

Journal of a Plague Spring

As President of the Board of Trustees, my experiences in the first half of 2020 were as much library-related as personal.

By the beginning of March, it was obvious - to most New Yorkers, if not to some others nationwide - that the COVID-19 outbreak was a developing global pandemic with serious local implications. The Library Director and I decided to move up our regular March Board meeting and hold an emergency session - distanced, and in a larger upstairs meeting room at the Library. On March 15th, The Board voted to close the Library immediately; to continue to pay the staff, but have them working from home; to set up a smaller ad hoc safety committee of the Board to assist the Director and staff in developing a reopening plan; and to grant the Director, in consultation with the ad hoc committee, the flexibility to adjust the plan to meet changing conditions. At that point, most people were concerned, if not frightened.

If March was a month of uncertainty, April and May were months of isolation. The Library remained closed, while staff working from home developed not only a draft reopening plan but also a set of safety protocols to protect both patrons and employees. They updated the Library website to provide timely information and, also from home, began answering patron questions and requests by phone and email. The Board began meeting virtually via Zoom, a practice that that would continue into the summer. Most people, except essential workers like my firefighter/EMT son-in-law or hospital worker daughter-in-law, sheltered in place - some totally, some (like me) only venturing out occasionally to the supermarket or pick up takeout meals.

June saw cautious optimism. The revised and Board-approved Library reopening plan was in its second stage. Some staff came back to clean the building or plan restricted services for their areas, then curbside drop-off began on 6/15 for the 30,000-plus materials not able to be returned since the Library closed. Loaning of books and materials with curbside pickup began on 6/22, while interior traffic lanes were set up and plexiglass shields were installed at the reference and checkout desks. My significant other and I began meeting one or two couples - outdoors, distanced, everyone bringing their own lawn chairs and drinks - and I had a few doctors' appointments and finally got a haircut!

July gave us a taste of the expanded "new normal." The Library moved to stage 3 and had a reopening ceremony on 7/6. Library hours were limited, as were the number of patrons allowed inside at one time; and masks were mandatory for both staff and patrons. Stage 3.b. began on 7/22, with Saturday hours added and browsing on the first floor allowed. I got together for a picnic - outdoors and distanced, of course - with choir friends, and also made plans for a few weeks in August at the family Cape house. On the other hand, we still avoid crowds and haven't eaten at a restaurant yet, even outdoors.

What these six or seven months has taught me is that the company of others and group activities are important and not to be taken for granted. The recent lack of human interaction we've experienced demonstrates the importance of community - and community organizations like our Library. And the concern for others shown by most, if not all, people during the pandemic should be a model for various forms of service to others, including those delivered by our Library. Finally, I have been impressed (once again) by the strong and visionary leadership of our Library Director, by the dedication and creativity of the Library staff, and by the intelligence and cooperative spirit of my fellow Board members.

Russell W
President, Board of Trustees