On March 11, 2020, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute — formerly, Furman University Learning in Retirement — cancelled all spring classes and activities. This stunning announcement from OLLI Director Nancy Kennedy came in response to schedule changes at Furman due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to advice from medical experts.

Overnight, our lives changed. We learned to “shelter in place” and to practice “social distancing.” We learned to SKYPE and ZOOM. We descended upon grocery stores for pantry supplies, disinfectants, and toilet paper. We brought out puzzles, recipe books, and garden tools. We stayed home together and became united in purpose: flatten the curve!

With wit and resilience we coped.

Pandemic! is a collection of our stories. It replaces our ordinarily scheduled May newsletter. It can be added to. SEND US YOUR STORIES. We will do another issue in June.

ADD YOUR PERSONAL STORY

(200 words max):

sue.renault@gmail.com
THANK YOU, contributors, for sharing your experiences for our PANDEMIC! journal. Many of you are writers for our OLLI newsletter, OLLILife, which would regularly be published in mid May. Who would have dreamed you’d be writing about “sheltering” instead of bonus events, council meetings, social activities, and summer classes?

There are a some prevailing themes in the messages we’ve received: we OLLI members, as a group, are resilient. Our response to troubled times is to roll up our sleeves and give this our best. Bring out the puzzles. No whining. We find the good side of this bad situation: more time for reading, gardening, and living simpler. We are in it for others. We’ll follow the rules to make the world safe. We are generous (Jim Hammond, your neighbors will love their Little Free Library; Marie, your friends are memorable!). We are curious. Look how we’ve taken to ZOOM! Some of us are facing this experience without partners or relatives. We call a friend or work in the yard, and we just make it work!

Most of all, we are grateful. The notes that arrived with these stories often conclude with this line: I’ve got so much to be thankful for. I’m embarrassed by my blessings!

If you have not contributed to PANDEMIC!, please consider adding your story to our collection. Write a brief “I” story (200 words max). No preaching, teaching, or philosophizing. Due by June 1.

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MARGARET IS A COMPETITIVE CLOUDWATCHER

I watch clouds from my window, back yard, or in the great outdoors.

They are nature’s way of telling me what mood she is in.

Every wisp, fluff, flurry or thunderhead has magic in it.

They turn Cinderella’s coach into elephants.

Recently, I’ve taken up competitive cloud watching.

The Cloud Collector’s Handbook has me looking for Kelvin-Hemlhotz clouds (55 points) or sun dogs (35 points) or a circumzenithal arc (45 points), which is a sort of upside down rainbow smile above the sun.

(If you are into clouds, there is no better resource than https://cloudappreciationsociety.org).

Warning: to avoid a spill ALWAYS stand still before gazing skyward!

Happy cloud spotting. by Margaret Clark

MOST OF ALL: WE ARE GRATEFUL!

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Sue Renault, editor
I have a new grandbaby born last week in New Zealand. I can’t visit him or his mother, my only daughter. I am 72 and have waited my entire life for grandchildren. What is a mother/grandmother to do?

DEAR HENRY

One hundred years ago, your great grandfather, John Henry Moriarty, was 10. He lived through the Spanish Flu Pandemic quarantined for six weeks in his elementary school, watched over by the Sisters of Mercy.

We are in the middle of a pandemic again, sending our prayers heavenward to ease the suffering of others.

Your granddad and I read more, laugh a lot at corny jokes, visit friends via email, texts and Facetime. Jigsaw puzzles have made a comeback, OLLI photography challenges me. Your granddad is anxious to hit the links again.

We walk regularly, and we discover something new about each other every day. We will celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary in June.

This week I would be heading to New Zealand to hold you in my arms and hug your mom and dad.

Not to be. But we will meet soon. The pandemic will end. Hopefully the entire planet will have learned new lessons about living a simpler life.

Abrazos y besos, your Nana

by Kathleen Allen

MARY KAY’S GARDEN

"Your flower pix are GORGEOUS," an Ohio friend writes on my FaceBook page.

"Bless your heart," I say to South Carolina, with none of the typical sarcasm of that phrase in the South. What’s not to love about Carolina in the spring?

While sleety rain was still dripping from the hats of Northern kin, we had daffodils with camellias still abloom. And jewel-tone perennials - yes, you, dianthus! - have been cheering my "isolation" in the garden for weeks. I was kicking myself for by-passing tomato plants my last time "out." But the volunteers are now poking their heads up in perfect spots.

I sit in my reading chair close to the tea olive where brown thrashers have nested. They’ve gotten used to me, with all this extra reading time. From here, I watch roly-poly bees buffeted by tiny breezes as they try to get to the weigela blossoms, looking like miniature gulls and pelicans having to give in to wind streams. How sweet to have time to just sit and watch them!

by Mary Kay Kantz

My daughter Kate separated her irises and gave me the pieces. I planted them in January. I did not think I would see them until next year. They surprised me. They are all up. Small miracles are happening in my yard every day.
IT’S BEEN DIFFICULT
TO TURN OFF MY MIND AND NOT TO PONDER...

The stay-at-home requirement for the pandemic has caused me to spend a great deal more time alone than is normal for me.

I don’t consider myself a worrier or an over reactor, but I’ve found that having too much time to think can alter those tendencies.

Though I have tried to keep myself busy, it’s been difficult to turn off my mind and not to ponder: what is the future going to look like?

How can I reasonably keep myself and those I care about safe?

Whose advice can I really trust? Should I go to places just because the government has allowed them to open?

And most importantly, if I caught the virus would I survive it?

When I get to that point, I realize I’ve crossed the line and it’s time to get out in my garden and enjoy the sunshine.

If I had to be stuck at home, spring is the best time of year to do it.

Everyday something new is coming out of the ground that adds beauty.

Even spreading seven yards of mulch adds to that beauty, and good exercise as well.

by Elizabeth Shaw

I MISS THE KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS I TUTOR AND WORRY FOR THEIR SAFETY

It seems I have two "speeds" - all ahead full and full stop. It’s clear that staying home and "social distancing" could save my life and that of my family, friends, and neighbors. Carl and I have rediscovered jigsaw puzzles, engage in friendly competition with our daily Scrabble games, Zoom with friends and family from the east to west coasts, and have enjoyed reading great books and watching the series, Outlander, on Netflix.

Our August Baltic cruise was canceled by the cruise line yesterday. Whew! August family reunion in the White Mountains of NH canceled as well – sad. I miss the kindergarten students I tutor at Slater-Marietta elementary school and worry mightily for their safety. These children were at risk before the pandemic. I can’t imagine the myriad pressures their families are dealing with now.

As it is the 75th anniversary of V-E Day, I have reflected on the incredible sacrifices past generations made to keep our country safe. Those men and women didn’t hesitate to step up and give their lives to protect the freedoms we enjoy today. The least we can do is to stay home to “flatten the curve” and do our part to battle this stealthy and deadly virus.

by Kathy Roed
I CHERISH OUR LUNCH DATES

Daily life at the Brown house has a pretty regular rhythm with our work and online school responsibilities shaping the day. Although we are all in the same house, we are in our own separate workspaces for most of the day. We still start each dinner time with, “So what did everyone do today?”

In our dining room, my husband teaches his 3rd-grade class virtually for most of the day. In his student meetings, he has been introduced to many pets and siblings and had tours of favorite rooms and backyards.

My daughter and son are engaged with school projects and virtual meetings with teachers and friends. I work on whatever OLLI project is next as we prepare for our historic virtual sessions! I am thankful for Zoom and various technologies that allow me to see OLLI members, co-workers, friends, and family during this time of distancing.

by Alise Brown

HOW LONG AGO MARCH 11 SEEMS!
A WHOLE NEW WORLD, IN FACT.
I MISS OLLI.

I miss our OLLI members, sharing life with my co-workers, the hustle and bustle between classes, and oh, what I would give to make the coffee.

But we press on and I find myself grateful for the unexpected blessings. As we juggle e-learning and working from home and all that comes with our unanticipated shared space, we also enjoy costumed badminton games, late night fires, visits with neighbors on walks, and countless family games. We linger at the table a little longer after dinner, and there are two happy golden retrievers that decorate my "office" floor.

We also have chores undone, battles over who used the last towel, and conversations that leave us with only questions - Greenville High graduation? A return to Clemson? Are they learning all they need to be prepared? And, will the laundry ever all be done? Tonight our family will share "virtually" in our niece’s wedding and while not in the manner we anticipated, I am again reminded... there's a lot of special in these days after all.

by Heidi Wright

I'm working my way through my stack of unread books here at home, longingly thinking of all of the books up at the Herring Center just waiting to be checked out. I always head to the big wicker basket first. I go under the assumption that if someone else has just finished reading it, the book must be good. Sally Bornmueller
QUARANTINE PUZZLES

Upon hearing of the upcoming isolation, I ordered a 1000-piece puzzle called Home Cooking. I figured I was familiar enough with muffins and cakes so it would be doable.

I knew to put together the edges first, then to sort by color. I also learned some tricks from my daughter, which were to separate by shape within the similarly colored pieces. In my head, I called these pieces dinosaur/ET head, rocker foot, one arm dude, two arm dude, upside down dude, and so on. My second puzzle, Lighthouse Point, was truly a challenge.

One unexpected discovery was the pleasing tactile sensation when disassembling them!

by Anne Doyle

GOOD DAY, BAD DAY

On a good day, I cull old pictures, reliving memories of a lifetime. I reach out to friends I haven't talked with for ages and bake, filling my house with aromas from the treats for neighbors.

On a bad day I wonder, "Will I ever travel again? When will I see my family?" I worry for friends' health and wonder if we can stay in touch going forward. I eat globs of raw cookie dough before my conscience can catch up to my hand, or troll pantry and refrigerator for comfort and answers.

On a good day, I discover new channels and inspiring programs. I laugh and feel hope. Morning exercise makes me vital, young and strong.

On a bad day, I sit, numbing my mind. I am inadequate and lazy. I find excuses to knock off. I am a slug.

On a good day Facebook is my window to the world, to friends, to our human condition and the heights and humor people are creating to conquer adversity. I sleep well.

On a bad day, I yell at the television, railing at distortions and politically motivated actions. I toss all nigh, fighting monkey-brain, trying to ignore the aches. by Sonya Hammond

DIANA MAKES A READING LIST

I made a list of books to keep things in perspective during Covid:

1. Diary of Ann Frank
2. The Martian
3. The Gentleman from Moscow

And am planning to reread War and Peace. If I don’t have time now, when will I? Diana Manley

ANNE MAKES A WALKING PATH

I had to find a way to get some cardio exercise. So, I took my rake and pruning shears to clear a path through our woods so I could do some combination walking & hiking. Now, if I find treasures on my woods-walks, like Pink Lake Slipper flowers, or hatched hummingbird eggshells, I share photos with Facebook friends. Anne Doyle
I have projects: writing a novel; building a Little Free Library for the neighborhood; planting a garden in the same soil that my father began cultivating almost 70 years ago. The tomato plants appreciated the rain last night.

We contemplate how and when to re-engage, face-to-face, with dear friends now only available to us by phone, text and video conference. Elizabeth and I take a drive once a week, usually to the nearby mountains, and villages such as Flat Rock Saluda and Lake Lure. We target a locally-owned café that offers take-out meals. We seek out a lakeside vista to share our lunch. We learn a little about what it might be like to be stranded on an island with one other person. So far, so good. …

The toughest thing is shared anxiety about jobs and income for our children and their peers.

The big weekly outing is to Ingles for groceries. It reminds me that the people standing between us and chaos are the grocery store manager and those who stock the shelves and ring up our purchases. I wear my mask out of respect for them.

by Jim Hammond

A NEIGHBOR LEFT BIRTHDAY CAKE OUTSIDE HER DOOR

Creativity and kindness. While wondering what I should be learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, these two words continually resurface. I think there is a message there!

I recently saw a female superhero, complete with blue bodysuit and red cape, reading a children’s superhero book aloud outside M Judson Books. Someone was recording her on video. A future online children’s story time? Minutes later, I met a young man – early 20s as a wild guess – carrying a sign to advertise his dog training business. Jobless, he decided to turn to something he loves and does well into a job – and he already has some clients.

A young couple in our condo building – parents of a seven-month-old daughter – posted a sign in our elevator, offering to do shopping or errands for anyone who cannot or does not want to go out. On my April birthday, a friend and neighbor left a delicious, beautifully-wrapped, homemade cake outside my door.

Examples like these abound. In the midst of difficult days, I find it uplifting and reassuring to know that people are tapping into their best selves, creating new and different ways to get things done and reaching out to others. by Marie Eldridge
Linda has spent much of her time in the yard planting, weeding, seeding, pruning, and watering. I have taken more photos than ever before and of what turn out to be amazing things like pepper grinders and steamer baskets.

Linda is constant contact with her Master Gardner friends and I email daily with many OLLI photographers (see side story).

These activities keep us sane, engaged and busy. We can’t wait to get back into the world and wish the group activities like OLLI classes, symphony concerts, theater and plays could be a certain part of our near future.

In the meantime we will wear our masks to the grocery store, avoid human contact, and continue exploring new books! by Greg Peters

A group of OLLI photographers has been participating in an Alphabet Challenge every day for the last 25 days. Each day we take a picture that represents a letter of the alphabet (e.g. apple for ‘A’). We share results with everyone to stay in contact while respecting social distancing. This has kept us busy with cameras and computers and talking via email with one another. Tomorrow we hit the letter “Z.”

LET THE CAT OUT; LET THE CAT IN

Today is May 4 I think. That’s what my computer says. I wouldn’t know for sure since I tossed my Planning Calendar for 2020 and replaced it with a daily “To Do” list. Ever since the stay-at-home order was issued, all meetings, OLLI classes, doctors’ appointments, trips, church activities and social engagements have been cancelled.

For almost two months, my days have been filled with simple tasks: **let the cat out;** make hummingbird juice; blow the driveway; unload the dishwasher; **let the cat in;** check on my elderly neighbors; plug in the crock pot; write cousin Jane; **let the cat out;** check emails; finish reading **Alone But Not Lonely;** take a walk; **let the cat in;** install new toilet seats; work on puzzle; call about cutting down dead pine tree in yard; **let the cat out;** turn off crock pot; check out Judy Woodruff’s wardrobe on PBS News Hour.

Who said your calendar had to look like the Queen of England’s? I kinda like doing less and enjoying life more…..

*Now, where is that miserable cat?* by Linda Fredsell

**SHOULD THESE PEOPLE BE ALLOWED TO OWN MASKS?**

**RIDING:** Lance reached up to adjust his mask strap and snagged the strap around the wire of his hearing aid. The hearing aid popped from his ear and ricocheted off the side of his head to the slender crack between the car seat and center console where only the tiniest nimble fingers could extract it. Eventually retrieved.

**WALKING:** Along the way to CVS, Sue prepared to put her mask on. She reached up to adjust the ear loops when one caught her glasses, plucked them from her nose, and sent them airborne to land eight feet away. Retrieved, Hallelujah, with no cracks.

The Editor