

AFTER HEALTH CRISES, THEY DIDN'T WANT TO WAIT

Stafford couple finally ties the knot

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When cancer interrupted the wedding plans of Sylvia Williams and James Hailstork Jr., both agreed he'd get through the treatments, then they'd get married.

Just as he finished radiation for prostate cancer, COVID-19 came along, and everybody went into shutdown. The older couple—he's 63 and she's 69—postponed their plans again.

Then, in late May, both Stafford County residents, who were living in their separate homes but spending a lot of time together, started feeling flu-like aches along with sweats and chills. Neither had a fever, but both lost their sense of taste and smell to the point they had no appetite whatsoever.

Both tested positive for the novel coronavirus—and tabled their wedding plans once more.

When each got retested last month and were virus-free, they decided they'd better tie the knot

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—SYLVIA WILLIAMS

before something else happened.

“God has spared us through all of this, and we decided it was the right time to get married,” she said. “We want to spend what

days we have left being happy.”

Williams, who plans to change her last name to his, initially had hoped to have a few friends and relatives at a ceremony. But because of COVID concerns, the wedding ended up taking place outside in her driveway. Marriage Commissioner Tracey Bilodeau officiated at the June 27 event, and the happy couple had two people at their side.

The best man was his nephew, Gregory Greenhow, and the matron of honor was her niece,

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MARRIED

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Charlene Greenhow. The two also happen to be married, and they represent one of the many connections between the newlyweds.

Both Williams and Hailstork grew up in Stafford County and have known each other all their lives. She is the youngest of 20 children of the late Mary Johnson, who was 103 when she died in 2006.

Williams and Hailstork were married before; she for 27 years and he for 23 years. The couples lived on the same road in southern Stafford and regularly waved to each other as they left for work, with many of them headed north for jobs.

His wife died in January 2014, about six months after her husband passed away. Hailstork didn't have any children, but Williams has a son, two grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

The two started dating in April 2018, and he proposed on Christmas Day 2019. They planned to be engaged for a while, but then things started happening that made them wonder if they should wait.

He had been diagnosed with prostate cancer in August 2019, but before doctors could treat that, they discovered he also had kidney cancer. He had his left kidney removed in September 2019, was off work for a week, then went right back to his job operating heavy equipment and working on road construction in Northern Virginia.

In March of this year, he underwent five weeks

of radiation for prostate problems. He'd finish work, go get treated and be back at work the next day.

When the couple contracted COVID in May, she feared his immune system might be compromised because of his previous problems. She believes the virus took more of a toll on him than cancer did.

"I was so worried about him because of his immune system, but it looked like he bounced back better than I did," she said.

She also was worried because of their ages and the higher death rate from COVID-19 among African Africans. Williams has high blood pressure and arthritis and is pre-diabetic.

But everything turned out well for the quiet Hailstork and the talkative Williams, who never thought she'd ever marry again, especially at this point in her life. Her niece, who put together a bouquet of flowers matching her dress and provided cake and champagne for a mini reception, jokingly calls her a cougar because she's older than her husband.

Williams says she's still a little shocked by the way everything came together, but glad that the couple have said their vows before God and can go forward as man and wife.

"You never know what life has in store for you," she said.

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Pandemic pregnancy brings anxiety and joy

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

“Pregnant During a Pandemic” sounds like a TV movie, but it was a real-life experience for Sarah Bullis, a first-time mom who faced the added anxiety of working in a hospital—and potentially being exposed to COVID-19—while her baby developed.

Bullis and her husband, Justin, a professional firefighter, found out in February they were expecting. A month later, the pandemic had crisscrossed the globe, and the front-line workers

had to consider the safety of their unborn child, as well as themselves, as they went about their daily duties.

She’s a radiologic technologist and supervisor in the Interventional Radiology and Cath Lab at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center. She routinely assists doctors and nurses who diagnose and treat various problems, such as clogged arteries.

As COVID-19 raged, some procedures were moved to patient rooms, when possible, to limit potential spread of the virus, Sarah Bullis

said. When fellow members of her team knew they were dealing with a virus patient, they insisted she not be involved.

But in other situations—when someone was having a heart attack and needed an emergency procedure—there wasn’t time for a COVID-19 test, and Sarah Bullis was in the thick of things. Over the course of her pregnancy, she learned to balance her responsibility as a care provider with that of becoming a mother.

“Being a health care worker, your natural instinct is,

‘This is my job, this is what I’m here to do,’ ” she said. “But your mother instinct kicks in as well because you realize there is another human being I’m growing, and I have to take that into account as well.”

The Bullises welcomed their son, Jackson, into the world on Oct. 23 and filled their Spotsylvania County home with little boy toys and baby animal prints. As the new mom reflected on spending her pregnancy working in a hospital, she was grateful for the support

PREGNANT

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of family—both biological and those bonded by the care they provide others.

“I absolutely enjoyed the pregnancy,” she said. “I would say the joy probably outweighed the anxiety.”

‘LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER’

Even so, the pregnancy brought a range of emotions.

Because Sarah Bullis, 29, has always been the kind of person who steps in to help, it was hard when others insisted she let them take care of patients to limit her exposure. While she was never made to feel guilty for hanging back, she “absolutely felt a lot of guilt.”

Team members saw it another way—that there were plenty of duties she could take on without being in contact with virus patients, said her boss, Shane Bittinger.

“We are a very tight team. We spend a lot of time together and we look out for each other like

family,” said Bittinger, director of cardiovascular services at Spotsylvania Regional. “If that was my wife or sister, we would want to make sure we did everything we could to make sure she was safe.”

It’s a camaraderie shared among health care workers, first responders and anyone who relies on members of a team during emergency situations. Justin Bullis recognized that his wife still had a job to do—just as he does answering fire calls in Northern Virginia—but he was glad she was being protected as much as possible.

“It made me feel a lot better, actually,” he said. “Knowing that the people she works with had her back was definitely big.”

There also was the fear of the unknown, something that first-time parents-to-be face even when there’s not a worldwide pandemic.

Sarah Bullis checked with hospital officials and read guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but COVID-19 was so new in the early stages of her pregnancy,

little was known about potential impacts to mothers and babies.

Even now, the CDC information boils down to: “Based on what we know at this time, pregnant people are at an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 compared to non-pregnant people.”

At a recent virtual town hall hosted by Mary Washington Healthcare, officials were describing the way COVID-19 has impacted all ages in the community, not just the elderly and those with underlying conditions. Pregnant women in their 20s and 30s have been among those who have been “very sick,” said Dr. Christopher Newman, chief medical officer with MWHC. “That’s another serious risk factor.”

TAKING PRECAUTIONS

Sarah Bullis relied on her training to keep herself safe. Health care workers stress that they’ve dealt with contagious diseases long before COVID-19 became a household word, and they’re schooled in the importance of protecting themselves

against exposure.

“Think of it this way,” said Eileen Dohmann, chief nursing officer at Mary Washington Healthcare. “Every patient [potentially] has something you don’t want to catch.”

At Spotsylvania Regional, Sarah Bullis showered and changed clothes before she came home just as she ramped up her hand-washing regimen. She joked that her mother gave her enough hand sanitizer to last a decade.

“It felt like I washed my hands hundreds of times a day,” she said. “It felt like they were raw at times because I was scrubbing them so hard.”

The Bullises limited their contact with other people, outside the workplace, and he was able to go to all her doctor appointments. When it came time to deliver the baby at Spotsylvania Regional, they weren’t terribly bothered by the COVID-19 rule that only one “support person” could be in the hospital with the mother.

“It was actually kind of nice,” she said. “You didn’t have a lot

of people trying to bombard you in a hospital as soon as you had a baby. It was nice for it to just be us for the first couple days.”

Jenn Gould, the women and children’s clinical coordinator at Spotsylvania Regional, said other parents have said the same.

“We have a large number of people who enjoy a ‘babymoon,’” she said. “It’s like a honeymoon with their significant other for a couple days before go home from the hospital.”

Sarah Bullis will remember that quiet time when she thinks back on her pandemic pregnancy and recalls the many scenarios that ran through her mind.

“You already have enough to take in when you’re pregnant, making sure that you’re eating well, getting exercise, not drinking too much caffeine, and now you have to worry about where you’re going and who you’re being exposed to,” she said. “Even though I had a lot of positive experiences, it was definitely a little overwhelming.”

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YOUNG PERFORMERS GET RED CARPET PREMIÈRE

Local students dance onto silver screen

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER

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Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, students at Umbiance Center for the Performing Arts did not get to present their traditional holiday performance this year.

Instead, they got to dress up in their fanciest clothes and walk down a red carpet for their very own movie première.

The church where the studio usually holds its traditional holiday dinner-theater performance was still closed due to the pandemic, director Khalia Harris said, but she still wanted to figure out a way to celebrate what her students have achieved during this unprecedented and difficult year.

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DANCE

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“I saw all our kiddos’ dreams being crushed all year,” Harris said.

Umbiance lost its studio space during the shutdown this spring and has not been able to find a suitable and affordable new location. Harris had to cancel the scholarships she has traditionally offered to low-income students to fulfill the studio’s mission of changing children’s lives through the performing arts.

She has seen her students suffer from isolation due to school closures and being separated from their friends, and she wondered how she was going to be able to feature her senior student, Abby Vance, who is in her final year with Umbiance.

Harris’ idea for a COVID-friendly holiday showcase was to film a movie, with Vance as the main character.

To make it extra-special, she decided to take a chance and ask Paragon Village theaters in Spotsylvania Towne Centre if she could screen the movie there—and they said yes.

The theater closed to the public Thursday afternoon so Harris could host a red carpet premiere of the movie, “Christmas Won’t Be the Same this Year.” It was shown on five screens in the theater so families could stay safely

distanced while watching.

The film pulls together themes from familiar holiday stories such as “A Christmas Carol” and “The Nutcracker.”

Vance plays a teenage girl who is frustrated and sad because of the pandemic and wants to cancel Christmas. She falls asleep and is visited in her dreams by Santa, aka “The Man with the Bag,” who takes her to revisit some of her favorite holiday memories from years past.

“And we find out that her mother died during the year,” Harris said. “She loves the memories, but she just doesn’t want another Christmas without her

mom. But then in her dream, she gets to sing with her mom one more time, and she wakes up full of hope.”

The movie features about 40 Umbiance students, from 2-year-olds dancing to “Jingle Bells” to high schoolers.

Harris said her students’ reaction to the news that they were going to film a movie that would be shown on a big screen was “exactly what I wanted for them.”

“It’s a huge night for our students and a great ending to a really challenging year,” she said.

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Santas spreading cheer while keeping distance

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
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In a normal year, Santa John Symonds is booked by mid-May for the rest of the year.

His usual holiday schedule of events begins in early November with the Central Virginia Chili Cookoff in Louisa. In mid-November, he strolls Caroline and William streets as part of the Fredericksburg Virginia Main Street Holiday Open House weekend, and in late November, he attends the downtown tree lighting in Hurkamp Park.

In early December, he's the closing attraction at the Fredericksburg Parade, and his season continues through the month with numerous breakfast-with-Santa events and more strolls through downtown streets.

But this year, his schedule stayed open through the summer and into September.

"It was scary for a long time," said Symonds, who has been a Santa for 35 years. "Usually by May 15, I'm booked for the season and don't have to worry about it. But this year, emails and texts were just not answered or they came back and said, 'No, we just don't know what it's going to look like.'"

Despite the uncertainty, local Santas like Symonds are still finding ways to spread holiday cheer in 2020.

Instead of sitting on his lap, children visiting Santa at Spotsylvania Towne Center sit on a seat at the base of a 6-by-4-foot, quarter-inch thick acrylic guard, which separates them from the man in red.

"There's a thinner piece of acrylic where they talk to Santa first," said Brian

Welch, owner of EDI Imaging, the company that manages the Santa experience at the mall. "Then they come around the front and we can photograph them from an angle so the lighting doesn't reflect off the acrylic and you wouldn't know it's there."

SANTAS

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“It’s socially distanced to keep Santa safe and everybody else safe,” he continued.

Welch said he had to find some new Santas this year, as some did not want to take the risk of interacting with hundreds of children during a pandemic.

He said he began planning for how to make the Santa experience COVID-friendly back in August.

“I bought one of these guards [over the summer] and photographed it just to make sure it was going to work,” he said.

Welch said traffic at the mall has been pretty steady, but can be hard to predict.

“This year, it’s so hard to judge,” he said. “[In the past] during the week it’s pretty slow, but all of a sudden, we’ll have a busy Tuesday. And then days when we’d typically be busy, we won’t be.”

Children and families are asked to wear a mask to their visit, but they can take it off for the photograph and when they talk to Santa, because they are appropriately distanced.

“People don’t need to be afraid,” Welch said. “We’re trying to keep alive one of the traditions of the season.”

Jim Maloney has been a Santa—and a member of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas—for 30 years.

He is the official Santa Claus for Marine Corps Base Quantico, and also volunteers his time as Santa to the Lisa Pitts Eley Cancer Foundation, which sets up a fundraising bake sale and visit-with-Santa opportunity in front of Irish Eyes on Caroline Street

during the month of December.

In previous years, children passing by could sit on Maloney’s lap, tell him their Christmas wishes and pose for a photo.

This year, Maloney sits in the back of a truck parked in front of the shop and children visit from the street below.

Maloney said that “on the advice of his physician,” he had to cancel his presence at the Marine Corps base, but he still wanted to participate in the Lisa Pitts Eley Santa event.

“It’s an outdoor venue and the kids are at a distance,” he said.

Maloney is handing out stockings filled with lollipops and small stuffed Santa figures to children who visit him at Irish Eyes.

Chuck Eley, who created the Lisa Pitts Eley foundation to help local families struggling with cancer in honor of his late wife, dresses up as Maloney’s elf. He said they gave away close to 1,000 stockings in the first five days they were set up downtown.

“I guess it’s one of the few places where kids can go see Santa in person,” Eley said.

Maloney said he is missing the human contact this year.

“When you have a little believer in your lap and you’re looking into his or her eyes and you say, you’ve been really good this year—you know, it lights a little pilot light in the heart,” he said.

“But it would be even worse if we didn’t do it,” he continued. “Because we miss the kids and the kids need to see that Santa’s still there and that everything’s going to be all right. That’s important.”

By the time September rolled around, events did start trickling in for Symonds, who retired from

his full-time job in January and was looking forward to concentrating solely on his Santa work this year.

He filmed his participation in the downtown Fredericksburg tree lighting early in November and the event was broadcast virtually Nov. 21.

He was also part of the city’s stationary parade earlier this month.

“A lot of my breakfast-with-Santa events have turned into Zoom or Google Meet events,” Symonds said.

He said he’ll “always miss the in-person events” but the virtual events have been fun and rewarding.

“I did a Zoom session with 30 kids from a church on Sunday night,” he said recently. “It was great because I had all the information ahead of time from their parents. So I was able to call each kid’s name and up they’d pop. One girl kept saying, ‘I just can’t imagine how you got all my information. You know my name and everything!’”

Symonds said he did another virtual event for a family that was spread out across four different states.

“I couldn’t do that normally,” he said.

Still, Symonds is looking forward to a return to “normalcy.”

“I do miss the one-on-one with the kids and being able to connect with them,” he said. “And just getting out and seeing people. That’s what I miss from downtown—chatting with the storekeepers, giving goodwill.”

“If we can get past this unknown, I think we’ll be OK,” he added.

YMCA offering free child care for frontline workers

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Brittanie Newbold, a patient services manager at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center, has one child of her own and also cares for her brother's four children.

Before the coronavirus outbreak, the children, who range in age from 5 to 12, attended elementary school in Spotsylvania and had an in-home nanny to provide before- and after-school care. But when schools closed and social distancing measures were put in place, the nanny no longer felt comfortable coming to Newbold's house, leaving her in a difficult

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position.

“My mother tries to provide care for [the kids] when she can, but she’s also in a difficult position, so ...,” Newbold said.

Then she learned last week about a program child care program offered by the Rappahannock Area YMCA for health care workers and first responders in the region. She signed the five children up and said it’s been “a huge relief.”

“As an essential employee, [the Y is] allowing me to serve others without worrying about my children,” she said. “Their staff is providing a fun and safe environment for our kids.

“During this time, the support of our community allows me to continue to provide excellent care for others in need. I’m extremely grateful for the YMCA and our community coming together to help support us.”

The YMCA went a step further last week with a fundraising drive with a goal of raising \$100,000 to cover the cost of the program so it could be free to the parents. Before, they were paying \$25 per day per child.

Michael Turner, a local businessman and soon-to-be member of the Rappahannock Area YMCA’s board of directors, sent an email last week asking the local business community to join him in donating to the Operation First Responder program.

In just three hours after the email was sent last Wednesday, the business community donated \$33,000 to the campaign. By last Thursday evening, the goal of \$100,000 had been reached.

Turner said he and YMCA Chief Executive Officer Barney Reiley agreed that with those workers putting their lives at risk every day for the community, “the least we could do is provide

As an essential employee, [the Y is] allowing me to serve others without worrying about my children. Their staff is providing a fun and safe environment.

—BRITTANIE NEWBOLD, PATIENT SERVICES MANAGER AT SPOTSYLVANIA REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER

child care at no cost.”

“The friends of the Y and local business leaders overwhelmingly contributed within 48 hours not only the necessary funding for the Y to provide free childcare to these critically important workers in our community, but also to refund any money collected to date,” Turner said.

The Y began offering emergency child care at its Stafford and Spotsylvania branches before Easter and expanded to Hugh Mercer, Parkside and Stafford elementary schools this week.

Reiley said each location can care for up to 100 children in grades K–5.

“The Y is trying to step up and meet its obligations to the community in times of duress,” Reiley said. “These people are on the front lines every day of the year and we are honored to be able to help them.”

With all Virginia schools closed for the rest

of the academic year, paying for child care has been a new challenge for many families.

A quarter of the 1,900 children who attend the Y’s regular child care programs receive financial assistance, Reiley said.

The emergency child-care program is also more expensive for the Y to operate than the regular program because of the social distancing measures necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

For instance, children cannot share art supplies because of the risk of transmitting the virus, so staff need to purchase enough for each child to have his or her own. There is also the cost of cleaning and disinfecting supplies and other necessary items.

Reiley said it is logistically challenging to maintain social distancing measures in a daycare setting.

“We have Xs taped all

over the building so the children are remaining 6 to 10 feet apart,” he said. “It’s not easy.”

Reiley said the program is currently offering enrichment activities and may begin to gather lesson plans for different grade levels from the local school divisions.

He hopes it can expand into even more sites in the coming weeks.

“Once we get this off the ground, we’ll expand,” he said. “We’ve been fielding quite a few calls.”

Philip King, president of the Y’s board of directors, said he is proud that the organization is able to offer this service.

“The YMCA is so appreciative of all those who have contributed to our emergency child care fund and more importantly, to Mike Turner and Hunter Morin for leading the charge with this initiative,” he said. “The Y family is thrilled to be able to offer this service to the much deserved first responders and their families. This community continues to amaze me with its outpouring of support to those in need.”

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OFFERING MORE THAN MEDICINE

Pharmacy focuses on filling pantries

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Early on in the pandemic, Dan's Wellness Pharmacy, an independent pharmacy in Stafford County, provided daily hot meals to the community.

Owner Dan Singh said he would watch people who live in the apartments behind the pharmacy on Garrisonville Road walk over and pick up four or five bags to take home to their families for dinner.

"It was obvious people were having a tough time," he said.

Ten months later, and with the approval of a COVID-19 vaccine, Singh hopes the pandemic is drawing to a close, but he knows people are still struggling.

So at the beginning of Decem-

HOLIDAY HELP

The Free Lance-Star will continue to highlight individuals and groups who are lending a helping hand this holiday season. Send information about you or your organization's efforts to help others this season to localnews@freelancestar.com. Include a brief description, the project deadline and a contact person's name and phone number.

ber, he began leaving out bags of grocery staples for people to take home.

Each bag contains about \$10 worth of food—cereal, oatmeal, pasta and sauce and canned vegetables and fruits—to provide

breakfast and dinner to a family for several days.

"My daughter [Serena, 17] was the one who kind of came up with the idea of doing something like this," Singh said. "We all talked about it and we wanted to do something that was easy and something that people could easily grab and not feel bad about doing it."

The filled bags are set up outside the pharmacy so people can drive by and pick one up without having to come inside.

"There has been a great response," Singh said. "We have given out over 100 bags of food since we started [Dec. 7]."

The Singh family—Dan, wife Parminder and daughters Serena

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DAN'S PHARMACY

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and Priya, 18—shop for groceries to fill the bags about every three days.

Pharmacy staff and customers have also helped out with donations of money and food, Singh said.

The pharmacy's storage room has turned into a temporary food pantry. Singh and his staff keep an eye on the bags outside and replenish them as supplies get low.

On a busy day, they give out 20 bags of groceries, or about \$200 worth of food.

"As we get closer to the holidays, I expect we'll give out more than that," Singh said.

He said he plans to continue offering the groceries through Christmas and possibly through the end of the month.

Singh opened his pharmacy in 2007 after working at local chain pharmacies.

In 2019, the pharmacy was accredited by the Pharmacy Compounding Accreditation Board for its services in providing

customized prescription medications. It first achieved this accreditation in 2013, when it was one of only three accredited compounding pharmacies in Virginia.

Singh said over-the-counter sales at his phar-

macy have dropped during the pandemic.

"There are less infections going around, less coughs and colds and bronchitis," he said. "So we're seeing less of those antibiotic-type prescriptions."

But his overall pre-

scription business has remained steady and he feels grateful to still be in a position to give back.

"We're helping the community," he said.

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Tech, innovators meet to help hear heartbeats

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Who knew there was such a thing as disposable stethoscopes—and that they'd be in such demand during a pandemic?

As it turns out, medical workers have been using them to monitor patients with highly infectious diseases—and to reduce the spread of those illnesses—long before COVID-19 became a household word. But as cases of novel coronavirus ramped up, Mary Washington Healthcare officials realized there was a worldwide demand for disposable stethoscopes.

"It's not even that we're having trouble finding them, we cannot get them," said Abigail Croy, a nurse and clinical

performance improvement specialist at MWHC. "Our supply chain routes have dried up, and we cannot locate them."

Officials turned to their in-house In-

novation Council, formed in the midst of the pandemic to deal with such matters. Chairman Cody Blankenship, who came to the health care system three years ago from manufacturing, brainstormed with community partners. He suggested they make their own, producing parts from 3D printers.

When Chief Nursing Officer Eileen Dohmann heard that, she scratched her head more than she jumped for joy.

"How can you do that?" she wondered.

Several weeks and prototypes later, she got an answer. Nurses were able to use the 3D-printed stethoscopes to clearly and comfortably hear the sound of their patients' lungs and heartbeats.

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STETHOSCOPES

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“It was a great way for us to partner with people in our community and our organization who have the resources and the talent to create such things,” Dohmann later said. “We’re pretty excited.”

What’s even more exciting—beyond the choice of neon colors for the tubing that goes around a nurse’s neck or the “drum” piece that sits atop a patient’s chest—is that the 3D-printed stethoscopes are made better than any disposable stethoscopes the health care system ever bought. About 300 have been delivered to MWHC hospitals, to date.

“The quality is so good, and they’re so reliable,” Blankenship said the hospital plans to sanitize the equipment as it would any other reusable device. “We’re gonna squeeze every bit of value that we can out every critical asset that we can get our hands on.”

‘BLOWN ME AWAY’

Just like Rome, a highly functional 3D-printed stethoscope wasn’t built in a day. The council worked from online designs for equipment that primarily was made for third-world countries with limited resources, Blankenship said.

For the first prototype, all pieces of the stethoscope were printed, and the result was a stiff, unbending device that was hard to put on and even harder to hear with, Blankenship said.

The second version featured other plastic sources for the diaphragm, the circular piece contained within the drum to help pick up sound. Nurses said they could hear better, but the stethoscope was still uncomfortable to wear and not nearly flexible enough to use.

More tweaks were made before the third prototype, which incorporated a combination of printed parts, diaphragms cut from plastic page protectors and strips of vinyl or silicone tubing, the same kind used in restaurant soda dispensers. Nurses much preferred the silicone, and designers later added more comfortable ear pieces similar to what’s used on headsets.

Croy figuratively put on her nursing cap and tried the latest-and-greatest version. She was prepared for the muffled sound from disposable stethoscopes of old, which made it seem like she was hearing the thump-thump through a tunnel.

The sound on the 3D-printed stethoscope came through loud and clear.

“It really is amazing how well they work,” she said. “When I think of printers, I think of paper and ink, I don’t think about printing an item. It’s blown me away that we are printing medical equipment.”

‘MOST INCREDIBLE’

Greg Smith, a Stafford County engineer who creates items on the 3D printer in his basement, says the same.

“I think that the stethoscopes may be the most incredible thing I have been able to manufacture,” he said. “3D printing technologies are advancing rapidly, and brilliant people around the world are finding new ways to use these technologies for all kinds of scientific and industrial uses.”

Harry Schoeller, who heads the engineering program at Germanna University, operates four printers at work and one at home. He regularly uses them in robotics classes at Germanna and during workshops with local

middle-schoolers who’ve used the printers to make their own fidget spinners.

After successfully printing stethoscopes for Mary Washington, Schoeller is thinking he’d like his students to make them as well.

“I would call it the most useful thing I’ve printed on a 3D printer,” he said.

Other partners have ranged from a father-and-son team to Carlos Castro, who heads a team from Prince William County schools. Officials there approved the use of 10 school printers to make whatever personal protective gear medical officials and first-responders need.

Craig Graziano, who manages the Fredericksburg branch of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library, works with fellow employee Simon Watts to keep 12 library printers running to crank out parts. They’ve used 3D

printers in the library for seven years and have trained customers how to use them for three years as part of an initiative.

The library workers first printed face shields, masks and ear guards with 3D printers then ventured into disposable stethoscopes—and have produced more than 1,110 parts. As the design has changed, Blankenship has sent his printing partners the accompanying materials for assembly so each can enjoy seeing the finished product.

Schoeller, whose wife just graduated from nursing school, said he’s been glad to help any way he can during the medical crisis. So have library workers from various branches who’ve been willing to assemble masks, then stethoscopes, Graziano said.

Blankenship isn’t surprised by the volunteer

efforts. He’s seen “a very high degree of civic mindedness” since his family moved to the area in 2017.

“I don’t know that all communities would get

this kind of support,” he said. “On one hand, I’m not surprised, but to see the stethoscopes coming in and to see the chal-

lenges—because none of

PRINTING A 3D STETHOSCOPE

COST TO PRINT:

About \$4 apiece for materials, about the same as the purchase cost before demand increased prices.

HOW LONG TO PRINT?

About 3 hours per stethoscope, once settings are configured. Printed pieces include the ear tubes that are part of the headset, earpieces and drum that forms the chest piece.

PROBLEMS? Silicone tubing, which gives the stethoscope its flexibility, is becoming hard to find. Cody Blankenship, chairman of Mary Washington Healthcare’s Innovation Council, would like to procure a few thousand feet of it.

VOLUME: Almost 300 stethoscopes have been printed and delivered to MWHC. The health-care system had been using 80 of the throw-away kind per day, but some only lasted a few hours. Officials hope the 3D-printed type can be reused indefinitely.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Gowns, either disposable or reusable. Blankenship is looking for community partners interested in helping assemble disposable ones or sew and launder reusable ones. He’d also like to recruit more 3D printers for disposable stethoscopes.

MORE INFO: Contact Blankenship at Cody.blankenship@mwhc.com.

this was easy—that definitely took some dedicated folks who were willing to stay engaged, and that is unique. Not everyone can endure the development process.”

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TIPS FOR VISITING SHENANDOAH

Claire Comer, an interpretive specialist at Shenandoah National Park, said a few simple things can dramatically improve visits.

1. Come on a weekday, when it's not as crowded.
2. Do some research and make a plan before visiting. Go to the park's website at [nps.gov/shen](https://www.nps.gov/shen) to check for the latest advisories and see what's open.
3. Use a section on the home page labeled "Hiking," then click on "Recommended Day Hikes" to find a list of "Hikes to avoid Crowds" on busy days.
4. If possible, take a bag and carry out your own trash, to help the park on busy days, and bring some water to drink and put out your campfire, as cold temperatures have necessitated some water sources being turned off.
5. Arrive early to avoid the worst crowds at the entrances.
6. Remember that it's often 10 degrees or more colder at higher elevations than in the valleys below, so bring layers of clothing. Said Comer, "We're seeing a lot of first-time visitors to the park and some may not realize that. It's better to be safe than sorry. Hypothermia is a real thing."

Brilliant fall foliage draws big crowds

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL to find throngs of visitors crowding into Shenandoah National Park to see the striking fall foliage during the last two weeks of October.

But toss in folks looking to find a safe getaway in the midst of a pandemic and a pleasant weekend of leaf peeping can become a traffic nightmare.

While the park has been able to cope with the crowds, visitors trying to salve their pandemic-

wearied souls with the brilliant oranges, reds and yellows on the horizons have caused some unprecedented problems.

They've ranged from miles- and hours-long backups on weekends at some park entrances to vehicles spilling out

HERE & THERE
Rob Hedelt



of overfull parking areas and overlooks to sporadic troubles with trash collection and traffic control.

Though the park doesn't quiz visitors on why they come to Shenandoah, staffers say anecdotally that they believe a good number are turning to the park as a safe destination during the pandemic.

I visited the park last Thursday and talked about the busy

year there with Claire Comer, an interpretive specialist for Shenandoah, as well as a dozen visitors on the colorful fall day. All but two of those 12 families said the relative safety of an outdoor visit to the beautiful spot played a big part in making it their destination.

Clark and Debbie Haver were taking in the striking colors in the distance at the Bald Face Mountain Overlook when they spoke briefly about their week-long visit to the park.

“We live near Charlotte, one of the real hotspots for COVID in North Carolina, and we haven’t really been going out to places much,” said Clark Haver. “But we wanted to have a getaway and we were interested in seeing Shenandoah National Park.”

He said that being able to have a safe trip where their activities were all outside was the clincher for them. They found great joy in completing a Bible-study unit while seeing such natural splendor.

Emily and Greg Marcinski of Baltimore said their attempt to catch fall foliage at its peak was what brought them out and added that they also thought it would be a safe outing in the midst of rising coronavirus numbers.

Ditto for Katy Brittingham of Alexandria, who arrived with her Lab and a desire to see dazzling fall colors in a location as safe for an outing as there is these days. Beverly Sowers of Richmond said for her it was all about seeing brilliantly changing leaves, though she added that it didn’t hurt that she felt it safe doing it.

I caught up with Comer at the park’s headquarters, where she addressed the crowds Shenandoah has been seeing this fall.

“The week before last, there was a two-hour wait to get into the park through Front Royal, and at one point, Front Royal shut down the entrance for hours,” she said.

The longtime Shenandoah staffer, whose family lived on land there before it became a park, said she’d seen a video on a recent weekend that highlighted backups at another spot.

“There was talk last weekend about the traffic backed up at the Thornton Gap entrance,” said Comer. “I saw a video on Facebook that a local woman did where she

came off the drive and went east on [U.S.] 211. Backed up all the way down to Sperryville, traffic was at a standstill.”

Comer said park officials have been working on ways to prevent overcrowding problems (see Tips for Visiting Shenandoah). Two of the recommendations are pretty simple.

“First, if at all possible, come during the week when our visitation is much lower,” she said.

And if you do come on the weekend, Comer said visitors should think about the reality they’ll face right now.

“That way, if you sit in line for two hours to get into the park, you’re not surprised,” she said. “You had the opportunity ahead of time to make the decision that it was worth that wait to get onto Skyline Drive.”

Comer said that the most recent data shows the park, which encompasses nearly 200,000 acres stretching across eight counties, has hosted well over a million visitors this year, an increase of more than 30,000 over last year at this time.

“And that doesn’t take

into account the fact that we were closed for six weeks at the start of the pandemic, or that all the most recent numbers haven’t been added to the total,” she said, noting that visitors started coming in larger-than-normal numbers by the summer, with July visitation more than 232,000 for a 38 percent increase over last July.

“Two weekends ago, we had 14,000 cars coming into the park on the weekend,” Comer said. “On that same weekend in 2019, we had 7,000. And that’s just cars, not people, and very few people come to the park alone. It probably averages three times that number of people visiting.”

Neal Lewis, a visual information specialist for the park who works with Comer, spends a lot of time taking photos and videos of the park at all hours of the day and night.

“I go up the mountains before sunrise, and before COVID, I never would see another soul up there at 5 a.m.,” he said. “Now I see people all the time at that hour. By 9:30 or 10, even on the weekdays, the overlooks and trail

heads are packed with cars spilling out onto the drive. And on weekends it’s even busier.”

While staffers have been able to serve most of the visitors’ needs, there are strains that big crowds put on the systems at a time when COVID has also been requiring more sanitation of facilities.

“In a national park, you have to work a little harder on some things, like trash. In a city park, there will be trash cans every 50 feet. We don’t do that, because it impedes the view and because of the challenge of picking up trash along 105 miles,” she said.

“It hasn’t always happened, but what we’ve seen at times is an awful lot of trash where we wish it wasn’t,” she said, noting that visitors don’t always seek out the bear-proof trash cans that prevent problems with the four-pawed park residents. “We ask them to look a little longer if a trash can isn’t right next to where they’re camping or picnicking.”

She noted that people parking on the side of Skyline Drive when parking areas are full creates safety problems.

Comer said more visitors also means more folks are out hiking, especially on popular spots such as Old Rag Mountain. That raises the chance of someone taking a fall and needing to be rescued.

She noted that park crews spent two weekend evenings on the mountain recently helping injured hikers until helicopters could be called in to fly them out the next morning.

Comer closed by noting that something President Franklin D. Roosevelt said when he dedicated the park in 1936 may be especially apropos this year. In his dedication, FDR talked about the fact that people would come to Shenandoah to recreate, but also to “re-create” by communing with nature to combat the toll taken by modern life.

“He talked about how people would come to feel the wind on their faces and hear the sounds of a running brook and their souls would be better for it,” she said. “In all the years I’ve been here, that’s never been truer than right now.”

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BATTLEFIELDS, BIRTHPLACE ALSO SEEING VISITOR SURGE

BY ROB HEDELT

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

While Shenandoah National Park has had the biggest crowds, most local, state and national parks have seen visitation rise sharply during the pandemic.

That's true for the area's two national parks, the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park and George Washington Birthplace National Monument.

"I don't think there's any

question about it," said John Hennessy, chief historian at the

National Military Park. "We've been busier than normal during the pandemic, and that was especially true in the spring, when things were really locked down hard. We saw a lot of people coming out, a lot of people discovering the different parts of the park as a place of escape, refuge and solitude."

He noted that all of the park's trails have been busier as people try to find a safe and quiet place to get out of the house.

"Lee Drive and the trails off of

SEE LOCAL SITES, A5

LOCAL SITES

► FROM A1

it have been very busy,” he said, “and we think a lot of people have found the magical quietude of the Spotsylvania Battlefield.”

He noted it’s also true that Chatham Manor, a private residence for over 200 years that was used as a Union headquarters and field hospital during the Battle of Fredericksburg.

“Many folks have discovered the joys and sights of sitting on the terrace at Chatham during this time when we’ve seen a very steady stream of visitors,” he said, noting that he spoke to a woman there in the spring who’d lives a half mile from the spot in Stafford County but “had never been there before COVID.”

Hennessy said that while local use of the park is up, for much of the pandemic the battlefield park hasn’t been getting the number of visitors coming from long distance.

Because the park’s different units are spread through several localities, and because there are many trails to choose from, they haven’t become overcrowding like Shenandoah.

His advice to those who live in the area: Take advantage of

the fact that within the park “is a beautiful landscape with a compelling story, a very human story.”

At George Washington Birthplace National Monument, Superintendent Melissa Cobern said the park has seen a significant increase in visitation and where folks are going in the park when they visit.

“The beach and picnic area have been very crowded, particularly on weekends. It hasn’t been uncommon to have a line of cars waiting at the gate to be the first ones on the beach because the parking lot was filling by mid-morning,” she said.

Cobern noted that in summer the park had to intermittently close the beach road when no parking was available.

“As the weather has gotten cooler, visitation has slowed a bit, but we anticipate nice weather on weekends and holidays will continue to bring a lot of visitors to the park,” she said.

She noted that there have been many more people than usual engaged in recreational activities such as fishing, hiking and biking in the past few months.

“We’re also seeing a lot of first-time visitors and more visitors from a wider geographic area,” she said, noting that the

park staff is happy that people are using and enjoying the 660-acre park that sits along Popes Creek. “We’re also here to protect the resources that make this place special, though, and we’ve definitely seen an impact to some of those resources.”

She noted that there has been trampled vegetation and social trails in some areas that were formerly pristine, and added that visitors are leaving more trash on the beach and in the picnic area, even though there are trash cans right there.

“We just ask that folks visit responsibly. Put trash in garbage cans. Stay on trails. We also encourage visitors to follow CDC guidelines for protecting themselves and others against COVID.”

Cobern closed by saying, “We’ve heard so many visitors say how much this park means to them as a place they can be outside in nature and, even with all the other visitors, find some quiet spots where they can de-stress for a while. They’re so thankful we’re open, and I think that speaks to just how important our parks are to people—always, and particularly right now.”

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A PANDEMIC BRIGHT SPOT

The bicycle business is booming for area stores

BY ROB HEDELT
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Dan Murphy, who operates Olde Towne Bicycles stores in Fredericksburg and Woodbridge alongside his family, said the coronavirus has brought an unexpected boost to the bike business.

“It was like a door opened and something new started happening,” he said, noting that families who couldn’t go to work, school or gyms turned to cycling as a way to fill time and exercise.

“It spread like wildfire and we suddenly were doing a month’s worth of business in a week,” he said.

First, he said, big-box stores

started selling out of children’s and inexpensive bikes for adults. Soon enough, customers sought out “every place they could buy any kind of bicycle,” he said.

“Our stores’ inventory of bicycles selling for under \$800 quickly started to evaporate,” he said.

Other area bike stores have experienced similar heightened demand, and report that though supply chains are slowly starting to catch up, stocks of lower-end bicycles are well below where they would normally be this time of year.

Andre Randolph, manager

SEE BICYCLES, A9

► FROM A6

of the Bike Works store in downtown Fredericksburg, said things have been busier than usual.

“The lower-end segment is pretty much gone right now from most bicycle and department stores,” he said.

He thinks the demand is coming from people whose lives have been changed by the pandemic.

“Lots of customers who came in were looking for inexpensive bicycles to get exercise and ride with their kids. It has made it very difficult to get those lower-end bikes,” Randolph said.

Oliver Harris, manager at Trek Bicycle Fredericksburg in Central Park, said the store’s experience has been similar.

“We’re almost out of all hybrids, and have sold pretty much every bike we have under \$1,000,” he said. “It started in April and has carried through into May.”

Harris said customers are coming from every walk of life.

“I think it’s just about everybody: whole families who want to ride together, adults who are looking for an alternative to going to the gym,” he said, “as well as returning customers who were looking for new bikes or had service work because getting out and riding was suddenly more important to them.”

A recent Washington Post story noted that the \$54 billion global bicycle market, which grew 6.9 percent last year, should see some road-bike categories shoot up 35 percent this year, according to WinterGreen Research.

The research firm reported that before the pandemic, the industry was mostly stagnant, with battery-powered e-bikes and gravel bikes showing growth, but sales of traditional road bikes falling.

The higher-than-normal sales of bicycles is happening at a time when consumers have heightened concerns about going into stores because of the virus.

To deal with that, local shops say they are following special protocols to keep customers and staff safe, ranging from limiting the number of customers in stores to contactless payment to curbside pickup and delivery of new bicycles and bicycles brought in for repairs. Masks and increased sanitation are also part of the new operating procedures.

And despite concerns that have kept customers away from many retailers, bicycle shops—considered essential services and allowed to stay open during the state stay-at-home order—have seen business boom.

Murphy’s Fredericksburg store closed for a week early on in an effort to keep everyone safe, but he said it became difficult to stay that way.

“Even though we were closed, we were coming in to take deliveries and make good on orders we had up to that point,” he said. “People were banging on the door or calling people they knew on staff to see if there was any way they could buy a bike or get one repaired so they could get out and ride.”

Though none of the shops contacted gave exact numbers on numbers of bikes sold, Murphy said the two Olde Towne locations have sold hundreds of bicycles since the pandemic hit and the company has ordered more than 300 additional bikes.

“Both stores are easily doing double business,” he said. “There really is no

more inventory right now. Things subsided a little after the first push, but we ended up doing a normal May’s business in the first 10 days of that month.

“Demand hasn’t really dropped off,” he added. “It’s just driven now by inventory. I think eventually the suppliers will catch up.”

Randolph at Bike Works said it didn’t help that manufacturers in Asia—like Giant Manufacturing in Taiwan, which makes the bicycles that are their predominant line—were shut down for three months because of the pandemic.

“What we’re seeing on our end is difficulties getting lower-end bicycles

I’m happy to see the number of people on the trails and bike paths growing.

—OLIVER HARRIS
OF TREK BICYCLE
FREDERICKSBURG

and even repair parts for the more inexpensive bikes,” he said. “But the supply is starting to come back a bit. Giant is doing a pretty good job trickling bicycles into the supply stream as they get them.

“We are definitely ahead of where we’d normally be for this time of year,” he added, “but I wouldn’t say drastically ahead.”

Harris at the Trek bike store said he and his staff have put in some long hours trying to keep up with surging demand.

“I get the impression that many of the customers during this time have been new to cycling, dipping their toes into the water for the first time,” he said. “It’s a good thing for our business, but also a great thing for the folks who are buying bicycles. I’m happy to see the number of people on the trails and bike paths growing. Riding keeps people healthy and promotes mental health and it’s a lot of fun.”

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Sewers and quilters rally to make masks

BY ROB HEDELT

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Before the U.S. government issued guidance directing Americans to cover their faces in public, many of those who quilt and sew were already making masks for front-line medical and emergency workers, and others who wanted them.

Trish Cooper of Louisa County, who's a quilter and has her own business called HFM Creations by Trish, said she got started making masks first for her daughter, who is a health care worker in a nursing home.

Then, she made a few for her other daughter and a friend who felt safer having one.

"Then I started thinking: I've been a quilter for 19 years and I've got all this fabric and I had the elastic you need and they're not

hard to make," said Cooper. "Why not make them free for people who need them?"

And that's just what she's been doing on her family's small farm—working all day in assembly-line fashion to roll out masks for people who get in touch with her on Facebook at her HFM Creations by Trish page.

"It hit me that there are a lot of people making masks for hospitals and other groups that need them, but what about individuals who might be immunocompromised and need one to go out?" she said. "So I got started. I'm sending one today to a woman in Marion, Va., who's 65 and on oxygen. She's afraid to go out without one."

Cooper said she's making them available free of charge, though if someone

SEE MASKS, A5

wants to donate to get their mask or others made, she'll accept that so she can make more. Ditto for postage, as she's sending them out as soon as they are finished.

"I've sent out 82 so far, and have orders for 77 more," said Cooper. "Most are individuals who just want to feel safer going out, but I did take an order for a friend for the PICU at University of Virginia Hospital. And another 50 for a business in Virginia Beach."

Cooper said that while she's got plenty of fabric, the tricky thing to find are pieces of elastic. But she's used some creative thinking for that, as well.

"I've taken wider elastic and cut it down, then zig zag stitching across it to shore it up," she said. "And my brother sent me something about how some folks are using weaving loom loops, so I've placed an order for some of those."

She added, "I'm making these all day and then taking a break in the evening. I try to get them out to these folks who are scared and getting desperate as the CDC considers whether people need to wear them in public."

Cooper is certainly not alone. Word spread last week of a burgeoning local effort by quilting and sewing guild members making masks for health care workers, first responders and others at risk for infection.

Lisa Henry, director of marketing and communications for Mary Washington Healthcare,

provided an update on the local effort Friday.

She said so far, local craftspeople have provided more than 1,600 masks for Mary Washington Healthcare's "5,000 Mask Challenge."

"And we're asking for what's basically another 5,000, to get us to the point where we can give all of the 6,500 people in our organization a mask," said Henry.

"Today, we delivered some 1,600 to our associates, and we'd like to get enough to give all those who work for us or are contracted workers in the building to each have a mask," she added.

The hospital is pushing to get more surgical-style masks, not just covers for N95 masks, on its website: marywashingtonhealthcare.com/COVID-19/COVID-19-Donations.aspx. Information there details how

mask covers can be made.

Henry was there when 79 masks were delivered to the hospital this morning, and the hospital's chaplain blessed them with a service.

"These efforts are all so generous," said Henry.

Janette Holland of Stafford County is a local quilter and fabric artist who has been answering the call for masks.

The software engineer who works for Basic Commerce and Industries in Dahlgren initially got involved when the call went out two weeks ago for masks at area hospitals.

But as she made masks by the dozens and then hundreds, she began hearing directly from health care workers, fire departments and nursing homes.

"At this point, I've made about 600," said the seamstress, who's about to start early next week

on an order for 150 masks for a nursing home in Woodbridge.

Because costs started ramping up quickly, Holland raised money for the safety masks by making and selling couture African masks.

The software engineer got so busy that she eventually took some time off from work to make masks.

"And still, I'm staying up until 3 a.m. each night getting these made," she said, noting that family members, including her children, husband and a niece, have been put to work cutting fabric.

"I just feel for these people who are scared and I want to help," she said.

"For these nurses and other folks getting one or two masks, I make them and leave them on the porch for people to come pick up," she said. "That keeps

them safe and my family safe by not interacting."

A local group, Measured Mile Mask Makers, also popped up in late March and grew through its Facebook presence.

Laurie Paige started the group, which has at least 25 members, said Laura Pryce, who joined the effort after finding them on Facebook. The group's Facebook page has more than 100 members.

"I'm just thrilled to use my sewing skills," said Pryce, 73, as she ran errands Saturday.

She wasn't sure how many masks they've made and donated so far, but the group has supplied local hospitals, area nurses and a postal worker. Pryce said one young man is working on plastic face shields for the group to donate.

Ozzy Ramos of Stafford got an idea for a different sort of mask when he went to purchase a new filter for his furnace the other day. When he got home, he looked at his purchase and began to wonder if he could make a protective mask from the filter and infuse it with other materials he had at home.

"To my surprise, I was able to create a prototype as a way for any person to create for themselves during this shortage," he said. "Although any form of protection is better than none I believe my version adds extra protection from micro droplets that remain in the air. One [filter] can produce 15 to 20 masks for just under \$20."

Staff writer Scott Shenk contributed to this report.

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