

Pressing On: Pandemic brings hard times to the North Country

By Mark Nicklawske

Four days before my wife, Jen and I were scheduled to fly to New York City the first coronavirus death was reported in the United States somewhere outside Seattle, Washington.

I had a feeling COVID-19 was going to be bad. It brought China to its knees. It had Italy in a stranglehold. Why wouldn't it take down the United States? Frankly, in the days before my New York trip, I was worried officials would order domestic travel restrictions and cancel flights across the country. But they didn't.

And I was glad.

I was flying from Minnesota to New York on a working trip. It promised to be the most exciting writing assignment in my 30 year journalism career. The trip culminated two or three months of complicated planning and delivered us to an opening night performance at the Belasco Theatre. My job was to review the Broadway production of "Girl From The North County," a play based on the music of Bob Dylan and set in Duluth, Minnesota. My review would appear the next day in the Duluth News Tribune.

The project felt important. Dylan was born in Duluth in 1941. As a youth, he moved with his family to the nearby iron mining town of Hibbing where he graduated from high school and promptly left Minnesota for worldwide fame. His relationship with the northland had always been complicated but the connections were undeniable.

What would Dylan and Duluth look like on the biggest theater stage in the world?

The distant threat of catching a strange virus wasn't enough to stop me from finding out.

I saw my first masked traveler in the Lindbergh Terminal of Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. It was Wednesday, March 4. Jen and I were headed through a security line on the way to catch our New York flight. The mask was black and it belonged to a young woman with a large mailbox-sized suitcase. It was striking. Photos were coming out of China showing busy, big city streets filled with pedestrians in masks. But in the United States, masks were worn in public only by the paranoid, I thought. The woman and her travel companion must be headed somewhere dangerous, somewhere overrun with the virus like the South Pacific.

Turns out Jen and I were the ones headed for danger. We were traveling straight into the initial beachhead for a COVID-19 North American invasion.

SWaBS isn't an acronym a flashy downtown marketing firm would create but since it describes an academic project designed to document the impact of a deadly pandemic on northern Minnesota, SWaBS works just fine.

Stories of Wisdom From Bodies in Separation: Archiving the Coronavirus Pandemic through the lens of Humanities (SWaBS) was a good enough title for the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) to win a \$175,700 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Professor David Beard and Assistant Professor Devaleena Das applied for the grant money in the spring as their Duluth campus went dark under lockdown.

Health concerns had closed classrooms forcing some 11,000 students at UMD to learn through a relatively unknown conference call platform called Zoom. Resident halls were evacuated as if a freakish Lake Superior hurricane had its sites on campus. A half-mile hallway - the very spine of the school - was rendered a hollow, deserted tunnel. The school hockey team would be unable to defend its national championship. The class of 2020 would not march together in graduation ceremonies.

To capture the moment, the researchers hired laid-off journalists, struggling artists, writers and other creative people, to seek out a diverse cross-section of northeastern Minnesota residents and document their pandemic experiences.

"The work produced during this project will help to combat the "infodemic," the deluge of information, misinformation, and conspiracy theories (that can arise during a pandemic)," wrote Das and Beard. "SWaBS will demonstrate how digital humanities are essential to fighting infodemic, and the xenophobia that can follow, while making opportunities for employment for the local community."

I was one of those writers in need of the opportunity. As a music and theater critic for the Duluth News Tribune, the pandemic has claimed my opportunities for work. Stages went dark. Musicians stayed home. Newspaper advertising disappeared and the News Tribune ceased daily home delivery.

In June, I joined a Zoom call orientation meeting where Das and Beard introduced more than a dozen other aspiring archivists to the SWaBS grant project. Our livelihood and artistic endeavors had been slaughtered by COVID-19. The grant would supply needed income and document history for future research - research that never happened during the last great pandemic more than 100 years ago.

As part of the orientation the researchers asked us if we had any other motivation for our participation. "I hate to use a sports analogy," I told the group. "But from a journalists' perspective, the pandemic is the Super Bowl. The biggest news story of our lifetime. If this is the way I can report on it, this is what I need to do."

The comment didn't play so well with the group. Maybe the sobering events of life and death in a pandemic didn't merit a comparison to an overblown, made-for-TV advertising vehicle played out on a football field. But the COVID-19 pandemic will have heroes and villains, gut-wrenching drama, unforgettable plays, controversial calls and an ending no one can predict. It will all take place on the world stage and be seared into the memory of those who lived it for generations to come.

A journalist is trained to report these stories.

No, SWaBS doesn't have a grandiose name - like the Super Bowl - but recording the impact of a pandemic that will ultimately claim hundreds of thousands of lives is so much more important than a football game.

Few people outside of China knew much about Wuhan prior to the city gaining infamy as ground zero for a deadly, still-uncontrolled pandemic. But in Duluth, Israel Malachi had a family connection to the place: His mother had been married to a descendant from the ancient Wu Dynasty in eastern China.

"My step-father was born in Wuhan, China, his name is Sherman Wu - he's passed away now - so I was familiar with Wuhan. It wasn't like: 'Oh, where's that? It's so far away.' I knew that there were connections and if it is contagious, people are gonna be spreading it around," said Malachi.

I was interviewing Malachi, 56, for the SWaBS project. A guitar player, pilot and small business owner not afraid to express his conservative views, Malachi told me he was locked in to the COVID-19 crisis as soon as he learned about the Wuhan outbreak. He feared the worst when most considered the virus something off in the distance.

"It wasn't so bizarre like, 'Wow this is some... other end of the world.' It's like: "Geez, I know my mother's been to Wuhan many times,' So I didn't feel like this was some weird thing that was never gonna affect me. It did at first, but then soon I thought, "This could be pretty bad."

While Malachi's business - palette manufacturing - remained strong during the pandemic lockdown his wife saw her livelihood disappear. Barbara Barrey Malachi had worked as a hair stylist since she was a teenager growing up in England. Minnesota Governor Tim Walz closed barber shops and hair salons for more than two months in the spring of 2020 as part of an all encompassing statewide stay-at-home order.

"By the time it got to the third (closing order), she was crying and she seldom cries. In nine years, I've probably seen her cry three times, and I just... I really felt bad because I'm always pretty upbeat, and she is too, under normal circumstances, but it was just, "Wow, this is so depressing for her and so hard." said Malachi.

The couple went for endless drives around the city, no particular destination, just driving and

looking at neighborhoods, discovering new places. And Barbara took up cooking. Malachi said before the pandemic he and his wife liked to dress up and go out to dinner almost every night. Under the lockdown, the couple ate delicious and healthy meals. While eating at home was good for the waistline, the couple missed seeing friends and supporting local businesses - the bartenders and wait staff that they socialized with regularly.

Malachi said he hasn't been angry or frustrated but experiencing a new world under COVID-19 has been difficult. The isolation and subsequent separation from his social network led him deeper into his faith.

"My faith is definitely grown from this. There's been a lot more prayer time," he said. "I think I've become a different person in some way, I'm much more introspective and I have a deeper faith in Christ because of this definitely. I've just had more time and more worry and like, what do you do about worry? Well, you can pray. So I think that's been a benefit that I've gotten out of that, so there's been a few downers and a few benefits."

"Hopefully, other people have experienced the same thing. I kind of think of myself as pretty average."

Azrin Awal may have been one of the first northlanders to witness the coronavirus pandemic as it devoured the other side of the world.

Awal immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh at the age of three, grew up in Northfield, Minnesota, and is now an undergraduate studying public health at the University of Minnesota Duluth. As part of her school work, she monitored news from around the world and discovered Chinese reporting about a virus outbreak spreading from Wuhan in December.

When Awal saw news reports about a virus infiltrating Uyghur concentration camps in China, she knew the problem would only get worse. If governments violate human rights they will also violate health rights, said Awal. "I was wishing that more people were aware of (the Uyghur) situation and just more aware of global struggles around the world."

In January, Awal took a global health class and continued to track coronavirus news in Italy. It didn't take long to see the similarities between the rising deaths in China and new cases in Italy. "In my mind, I was like: 'My goodness, these are the same COVID-19 symptoms that we saw in China and all that.' So I was following it and realized that this is a pandemic that we have in our hands."

Awal knew the grim possibilities months ahead of any announcement from international health experts. Indeed it wasn't until March 19 that the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic.

It struck me that Awal had a unique perspective on the pandemic. She knew what was happening and watched helplessly as American news media and government officials largely ignored the problem or operated with a "it won't happen here" arrogance. The situation must have led to a great deal of frustration and anxiety.

Awal has long wrestled with depression and the spring lockdown only made matters worse. School went from in person to online overnight. Her important work at the campus Women's

Resource and Action Center halted and volunteer activities canceled. “It healed me being with people, having a purpose to each day, so when all of those purposes left, my creative energy just disappeared as well, and I became so depressed, and I can't even remember March, April, May, those months during isolation,” she said. “It was hard.”

But as the pandemic has carried on, Awal made a discovery. Maybe slowing down and being alone for a while has helped people understand themselves a little better.

“We are going back to the basics and maybe in a way that is good for our generation, because we forgot as humans who we actually are maybe,” she said. “ It got me to realize that... My goodness, I'm having so much trouble just being home and being at rest, I've been always running... I look back and I was like, wow, I think our generations needed this, 'cause if we kept going at the path we were, if we just kept running and racing, who knows? We could have collapsed.”

Awal, now in her fifth year of undergraduate studies, plans to finish work on her public health degree and graduate. She continues her counselor work at the Womens Resource and Action Center on a limited basis and is looking for a second job to help meet daily expenses. It's been a difficult year watching the COVID-19 crisis unfold, but Awal hopes the experience will lead to positive change.

“I think 2020 will be a year to remember and it's gonna be a year where humanity had to take a step back to relearn ourselves and to reground ourselves, and possibly change ourselves,” she said. “It's given us the opportunity to change ourselves and our communities for the better, to create a more humane, just, equitable community. And I guess the next thing to see is if we do, if we take those steps, if we take what we've learned and experienced.”

I supposed we've all learned something from the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The pandemic has pushed some - like health care workers - to their limits of strength and endurance. Certainly those who have experienced infection have learned how to live with various levels of fear, isolation and even death. But I think the vast majority of Americans have had a more simple learning experience. I think most people have learned how to deal with inconvenience be it small - like mask wearing - or large - like not being with friends and family during the holidays or important live events.

Aside from the historical documentation of the COVID-19 pandemic, my goal for the SWaBS interview project was to find out how the pandemic impacted the lives of 10 ordinary northland residents. I sought out a diverse group to interview, different age groups, cultural backgrounds, sexual identification, family and work life, even political leanings. The idea was not to find a single answer to the lessons learned in a pandemic, but to uncover the challenges people faced and their reaction to events brought on by the single most deadly health crisis in a century. Those experiences could both serve as guideposts and examples for future researchers and help others still living through COVID-19 issues.

Like Israel Malachi, who found a deeper faith during lockdown, and Azrin Awal, who sees the disastrous year as a harbinger for hope, others interviewed for the SWaBS project had similar stories and reactions to life in a pandemic.

Careers threatened

Singer-songwriter Ann Kathryn Forsman and registered nurse Jeremy Kershaw saw the virus threaten and possibly cripple their work life.

Kershaw, who works with mental health patients, was on the front lines when COVID-19 swept across the country. He feared not only for his job - Duluth hospitals laid off hundreds of non-essential workers - but also his own personal safety. His first encounter with a potential COVID-19 patient came when a woman checked into the mental health unit and claimed exposure to the virus after sharing needles with roommates.

“And I remember quickly backing out of the room and saying, ‘I’ll be right back,’ and then going to get the gown, face masks, cap and other things that were recommended at the time,” he said. “And I realized...I may have just exposed myself to an infectious situation, because we just weren’t used to it.”

Hospitals across the country scrambled to establish pandemic protocol and battled through limited personal protection equipment issues. By November, 2020, close to 800 frontline hospital workers had died from COVID-19 in the United States, with another 200,000 infected. With non-essential procedures cancelled and the public avoiding routine doctor visits, hospitals laid off 1.4 million workers in April alone.

“Thankfully, both my wife and I have been able to stay employed,” said Kershaw, the couple has two daughters, ages 10 and 13. “ But there was about a week or two there early on that we didn’t know...”

Forsman knew right away the virus had derailed her emerging music career. Forsman released her first album in 2019 and was planning a tour to support the project. All live performances stopped in March of 2020, leaving her to find a new way to share and make her art.

“We artists thrive on obstacles and adversities that come our way, because the beautiful thing about art is you can turn pain and adversities into something beautiful,” she said. “I have written quite a few songs during this pandemic period, and I’m really trying to make a conscious effort to turn the anxieties and the feeling of not being in control of our situation, turning that into something creative and something that could bring joy to somebody else - that’s what I’ve strived for.”

Forsman said music, nature and her “day job” serving adults with disabilities helps her through difficult times.

“Things can go awry externally and around us in this world, but if we’re being true to ourselves and being authentic, we’re able to weather the storm,” she said. “And I guess that’s what I’m trying to do, and I hope that everybody that I care about in my life and everybody else in the world is doing the same thing. We have to watch out for each other.”

Parent’s worry

Early in the pandemic Amy Westbrook got an anxious phone call from her adult daughter, Ashley, living in a Colorado ski resort town. As international travelers flocked to the Rocky Mountains, it became one of the first COVID-19 hotspots in the United States.

“My daughter calls and said, “Mom, Dad, I’m in Colorado. I’m feeling very isolated, very lonely

and very scared. Can I come home?" said Westbrook. Of course, the answer was yes. Ashley spent two weeks quarantine in a bedroom on the second floor of her childhood home.

"I'm grateful after two months here with our daughter and she got through her quarantine, we were really grateful that we lived in a small city," said Westbrook. "We could go do things, get our exercise, and lift ourselves up out of the malaise and sadness, and being distraught."

Dennis Lamkin realized the pandemic would be life changing when his two "chosen sons" became stranded in the Middle East.

Talha and Muhammed, 24-year-old twins, had traveled to Turkey and were finishing their education when the virus struck in March. Suddenly all travel visas back to the United States were suspended indefinitely. "That's when we realized that things really were changing," said Lamkin. "They're stuck in Izmir, Turkey, and forging a life there. It's working out fine, but that's when it changed our day-to-day routine, and it really strikes home when something affects you personally, I think."

While many - like Westbrook - saw their adult children returning home, seeking shelter from the virus. Others like Lamkin were cut off from loved ones and left feeling helpless and fearing the unknown.

"For me, it was disappointment that they're not coming back at this time, that things are going to be difficult, that things have changed," said Lamkin. "But then there was the realization that while they can't come back here how are they going to support themselves? What are they gonna do for money? How are they going to get work over there? How are they gonna pay for an apartment and those kinds of things? Just digesting that information and figuring out that they, too, were very responsible for their actions."

Lamkin said Muhammed and Talha are ambitious and resourceful young men so he was confident they would do well in a new country. But travel restrictions could lock them down for almost two years. When will they return to Duluth?

"So they've forged a life there, and my only concern is that they'll find it," said Lamkin. "They'll accept it and just... That'll be it. They'll end up staying."

Racism exposed

George Ellsworth, an African-American admissions representative for a Duluth hospital, and Suenary Philavanh, a Cambodian/Lao-American who recently graduated from the University of Minnesota Duluth, both watched the pandemic agitate tenuous race relations in the country.

Ellsworth said the protests sparked by the Minneapolis Police killing of George Floyd in May - just as the nation was coming out of lockdown - may have swept the country but was only a small step in generations of struggle.

"Maybe it sounds a little cold or mechanical, but it's kind of the continuing reality to me," he said. "I know this conversation isn't a one-and-done. I know this isn't going to fix it. This is not the Hallmark movie version of race relations."

Ellsworth said U.S. social justice develops in a cyclical fashion and current events see the country re-litigating responsibility for the comfort, safety, well-being, and acceptance of its minority populations. "All these things that we had hoped we had found solutions for in the last

century are now being blown apart," he said.

The social justice movement - largely led by young people - is passionate and loud, said Ellsworth, but change will be slow.

Philavanh said social distancing and a slowed work calendar gave her more time to examine racial issues and advocate for social justice. COVID-19 also opened up old wounds in the Asian-American community.

"Some of the things that I've kind of learned through (the pandemic) is that we don't really talk about Asian-American or Asian racism a lot in social spheres," she said. "I think part of it is because there is this normalization around racism towards Asian and Asian-Americans. You kind of see this through how the president talks about the virus and talks about how the virus is like a 'Kung-flu' or 'Chinese virus.' It kind of opened my eyes to how normalized racism is towards the Asian-American community"

Neither Ellsworth or Philavanh could see any timely resolution to America's racial problems. The pandemic and the racism it helped spotlight serves only as another reminder of the struggles that lay ahead for equality.

"The darkest corners of my heart told me that George Floyd's situation was unique just because we had such good video of it," said Ellsworth. "He will not be the last video we will see, and he hasn't been."

Faith frustrated

Zach Benz had recently graduated from the University of Minnesota Duluth and was looking to start a journalism career when something worse than the pandemic sent him in a new direction. His grandmother, already afflicted by dementia, suffered a major stroke on the family farm in Hibbing.

Benz moved back home and watched as his grandmother's condition worsened and the pandemic grew. Health care workers dressed in haz-mat suits made house calls. Visitors went through strict screening, and an aunt delivered groceries. When his grandmother died, college friends came to participate in a celebration of her life.

"We asked people: 'If you want to come, pay your respects, do it socially distant.' So it was like a big graduation party in my grandma's 20-acre farm property where we all stood... It was a weird thing, it was like a bunch of sheep in the field, all distant from each other, but talking about this woman who changed people's lives."

There would be no funeral.

Places to gather and celebrate milestones or share in worship have been heavily impacted by the virus. Soon after public officials ordered limits on church gatherings, the U.S Supreme Court overturned the order saying limits violated a Constitutional right to religious liberty.

University of Minnesota Duluth senior Tiffani Skroch, a devout Catholic, said attending mass was a big part of her campus life after moving from a small Wisconsin town hundreds of miles away. Skroch attended church weekly before COVID-19 but now stays at home reading her Bible and watching mass on-line. She does this as a precaution. A part-time waitress, Skroch

interacts with diners, making her a potential virus carrier. “I don't wanna risk going to church and affecting other people.” she said. “I haven't been there since March, which I know is the same for a lot of people. It's really hard for a lot of people to go.”

“I actually really do miss church.”

Skroch said she will keep the faith and carry on, but she worries about new students trying to find their place on campus and meet people. “It's really hard to move away from home, and not have a core group of friends,” she said.

Places of worship have long played a vital role in our social structure. For many, losing these institutions has been difficult.

“It was frustrating because (my grandmother) was such an important person in my life that all those milestones or send-offs or good byes didn't get to happen because of an invisible disease that could potentially kill anybody who came into contact with you or vice versa,” said Benz. “I don't know. If I just boiled it down I'd just say it was extremely frustrating, because life was never the same afterwards.”

I've been to New York City many times. Mostly as a tourist. The energy is intoxicating. The people, the noise, the constant motion and disorientation drives something deep within. There's a rush the minute you burst through those filthy airport sliding glass doors into the traffic circle outside.

But not this time. COVID-19 was in the air.

According to New York City Health Department statistics, doctors diagnosed their first coronavirus case on February 29. By the time Jen and I arrived on March 4, there were five documented cases in the city and people were on edge - New Yorkers knew what was happening in virus-plagued countries like Italy and China.

But the news and the growing numbers didn't stop us from enjoying the city. We checked into an old midtown hotel and set out to explore the neighborhoods, shop for vintage clothes, eat Indian food and tour the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. And then, of course, the “Girl From the North Country.”

Jen and I had never been to a Broadway opening night, much less land lower level press passes and an invitation to a cast and crew after party. We lingered outside the theater under the glow of the marquee lights. Chatted with a show producer who traveled from England and snapped her picture next to a poster. We watched celebrities like Brooke Shields, Anthony Edwards and Bernadette Peters exit their limos, pose for the paparazzi and float through the doors into the theater.

Inside the sold-out, turn-of-the-century theater people were jammed into their seats shoulder-to-shoulder. It wasn't a virus I was worried about, it was finding the nearest fire exit. The play had been running in preview for weeks and word was out it was a winner.

“Girl From the North County,” written by Irish playwright Conor McPherson, is a dark and deeply emotional work centered around hardscrabble characters fighting for survival in a depression-era Duluth boarding house. As the play progresses, the cast performs a range of Dylan songs underscoring the difficulty, desperation and, yes, hope found in their tangled and distressed lives. Living through a national disaster can be heartbreaking, but hard times can push our souls to new heights - this makes for great theater.

I wrote the review the next day at a small wooden desk built into the wall of our antique hotel room. As I pushed the words out it occurred to me that writing in New York City was the most exciting thing I’d ever done in my 30-year journalism career. Important things happen in New York. It’s the center of the art world; and Bob Dylan and Broadway are two of the biggest names in entertainment.

Here’s what I wrote that day about “Girl From the North Country” featuring the music of Bob Dylan: “It’s hard times in Depression-era Duluth, but the work of a revolutionary musician, born in the same place nearly a decade later, soars above it all as these lost souls battle demons and dysfunction searching for a better life.”

No one knew at the time it would be the last play to open in the New York City Broadway district. As the coronavirus pandemic swept through the city, theaters were ordered closed March 12, by then New York City daily COVID-19 cases had reached 355. Less than a month later 5,000 people a day were getting sick and more than 500 a day were dying.

The virus had a stranglehold on the world. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs, cities burned in protest of a racially charged police murder, and more than 300,000 people - most of them elderly - lost their lives to COVID-19.

Once again American cities like Duluth were experiencing Depression-era poverty, homelessness, hunger and tension. People feared for their lives and those of loved ones. Livelihoods were threatened or lost, and the future looked dark and confusing. Perhaps the last performance to open on Broadway before the pandemic was actually the play that introduced the COVID-19 era.

Like so much of Dylan’s work, had the production used his work to anticipate the troubled times we were all headed for in 2020?

At the opening night after party, Jen and I tracked down McPherson in a crowded tent pitched off the back of the New York Public Library. He was gratuitous and humble amid the clamour of hundreds of satisfied theater goers. I asked him about the song that closed the night - a little known Dylan composition called “Pressing On.”

McPherson said he had just discovered the song and only recently wrote it into the performance. “(Actress) Jeannette (Bayardelle) did an amazing job with it didn’t she?” he said. “I had to get it in there.”

While most people might find “Girl From the North Country” a sad and disheartening look at troubled times, the play’s closing song “Pressing On” offered a way forward. The song received a standing ovation from the opening night audience. It also could serve as a soundtrack to the lives people are living in the North Country today. In my SWaBS project interview, I found the pandemic has forced people to deal with lost work, separated families, the death of loved ones, racism, loneliness and depression. Still they find a way to make it through the days, weeks and

months of hard times.

They're pressing on.

I closed my review of "Girl from the North Country" with this:

"Jeannette Bayardelle, playing a boarder who loses her heart to (owner) Nick Laine and her money to a corrupt attorney, performed another Dylan obscurity, "Pressing On," as a stunning gospel coda. Bayardelle gave the song a powerful reading, leaving the audience hopeful that the dire circumstances found in the city "with winters seven months long" will eventually lead to new life in the spring."