Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Recommended Citation
Michaela Stram with Cheryl Reitan (2021) "Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic," Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 34. Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol6/iss1/34

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Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic

Cover Page Footnote
Stories of Wisdom from Bodies in Separation (SWaBS): Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic Through the Lens of Humanities has been made possible by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this project, do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

This article is available in Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol6/iss1/34
A National Endowment for the Humanities program helps UMD gather stories of survival.

Ivy Vainio, a Duluth area photographer, says that since the pandemic hit, she isn’t taking photos like she used to. “I have felt lost,” she says. “I see other photographers out and doing things like photographing protests… which I would love to be doing. But I ban myself, even though I support them. I don’t want to be in harm’s way with Covid.”

A project called, "Stories of Wisdom from Bodies in Separation (SWaBS): Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic Through the Lens of Humanities," is documenting the concerns of Vainio and others. Her experience of feeling lost isn't unique.

While Vainio took very few photographs in 2020, she did one photo shoot with Herb and Patty Fineday for a national article about the absence of powwows. The Finedays, from the Fond du Lac Tribe of Lake Superior Chippewa, wore their matching pow wow regalia and made matching face masks especially for the session. All three practiced social distancing and wore masks the whole time while together. Vainio appreciated the rarity of time they spend together. She took time getting the different angles and poses. In the end, she could send only one photo to the national magazine. “The one I chose was the one where I asked them to kiss through the face masks,” she says.
Vainio, is a 1992 B.A. graduate from UMD (University of Minnesota Duluth) and a 2011 M.A. grad from the University of Wisconsin-Superior. She is now the climate and cultural resiliency program coordinator at the American Indian Community Housing Organization.

Over 100 people, including Vainio, participated in a $175,745 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) project directed by UMD’s Devaleena Das, principal investigator and David Beard, co-principal investigator.

A Year of Interviews

Beard and Das created an online format to share the Covid Stories interviews. More than a dozen area residents were chosen to assist with the project organization, take photos, and conduct the interviews. People from towns the size of Finland, Minnesota to towns as large as Duluth were approached. People of all ages, professions, and backgrounds participated. Some have lived in Duluth their whole life while others have been in the United States for less than five years.

Project support came from across the campus from UMD’s Kathryn A. Martin Library, Tweed Museum of Art, and the College of Liberal Arts. Professional consultants from UMD’s writing center, the Writers’ Workshop, met online with individual writers on the team to review early drafts of their pieces. One of the consultants, Lindsey Jungman, said, "Seeing how each writer approached the topic was incredible. All of the different genres and voices--it was a joy to collaborate on such a community-based project during this isolating year." The workshop is open to all members of the UMD community and so played an integral role in shaping the creations of some of the project members in this grant.

Matthew Rosendahl, the library director, pointed out the value of archiving this moment in time. “Libraries collect stories to help us understand our lives and our world.”

Art and "Creating Apart"

Part of the Stories of Wisdom from Bodies in Separation project included a Tweed Museum of Art exhibit called “Creating Apart: Local Artists Respond to a Global Pandemic.” The exhibition showcased the work area artists created during 2020. It was curated by Anne Dugan, and a description of the work called attention to the recent proliferation of art.

The narrative states, when "almost all activities outside the home halted, community members turned towards the arts." Six area artists contributed to the show in the Tweed: Brian Barber, Sarah Brokke, Joe Klander, Karen Savage-Blue, Ivy Vainio, and Moira Villiard.
Sarah Brokke's work (above) was used in the promotional material for the "Creating Apart" exhibit.

The name of the show, "Creating Apart," highlights how artists dealt with the pandemic alone, and on an intensely personal level. As its description states, it promotes "public health and social justice through public service campaigns, public art, and activism."

**Documentation for the Future**

Beard was pleased with the project’s reach. “It’s a wildly diverse group of people,” he says. “I am still amazed at the breadth of human beings and the diversity of narrative perspectives this project [has] brought together."

The project was conceived and carried out within just a few months and Rosendahl applauds the effort. It's a "rich document of our history."

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*Banner photo (above) Ivy Vainio at the AICHO building. Photographer: Mike Scholtz*

*This story was co-written by UMD student Michaela Stram, who is majoring in communication. Michaela works with Cheryl Reitan in University Marketing and Public Relations.*