A hero can be defined as “a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities” as noted on www.google.com (Google Inc, Mountain View, CA). The year 2017 provided plenty of opportunities for heroism. Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma slammed into U.S. Territories and the Gulf Coast. Mass shootings injured hundreds in Texas and Las Vegas, Nevada. California wildfires burned more than 1,000,000 acres and hundreds of structures. Numerous other natural and man-made events did not garner this level of national press coverage yet resulted in injuries and death.

Our first-responder colleagues are often heralded in the news for the heroic role they play in these types of events and I certainly do not want to detract from that praise. The challenges and dangers they face on the front line is considerable and they deserve all the attention they receive. But there are numerous unsung heroes working tirelessly behind the scenes during these events that rarely get that kind of attention. We, as emergency nurses, are among that group.

After Hurricane Harvey, television cameras captured the dramatic rescues of those trapped by floodwaters. But those same cameras failed to record the heroic efforts of emergency nurses trapped in their workplaces for days toiling in less than ideal conditions. Sherri-Lynne Almeida, 2002 ENA President, provided insight into those heroic efforts through her regular Facebook posts during the event. Here is an excerpt from her posting on August 28:

“Update 11:30 PM: I have slept for three hours but I need a few more. Can’t seem to shake the chill. The courtyard outside my office looks like a pool. The heavy rains continue. ½ of the staff are sleeping while the other ½ works. Everyone inside is safe.”

In November, I had the privilege of visiting the hospitals in Las Vegas that cared for patients during the mass shooting on October 1, 2017 and met with some of our emergency nursing colleagues who worked that night. I could fill this entire journal with the amazing stories related to me during those visits about acts of heroism that have never been told.

Perhaps the story that stands out the most from my visit to Las Vegas involves a young emergency nurse who, along with his brother, attended the concert where the shooting took place. Sadly, his brother was shot during the incident. The nurse drove his injured brother to the same hospital where he worked. As the team was caring for his brother’s wounds, this young nurse recognized the carnage going on around him, donned a pair of scrubs and began helping his colleagues with the influx of patients despite the personal tragedy he was experiencing.

One of the nursing directors in Las Vegas shared with me that a sports team in Las Vegas wanted to recognize the heroes that worked that night and asked for a representative from the ED to walk out on the field with first responders during the singing of the national anthem. When she asked for volunteers from her staff to take part in this honor, they all refused. Their answer was simple, “We are not heroes. We went to work that evening like we do every shift and cared for patients who came to us.”

Personally, I disagree. While it is true, these emergency nurses did their job that night, they were asked to go far above and beyond the call of duty caring for several hundred gunshot wounds in the course of one shift. This to me fits the definition of a hero I used in the first sentence above—“a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.”

As emergency nurses, we have been given a gift, a gift to practice heroism every time we go to work. It may be responding to a mass casualty event or it may be something on a smaller scale, like delivering a life-saving shock to a patient in ventricular fibrillation or hugging a mother who grieves the tragic loss of her son. But to someone, you are a hero for what you do.