

COVID-19 Archive: RI Historical Society and Providence Public Library are collecting stories from the coronavirus



Socially distanced shopping at Wishing Stone Farm

The coronavirus has brought with it feelings of loneliness. Social isolation, social distancing ... every word after social translates to not seeing others and not leaving your home. We're all feeling the effects of the quarantine and experiencing the tough transition into this new lifestyle.

Here's where Becca Bender, archivist for the Rhode Island Historical Society, and Kate Wells, curator

for the Providence Public Library, come in. Together they have created the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, a website where the people of Rhode Island can share stories, videos and photographs about their experiences dealing with the quarantine and virus. This is a way to bring the people of Rhode Island together while we are physically apart.

The way Wells puts it, “The idea is everyone’s voice has a way to contribute to history. No matter what age, sex, ethnicity ... it’s just a way to get people’s thoughts and voices heard.” The website is a bit like a time capsule for historians, specifically Rhode Island historians, to look back and know what the experience was like from those who actually experienced it.

Bender says, “It’s a way to know first-hand what it means to be a person in the community going through this. One of our goals is to get all of the voices into the mix — food delivery workers, janitors at hospitals, moms working from home...” Both agreed it’s important to get view of the home side of this crisis to show how those working from home are doing, while also showcasing how those on the front lines are coping.

Wells states, “One of the goals is to have a place where people can document this huge lifestyle change. We’re living in a really historical moment, so if there’s anything to collect for future generations that’s a goal.”

And Wells means anything. Bender is continuing her passion for gardening and building a vegetable bed, while also binging “30 Rock” and completing puzzles. Wells is getting as much sunshine as she can while also spending time with her husband and pets.

And that’s the exact content to be sent to the archive website: People going about living their lives in this quarantined lifestyle. The content posted doesn’t have to be extraordinary because, let’s be honest, a lot of our quarantining experiences aren’t. Instead the website captures what this experience is really like for so many, and helps us all not feel so alone during a lonely time.

Bender says, “We want people to find comfort in knowing that we’re all going through it together, though physically apart.”

Wells hopes this project encourages more community partnerships and wants to see people in every community participate. “Having a wider range geographically, different ethnic communities contributing, working on translating the site into different languages,” Bender says. “We just want to represent every experience that is being experienced.”

These past couple of months haven’t been ideal for anyone, but sharing experiences and knowing that others are in the same boat helps. Documenting this less than perfect time so that when it’s over we can look back knowing we all made it through is what makes this project so necessary.

To view the archive or contribute an item, go to ricovidarchive.org