

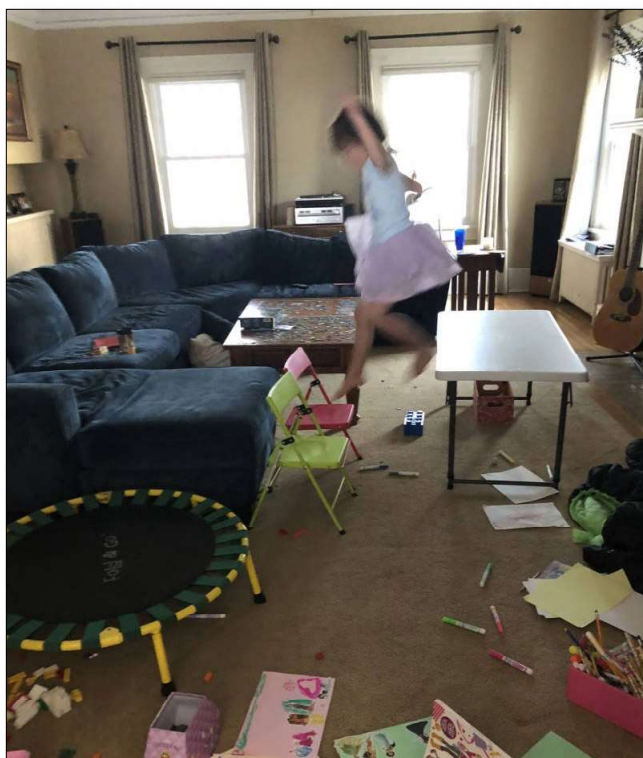
Electronic Currents

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Reflections on the First Four Months of the Northeastern Minnesota COVID-19 Community Archive Project

*By Shana Aue, Archives Assistant, Kathryn A. Martin Library Archives and Special Collections,
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I can pinpoint the day COVID-19 became real for me: Sunday, March 15. Though I had been following news of the pandemic for months, that was the day the University of Minnesota made a systemwide announcement that all employees who were able to work from home would do so starting the next day. That same morning, Minnesota governor Tim Walz announced that K–12 schools would close beginning Wednesday. As I rushed to the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) to pick up my laptop, I hoped that the closures wouldn't last long. I had boxes of unfinished processing projects and research questions I hadn't answered. How would I continue all this important work from home? As the first week passed, the question shifted. How would I face the challenge of documenting this time in my community?



This picture captures my daughter enjoying minimal supervision while I'm working from home. Day 9 of quarantine. Full record: <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll535:64>.

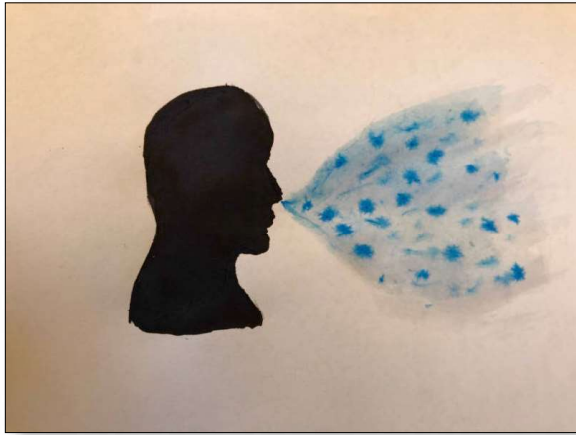
On March 27, barely two weeks after we started working from home, the UMD Archives and Special Collections launched the Northeastern Minnesota COVID-19 Community Archive Project. We have received about 300 items from over 100 contributors, and we believe this is only the beginning. This is our first major digital collecting initiative, and our first large community collecting project. In this article, I will explore some of the strategies we used to bring the project together quickly and the challenges we faced in making it a success.

As the archives assistant at UMD, I am primarily responsible for processing collections, managing our content management system, and, increasingly, coordinating digital collections and repositories. We have made significant progress in our digital collections in the past two years, including increased participation in digital repositories, digitization of obsolete formats, and accepting several small digital collections. But, in March of 2020, we had yet to embark on a major digital collecting project. When archivist Aimee Brown and I started discussing documenting the COVID-19 pandemic in Duluth, we knew that the collection would be primarily digital, both because of the nature of the materials being created and because, without access to our building, we couldn't accept physical items. While UMD web pages would be crawled and university communications would be saved, we wanted to be more inclusive in documenting the pandemic in our community. The obvious choice was a digital community archive, where individuals, local businesses, and community organizations could contribute their experiences. Given the many questions we received in 2018 about the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the dearth of local resources available, we knew this collection would be important to future researchers. But how would we do it? We are a small staff of two, and this was new territory for us.

We started by looking at other COVID-19 archives projects across the nation. It was encouraging that a few other projects had already begun, and we found it useful to see their collecting scopes, communities of focus, and

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Pen-and-ink drawing entitled Breathe. The artist is Elizabeth C. Minor. Created for the Duluth Interdisciplinary Chirographic Technology Association (DICTA) Pandemic project. Full record: <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll535:36>.

logistics of collecting. We also refamiliarized ourselves with existing guides on archival collecting in times of disaster, such as SAA's "Documenting in Times of Crisis: A Resource Kit" (bit.ly/2OJRxRv), and ethical digital collecting, including "Documenting the Now" (www.docnow.io).

At the same time, we reached out to colleagues at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. We are fortunate to have access to the expertise and resources of a university system. One area where we needed guidance was navigating copyright issues and donor agreements. Our standard donor form is on paper, and we didn't have a clear process for digital collecting. We consulted with Nancy Sims, UMN copyright programming librarian, to develop standard copyright language that contributors would agree to when submitting digital materials to the archive.

Another question was how the collection would be accessible in its final form. Just as we wanted the archive to include as many voices as possible, we wanted the final collection to be accessible to as many people as possible. We hoped to make parts of the collection publicly available quickly, to share what we were receiving and generate more interest and contributions. Again, we looked to an existing collaboration with UMN. About a year ago, we started participating in UMedia (umedia.lib.umn.edu), an open-access digital repository hosted by the UMN Archives. We approached Jason Roy, the director of Digital Library Services, about the possibility of the COVID-19 Community Archive being added to UMedia on a rolling

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basis as we received submissions. After a few clarifications, we determined that this would be a good fit, and our collection had a public, accessible, online home before it was even launched.



COVID-19 spray paint mural at a residence in the East Hillside neighborhood of Duluth, Minnesota. The artists are Kevin Pendleton and Taylor Rose. Full record: <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll535:27>.

We decided that a Google form (bit.ly/2Bm9i6h) would be the best way to accept submissions. This option uses existing technology at no additional cost. We created a LibGuide (libguides.d.umn.edu/covid-19) to introduce the project, which includes information about why we are creating a community archive, the scope of the project, how to contribute, and FAQs. The LibGuide has grown to include a page for media stories and a link to the collection in UMedia.

By the end of March, we were ready to launch the Northeastern Minnesota COVID-19 Community Archive Project! We made an announcement on social media, but we knew the publicity couldn't end there. In collaboration with University Marketing and Public Relations, we created a press release that was sent to local news organizations. We were delighted when a newspaper in Minneapolis also picked up the story. Brown was interviewed on the KUMD radio program *Neighbors* (kumd.org/topic/neighbors). We also contacted local businesses and organizations directly to solicit contributions.

Slowly at first, and then more quickly, contributions started to come in. Early submissions were mostly from the UMD community and from within our own networks. Eventually, word got out and we started to receive submissions from the wider community. So far, we have received

photographs, artwork, written reflections, videos, records of church services, social media posts, and more.

Early on, we realized we were not receiving as many submissions from local businesses and organizations as we had hoped. These entities were busy, and those we wanted to hear from most were the busiest. One example was Vikre Distillery in Duluth. Like many local distilleries nationwide, it had started making and distributing free sanitizer in response to shortages of cleaning products. It was also creating wonderful social media content, including videos of the procedure for picking up sanitizer, advertisements for its at-home cocktail kits, and videos of the company owners at home making cocktails and discussing life during quarantine. We had reached out to Vikre, but the company did not respond. Finally, we had an idea. What if we asked Vikre for permission to collect materials from its Facebook page, so their staff wouldn't have to remember and take time to submit items? We contacted the company again, and the owners immediately gave written permission for us to download items and include them in the archive. We made the same request to several other businesses and organizations, and received positive replies. Collecting from social media is more work for us, but we are happy to preserve these materials.



Vikre Distillery employees distributing sanitizer. Vikre Distillery is a local business in Canal Park in Duluth, Minnesota. Full record: <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll535:20>.

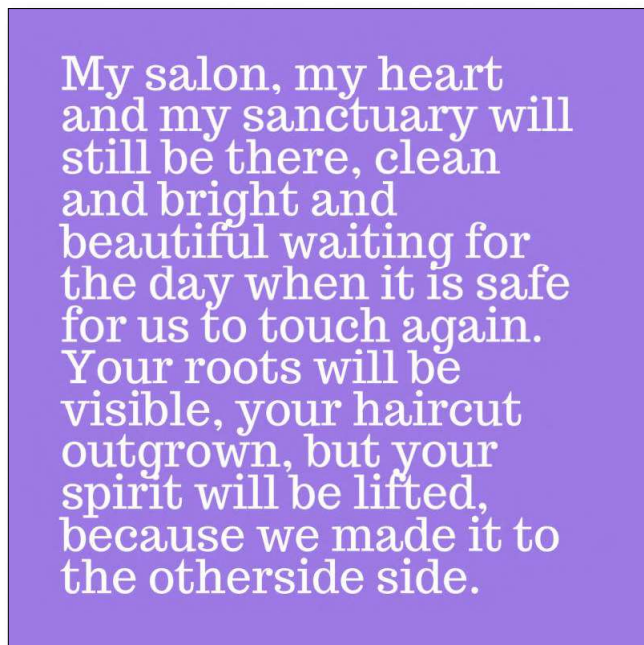
We also wanted to include student perspectives in the collection. UMD journalism and communications professor Jennifer Moore has been interested in the project from

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the beginning. With her classes shifting to online only, she modified the final projects for two courses. Students could create materials to be included in the archive. Students wrote personal reflections about COVID-19 and the shift to online learning, took photographs of the changes in their communities, and made videos documenting their own experiences and those of classmates and family. This group of materials is a valuable addition to the archive.

This summer, we were presented with another exciting opportunity. Devaleena Das and David Beard, two faculty members from UMD's College of Liberal Arts (CLA), applied for and received a National Endowment for the Humanities CARES grant in the amount of \$175,745 to produce materials for the community archive. Through the grant project, 10 humanities professionals who have lost income due to COVID-19 will be hired to create content, which will include oral history interviews with a diverse pool of community members and creative works conceptualized by the grant employees. The grant also provides two part-time archives consultants to help process materials and a web designer and curator to create a digital display and an exhibit at the Tweed Museum of Art. This collaboration with CLA is just getting started.



Instagram post from Adeline Inc., a local salon in the East Hillside neighborhood of Duluth, Minnesota Full record: <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll535:25>.

We hope to continue collecting materials for several years, as our community moves through and beyond this pandemic time. While this is a challenging time for archives, and some of our work is on hold, this project has given us a renewed sense of purpose. I know the resources we are collecting now will be valuable to our community throughout the current crisis and far into the future.

Currently, a selection of materials is available through UMedia (bit.ly/2ZRWCgR). We will continue to add to this online collection. More items can be found on our Facebook (www.facebook.com/UMDuluthArchives) and Instagram (www.instagram.com/umdarchives) pages. Questions about the project can be directed to libarchives@d.umn.edu.

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