They lived in a factory for 28 days to make raw PPE materials to fight coronavirus

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On March 23, Joe Boyce checked into his factory just off the Delaware River, in the far southeastern corner of Pennsylvania. It would be the longest work shift of his life.

In his office, an air mattress replaced his desk chair. He brought a toothbrush and shaving kit, moving into the Braskem chemical plant in Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, as if it were a makeshift college dormitory. The casual office kitchen became a mess hall for him and his 42 coworkers-turned-roommates. The factory's emergency operations center became their new lounge room.

Sleeping And Working In One Place

For 28 days, they did not leave, sleeping and working all in one place.

The "live-in" at the factory is just one example of the endless ways that Americans are helping fight the new coronavirus. The 43 men went home April 19. Each worked 12-hour shifts all day and
night for a month straight. They made the raw materials for the face masks and surgical gowns worn by workers on the frontlines of the outbreak.

No one told them they had to do it, Braskem America head Mark Nikolich said. All of the workers volunteered. They hunkered down at the plant to ensure no one caught the new coronavirus, or COVID-19, the new flu-like illness spreading quickly across the United States and worldwide.

**Rocketing Demand**

They worked to meet the rocketing demand for their key product, polypropylene, a kind of plastic needed to make various medical and hygienic items. Braskem's plant in Neal, West Virginia, was doing a second live-in as of April 23.

"We were just happy to be able to help," said Boyce, a work shift supervisor and a 27-year veteran at Braskem America. "We've been getting messages on social media from nurses, doctors, EMS workers, saying thank you for what we're doing. But we want to thank them for what they did and are continuing to do. That's what made the time we were in there go by quickly, just being able to support them."

**Key Ingredient**

For countless face masks in America, their journey from a blob of chemicals into the hands of first responders and grocery-store clerks likely began at a plant just like Braskem's. The company is one of the earliest links in the supply chain, providing a key ingredient for the personal protective equipment that millions of people worldwide now need each day.

Nikolich said the company has shifted its production lines to focus on making that key ingredient, polypropylene. The company then sells the product to clients that turn it into a nonwoven fabric. Ultimately, medical manufacturers use the fabric for face masks, medical gowns and even disinfectant wipes.

Over the last month, Nikolich estimated that the Braskem plants in Pennsylvania and West Virginia have produced 40 million pounds of polypropylene. The amount is enough to make either 500 million N95 masks or 1.5 billion surgical masks.

"It just makes you immensely proud to be associated with a team like that," Nikolich said. "They're operating in a strange environment 24/7, 365."

Nikolich said the plants decided to launch the live-ins so employees could avoid having to worry about catching or spreading the virus while traveling to and from work.

"We tried to make them as comfortable as possible," Nikolich said.

Boyce said some guys brought their Xbox consoles and TVs, and even a cornhole set, to stay entertained. They stayed active at the on-site gym and stayed extra busy in the kitchen. A skilled cook, Boyce and others whipped up creamed corn, barbecue and even filet mignon dinners for more than 40 people a night.

**One Enormous Household**

Before long, they fell into a routine like they were all in one enormous household, he said.
"We had to kind of adapt. We came up with a chart for housekeeping chores so we could all clean the bathrooms and clean up after meals," Boyce said. "It wasn't long before we're all sitting in the same spots at dinner."

However, being separated from family got harder as time went on, said Boyce, a father of two teenagers. Some guys counted down the days, and one missed the birth of his first grandchild. Visitors were not allowed.

So on Day 14, the families organized a "drive-by visit," Boyce said. It was their halfway point, celebrating not only being halfway done but also free of any signs of the virus, as no one during that 14-day period developed even a sniffle. With a police escort, more than two dozen families paraded past the plant bearing signs and cheering from the windows. They were too far away for a conversation but just close enough "to give a boost to all the guys," Boyce said.

"It was something to see," he said. "Just a shout and wave was pretty much what we got, but it was enough."

They went back to work. The days blended between factory floor and conference-room bedrooms, until finally, on April 19, it was time to clock out.

"We wanted to walk out as a team," Boyce said. "Everybody felt that way. It really hit me when my car got a little ways down from the plant — I'm finally going to see my family."