set a blazing fire of His love in my heart for the Middle East and all its amazing people," he said. Returning to Iraq and the Middle East was a response to the love, to a vocational calling that has changed my life." In 2017, Shelton led a small humanitarian organization's relief team in Iraq. "We delivered emergency food, water and blankets in zones of conflict, and worked with local health actors to help provide frontline emergency medical care."

The plan had been for Shelton to return to Iraq in late March, but airport closures canceled his flights "As the crisis escalated here at home, there wasn't really any thought about it. I knew I wasn't going to sit this fight out," he said. When Samaritan's Purse contacted him, his answer was a ready "yes."

Although Shelton was unable to return to Iraq in March, his tours of duty there inspired him to start his own nonprofit, Mideast Rescue, which aims to provide first aid and emergency training to healthcare professionals, civil servants and lay-providers – such as school teachers and humanitarian workers – across northern Iraq.

“Mideast Rescue is very much in a startup phase,” Shelton said. So far, he has written, translated and begun teaching an emergency first aid and CPR course in Arabic and Kurdish. The group also conducts nursing home visits to provide care and family education, as well as helping with medical case management, which occurs when Mideast Rescue helps a family accessing and paying for specialized care.

Shelton has no specific date in mind for his return to Virginia. “I would like to stay in New York City for at least eight weeks and then re-evaluate,” he said. After the outbreak is under control, he hopes to return to northern Iraq to further his work with Mideast Rescue.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

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