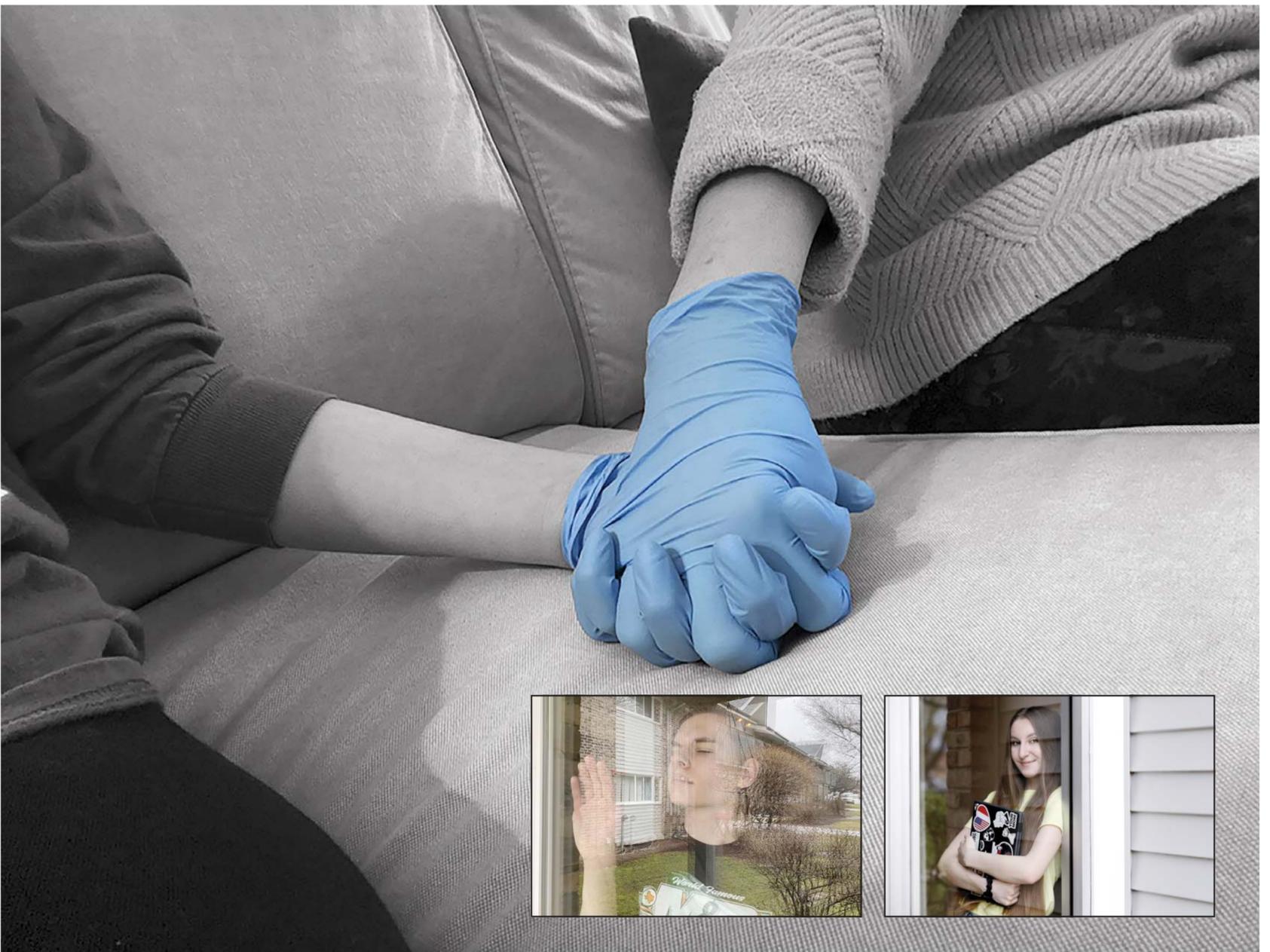




OPINION

OTHER VOICES



In this March 18, 2020, photo provided by Zofia Oles shows one of Oles' images titled 'Plastic Touch' taken in Willowbrook, Ill. Oles is a senior at Hinsdale South high school and submitted her art work to the Illinois State Museum, which is documenting what daily life is like for Illinois families during the coronavirus pandemic. (Inset, left): In this March 18, 2020, photo provided by Zofia Oles shows one of Oles' images titled 'Glass Bubble' taken in Willowbrook, Ill. (Inset, right): In this April 28, 2020 photo, Zofia Oles holds her laptop in Willowbrook, Ill. (AP)

Art inspired by pandemic

Everyone a story ... How will we remember?

By Sara Burnett and Regina Garcia Cano

Artist Obi Uwakwe was driving through Chicago's empty streets, camera on his lap to document life during COVID-19, when he saw something that made him stop: a casket being carried out of a church while a few mourners stood by, their faces covered.

The 43-year-old raised his camera and took a photograph. Later, it would become one of the images Uwakwe used to create paintings inspired by the pandemic.

"To see maybe six people there, everyone wearing a mask," he said, "it brought everything together."

Around the world, people like Uwakwe are creating photographs, paintings, emails, journals and social media posts that will shape how the world remembers the coronavirus pandemic for years and centuries to come. Museums and historical societies already are collecting materials, often with help from people accustomed to capturing and sharing even the most mundane moments around them.

The result, historians say, will be a collective memory more personal than perhaps any other moment in history.

"Everyone is touched by this. Everyone has a story," said Erika Holst, curator of history at the Illinois State Museum, one of hundreds across the US gathering pieces of a generational treasure trove. Collecting the items in real time allows historians to nudge people for the stories behind them — a luxury rarely available, Holst said.

Effect

"Usually as historians, we get a lot of numbers — the number of people who died, the number who got sick, the economic effect," she said. "It doesn't always capture what it felt like."

The enormity of the event is forcing historians to balance capturing ephemeral moments and those that will transcend time.

At the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, a task force is looking into how to gather and preserve objects, images and documents that could become part of permanent collections. But the pandemic itself is challenging the group's ability to collect because the museum is closed, so curators are asking potential donors to hold onto items.

"We are trying to take the long view on this, so (we are) focusing now most on objects that are ephemeral, things that might disappear, that might get thrown away or just used up," said Benjamin Filene, the museum's associate director of curatorial affairs.

Unlike during other national crises, people have a camera in their pocket at all times, documenting whatever they deem relevant and sharing it on social media, from the cloth mask they sew and the sourdough bread they baked to the cheer for front-line workers and the Zoom meeting of school students.

Finished

But not every quilt made or puzzle finished can tell the story of what happened in the US in the spring of 2020.

"There is sort of this overwhelming mass of information, but that information is not necessarily being captured in a way that's going to be preserved," Filene said. "And there's also the possibility that it is so fragmentary that how much will it translate to somebody else five years from now or 25 or 50 years from now? We don't just need a thing; we want the story that goes with the thing."

The National Museum of African American History and Culture has been working with doctors, nurses and other health workers who have offered to donate personal protective equipment. Senior curator for history William Pretzer said cultural organizations nowadays do "rapid-response collecting" and no longer wait until materials are considered memorabilia.

Me or we?

Individualism or the common good?

WASHINGTON, May 18, (AP) — We, the people. But individual rights. The common good. But don't tread on me. Form a more perfect union and promote the general welfare. But secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

From the moment the American republic was born right up until today, this has been its hallmark: Me and we — different flavors of freedom that compete but overlap — living together, but often at odds.

The history of the United States and the colonies that formed it has been a 413-year balancing act across an assortment of topics, priorities, passions and ambitions. Now, in the coronavirus era, that tug of war — is it about individuals, or the communities to which they belong? — is showing itself in fresh, high-stakes ways.

On Friday, protesters massed at the

foot of the Pennsylvania Capitol steps — most of them maskless — for the second time in a month to decry Gov. Tom Wolf and demand he "reopen" the state faster. It is one of many states where a vocal minority has criticized virus-related shutdowns for trampling individual rights.

"He who is brave is free," read a sign carried by one Pennsylvania protester. "Selfish and proud," said another, referring to the governor's statement that politicians advocating immediate reopening were "selfish." "My body my choice," said a sign at a rally in Texas, co-opting an abortion-rights slogan to oppose mandatory mask rules.

"The pandemic is presenting this classic individual liberty-common good equation. And the ethos of different parts of the country about this is very, very different. And it's pull-

ing the country in all these different directions," says Colin Woodard, author of "American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good."

Though polls show a majority of Americans still support some level of shutdown, the cries to reopen have grown in the past few weeks as job losses continue to mount. In Pennsylvania and across the country, the demonstrators' chorus has generally been: Don't tell me how to live my life when I need to get out of my house and preserve my livelihood.

"They're being told to stay home, wait it out. And that's a really weird democratic message to get. And the only way to do it is to say, 'I trust the government,'" says Elspeth Wilson, an assistant professor of government at Franklin & Marshall

College in Pennsylvania.

While the catalyst is an unprecedented pandemic, the collision of individual rights and the common good is as old as the republic itself: Where does one American's right to move around in public without a mask end, and another American's right to not be infected with a potentially fatal virus begin?

"This is economic paralysis by analysis for some people. And they're afraid," says Steven Benko, an ethicist at Meredith College in North Carolina. "They feel devalued."

Americans have long romanticized those who reject the system and take matters into their own hands — the outlaw, the cowboy, the rebel. Many American leaders have wrestled to reconcile that with "common good" principles that are generally needed to govern.

Service, while her husband is an electrical foreman.

"I have two young children at home and I can't afford to stay home and only receive two-thirds of my pay," she wrote. "We are both exposed to the world ... My mother can't get this disease, it may kill her."

Heather Voelz of Taylorville, Illinois, submitted a photo to the Illinois State Museum of her kids on Easter. But she said most of what she's recording are things that "wouldn't mean much to anyone but us." Voelz and two of her children, ages 3 and 5, are keeping a kids' journal she found online, and Voelz plans to put the pages in their baby books.

"I know they don't fully grasp what is happening," she said. "But they will someday."

Zofia Oles, 18, of suburban Chicago started taking photos for her school photography class but kept at it to remember her senior year. Some photos show Oles dancing alone in her room, she and her brother going to the store and neighbors gathering — at a distance — in a parking lot.

"I want to have a memory of how it looked so when I am able to be with my friends again, I can appreciate how it was," she said.

Uwakwe said recent weeks remind him of the days after 9/11, when streets were quiet and there was a collective sense of grieving, helping and appreciation for people on the front lines.

Uwakwe didn't walk around with a camera back then. In the years since, he's thought about those missed images. It's what ultimately moved him to get in his car and capture what's happening.

"The more I sat, I thought: 'I don't want to regret not doing it again.'" (AP)

editor's choice

