

[music]

ALI: You're listening to Community InterActions with InterAct Story Theatre. Our Wheaton community is full of stories to tell, and today, we're telling one of them. Today's Story: Pandemic and Making Art. Hi, I'm Ali Oliver-Krueger...

EMILY: And I'm Emily Townsend. I'm the artistic administrator for InterAct Story Theatre here in Wheaton, and Ali is our Executive and Artistic Director. With this limited podcast series, we've been collecting some of the stories of Wheaton during this pandemic time, and sharing them through the words and voices of the people who are living them, and who wanted to share their stories with us.

ALI: Today, we're talking with artists who live and work in Wheaton, and the ways that the pandemic has affected their lives and their work.

EMILY: And that includes us! InterAct Story Theatre is based in Wheaton, with our offices right in the Wheaton Arts & Entertainment District, and serving our community is an important part of our mission. With the Wheaton Family Theatre Series, we bring free family arts performances into Wheaton for the community, and we do that in addition to the work we do teaching and bringing educational arts programming all around Maryland and beyond. In a normal year, we serve thousands of people, children and adults alike, with plays, workshops, family literacy programs, and more. But in March 2020, suddenly, all the places where we shared our work were closed- from the schools to community venues throughout the area.

ALI: Mm-hmm. And so we had to figure out a lot of things at InterAct very quickly - how do we support all the artists that we work with and who now couldn't do the work they were contracted for? And then there was the question of, well, how do we make the kind of art that we love, and that we're good at making, during a pandemic that's keeping people apart? Emily, I'll be honest, that was a real struggle for me in the pandemic, trying to think about making art while also being really focused on taking care of people around me.

EMILY: I felt the same way, especially as I saw other arts organizations able to pivot very quickly. Which is amazing! But it makes it hard when you feel like you can't do that yet. For us, it took a little longer. We kept thinking and asking the question--what is it that we can do, that's still InterAct? Eventually we created performances and workshops that could work in virtual spaces. We were able to bring back the Wheaton Family Theatre Series in 2021 and share free arts programming again with our community. Pivoting to digital work was an interesting challenge for InterAct to work out, but we always knew that we weren't alone - Wheaton and the surrounding area has amazing artists, and we were all in the same boat together, figuring out a new way to paddle.

ALI: Exactly. The pandemic has been hard for everyone, but we've seen how some artists and arts organizations found ways to pivot, to jump in and find new ways to redefine what making art can be like in the pandemic. And when you find ways to innovate and make great art in your

community, it's an incredible, empowering feeling. One Wheaton organization that's been thriving is Urban Artistry, a nonprofit dedicated to the performance and preservation of art forms inspired by the urban experience. We spoke with Ryan Webb, a dancer and teacher who is also the education director of Urban Artistry. We talked with him about how the pandemic affected his work both personally and as a company member with Urban Artistry:

[clip] RYAN: "So for myself personally, about six months of work, like gigs - I was supposed to be in New Orleans, I was supposed to be in Tokyo, we had, Junius and I had a Red Bull event that we were planning for the DC area - all of this just got postponed. At that time they were saying 'postponed' because we didn't know - no one knew how long this was gonna last, but then those things eventually got canceled, so the first thing was just that fear of not having these gigs and not having income."

EMILY: Ryan described how the company's founder, Junious Brickhouse, adapted once in-person programs had to be canceled.

[clip] RYAN: "... Junius was very quick to like, adjust to Zoom. He got us, like, getting on - getting the ball rolling. I remember we were like, 'Oh, should we use Skype or Zoom?' Like, we were still having conversations like that, and we all - we got our Zoom accounts up, and we just started immediately. Like, by the time it was already, like, May, I think, we were online full programming from our weekly classes to workshops. I booked a workshop series called Dance & Dialogue where we did interviews and classes throughout the whole pandemic. We started doing online parties; we had a party called Function Junction, and we were doing like, bringing DJs in, and dancers, and having battles. We were doing all of our classes online, and our workshops so, it felt like even during that second wave that people were still even more getting used to the - this online world of classes and trying to be involved and connect with people in different ways, it's like...as people realized that it wasn't going away, it seemed like people started to settle in to this idea that you have to adapt to this online environment for education and performance and connecting with arts communities in whatever way possible. So, for us, it - we didn't feel much of a difference, it just felt like it was getting stronger in terms of people connecting online with us during that time."

ALI: Urban Artistry as an organization is dedicated to preserving all sorts of forms of urban dance by teaching those styles to young people and adults, and empowering dancers as a part of a living and evolving history. That passion means that there have been some incredible benefits to moving into the virtual space during pandemic:

[clip] RYAN: "I think one of the coolest things, if we're looking at the positive things, right, was the ability to reach the elders in our communities. The styles that we do come from many different cities all across the states. For instance, I do a style from San Francisco called strutting, I do a style from Memphis called jookin', and the ability to reach some of the originals and some of the earlier generations of these dances and hear their stories has been, like, one of the biggest positives. People are actually able to really dive deeper into the culture of what they're learning, and it's easier to connect with the communities of people of practice, to sum it

up, you know. We can really build relationships with those people where before, it wasn't so common. You'd have to go to that place and do like a study, and be a part of it and try to soak up the culture, and meet as many people as you could, and now we're able to really connect with them. And not only that, we've also been helping them adjust to this online thing. So we've been getting people Zoom accounts, helping them even structure some of their classes online, and getting them webcams. We've been trying to really push on that, because for us, that's a big part of what we do, is connecting the legacy and the different generations of our art forms. So I hope that that continues, the ability for different generations to connect, and for us to be able to stay connected to the source of where some of these art forms come from. I hope we continue that as this moves forward."

EMILY: Urban Artistry has been a great testament to how artists can learn to pivot and adapt to new situations, and for Wheaton artists, that's been crucial. Some organizations had to fundamentally change what they do because of the pandemic, but still found a way to stay true to their mission--like the Wheaton Arts Parade.

ALI: The Wheaton Arts Parade and Festival is a huge event, inviting the community out to celebrate Wheaton by making and seeing art and literally parading art through the street. Local restaurants set up outside in the festival area, there are children's art workshops and performances happening all day--it's a great event. But when the pandemic came, everything came to a screeching halt, both with parade planning and the Parade gallery at Westfield Wheaton. We spoke with Dan Thompson from the Wheaton Arts Parade about how that happened:

[clip] DAN: "I don't know the exact date, but I came in one afternoon after the shutdown was announced, and I saw several artists hanging a display in the window. They were on a ladder, putting art in the window and I said, 'Put your tools down, put the display down, we're all going home.'"

EMILY: Suddenly, the gallery was shut down and as the pandemic wore on, it became clear that the parade itself wasn't going to be able to happen at all in 2020. So, what could they do?

[clip] DAN: "This was going to be the first Wheaton Arts Parade and Festival at our new plaza, the Marian Freyer Town Plaza, with the new county office building. We were going to truly parade the triangle and then end with our festival on the county stage. We were very excited, looking forward to that - and things did not improve. March, April, May - things were getting worse. And it started to dawn upon us that we may not be able to have a parade. I was sitting with one of the - the now manager of our art gallery, Paige Friedman, and we were brainstorming, we were wondering, 'What are we going to do?' And Paige mentioned that, 'You know, in Annapolis, they've had these public art displays of fish and crabs?' And I said, 'Oh, yes, and in D.C. they've had the donkeys and elephants and pandas.' So it just struck us right between the eyes that we were going to turn this parade of art into a public installation of art, where people could come to it safely. Well, what would be our public art? It's not gonna be a panda down here, an elephant. We have always said this is 'parade the Triangle'. We have

featured the Triangle, the tetrahedron, in a number of our posters. Wheaton is formed by three state highways, creating what is known as the Wheaton Triangle. So it just made sense to me we would do public art of tetrahedrons. We put out a call for artists, as we do, and the call was to create three 8-foot edges tetrahedrons and ten 4-foot edged tetrahedrons. 45 artists applied and we selected 11. One of the tetrahedrons was made in cooperation with One Montgomery Green, using non-recyclable plastics, and the last tetrahedron was a project funded by the Maryland State Arts Council - we call it Community Mosaic where traditionally we have worked with a community group, and they would meet, kids would work after school, and the parents and families and neighbors would work in the evenings. But we couldn't even do that, because we couldn't gather to make our community mosaic. So we divided the Mosaic project up into three families. Families that could work together and who could be exposed to each other, and each side of the tetrahedron was made by a different family, and our mosaic artist actually stitched it together as they were, and put them together into that tetrahedron. Well, what to do with the festival? Jim Epstien, who has led the coordination of our stages and our artist tents, he decided that he could put together a virtual festival - he called it a V-Fest - and he worked with our performers, and with Strathmore - we were able to use Strathmore's space to film performances, we were able to get some performances in the can. And working with Hugh Moore, we put these on our Youtube channel and then we were able to broadcast them on Facebook - they appeared as if they were Facebook Live, but they were all pre-recorded. And so they were scheduled to go out over the weekend while we had a two-week public art installation. And, well, all I can say is we did it, and the art was installed, it was an amazing reception. It was so wonderful to see families gathered around the pyramids. And we also had, for each of the pyramids, a QR code on the side, so that a visitor could use their phone and call up on the QR code, and you could hear an audio interview with the artist. So, it came together, and it was such a tremendous success that I think we're gonna have a lot of pressure to continue to do public art."

ALI: It may not have been a parade, but it was still great public art, out in the streets of Wheaton for the whole community to enjoy and celebrate, and in a way that avoided big crowds and stayed safe for everyone. As of this recording, the tetrahedrons are on display at Brookside Gardens for all to enjoy. And now the gallery is up and running again, displaying the work of artists from around the area. And, even better, the parade itself is back on for September 2021!

EMILY: A wonderful component of the Wheaton Arts Parade has been the way that it's celebrated artists who live and work in Wheaton, and also helped to draw artists *into* Wheaton from a little further out, making the community into an artistic hub. We were able to speak to a number of artists who have been part of the Parade and its Gallery, and who have been making art in Wheaton and the surrounding area before and during the pandemic.

[clip] KELSEY: "My name is Kelsey Joyce and I'm a papier mache sculptor."

[clip] TYLER: "My name is Tyler Henson, I'm a photographer and videographer."

[clip] DARIEN: “My name is Darien Henson. I’m a photographer. I dabble in videography as well.”

[clip] SANDRA: “I am Sandra Perez-Ramos, and I am a visual artist, and I mostly work with inks, acrylic pen, watercolor pen, and I also do fiber art mixed media.”

[clip] SAVANNAH: “I’m Savannah Scollar. My business is called Sparkle Plant, and I mostly do digital art, and textile designs.”

[clip] DINAH: “My name is Dinah Myers Schroeder. I’m a visual artist. I work in several different mediums, from pencil, to steel and metal, and fabric, but currently, most currently, I’ve been doing a lot of acrylic painting.”

[clip] CARLOS: “Well, my name is Carlos Ramos, and I am an artist/digital artist/muralist/graffiti artist/screen printer/a lot of things, but basically art is what I do.”

EMILY: When the pandemic hit, a lot of the regular opportunities folks had to make and share their art shut down. For some artists, they found time to hone their skills and work on their art. Carlos Ramos shared how that looked in his life.

[clip] CARLOS: “Pre-pandemic, I would be doing like a lot of murals on the streets, and just like being more in art galleries in New York, and just being, you know, spreading the art out more, so there was more events that I would attend before this pandemic happened. And then, well, you know, when it did happen, unfortunately, we couldn’t, you know, hit up the galleries like we used to anymore, and be involved in all the art shows like it was before, so I had more time to think to myself, to really accumulate my art and increase my skills in certain areas where I was always working on, so you know it’s always been a work in progress, so you know I haven’t - you know, just because that happened, it’s not going to bring me down, you know, I’m not gonna let it bring me down at all. You know, It’s just getting more energy and filling me up with more creativity. So you know I have a lot of stuff I’ve been working on, and I haven’t showed nothing yet, because you know, I’m not ready to show it yet, you know. So when the time is right, I think I’m gonna hit the world with a boom.”

ALI: Another artist whose artmaking took a creative turn is Dinah Myers Schroeder, who created a pop-up gallery in front of her house.

[clip] DINAH: “As a person, with everything that was being bombarded on us, from the media, from the, you know, the doomsday mentality of the end-of-times and all of the stuff that was coming in, it was frantic, it was just really scary, I was stressed out, and so, I really had to turn off the noise and the news coming in and just take in some in bits and pieces and whatnot, it was just a lot to handle. ... although all of that happened, my art just really flourished, as far as really developing different painting techniques and skills, and painting just about every single day... I started painting on the lawn, I was painting - I was setting up pop-up galleries on the lawn. I met more neighbors during COVID, when we had a stay-at-home order, because when

they would be out walking and whatnot they would stop and they'd talk to me about my art. I even sold some pieces like that. And so, although this was nothing that any of us ever wanted to have to live through, the positives that I can take from it is that I was able to find healing and therapy in working on my art and on myself. I was able to really focus on getting - I did a lot of virtual shows. And so, the bad thing about a virtual show is a lot of my pieces, I feel they show better in person because you miss out on the texture and being able to want to touch them, to not being able to do that, but I also - I could put the same piece in multiple shows, so there was that. And honestly, I created so many new pieces that helped me - I just, I wanted people to see it. So, that's what being in a pandemic and staying home and having to deal with that stress really was able to do for me."

EMILY: The onset of pandemic also interrupted plans in progress. We heard about that on a larger scale with some of the arts organizations we talked to, but this was true for individual artists as well. Savannah Scollar was a high school senior when the pandemic hit.

[clip] SAVANNAH: "Well, I was in my senior year of high school when that started, (laughs), so it was a very interesting time. It was difficult to have that change at such an important time, like having to do everything online all of a sudden. My plans were, like, after high school, I had these plans all made out, and like spreadsheets and Google slides about how I was gonna, like - I wanted to take a bus, and turn it into like a mobile shop, and sell my art at markets and things. And that couldn't happen! So I had to kind of rethink everything, and what I wanted to do."

EMILY: Savannah is now finding a new way forward, and is staying in Wheaton for the moment while working on a new project.

[clip] SAVANNAH: "Well, I'm working on a mural soon, and I'm really excited about that. It feels like my first big art job, I guess. It's going to be in Wheaton, and I'm doing an internship with it. The artist who got chosen to do the mural is having some younger artists work with her and learn how to do it, so I'm very excited about that. Like, whoa, I'm gonna get to help paint on the side of a huge building. I used to be like, 'Oh, I need to get out, I need to go, like, into the world and be an adult!' But like, I found out that like, oh, I can do that here. I don't have to, like, leave just yet. I can find my own place where I am and still be able to work and keep making my stuff without having to go far away or anything."

ALI: For some artists, the trauma of pandemic created a block, or made artistic creation more difficult. I'll be frank and say that was my experience. Kelsey Joyce describes this experience, and how it has changed her relationship to making art.

[clip] KELSEY: "Yeah, when the pandemic first hit, I lost my job because I was working at a sip and paint wine bar, but they had to let us all go. Then I transferred over to working on Zoom and doing art lessons, but I creatively just ran out of juice, like I completely lost my moxie and I had to ask myself why I wanted to do art, because I didn't want to anymore. It was always something I wanted to do, but being isolated, it made me realize I think I was doing art to impress people and I wanted to get away from that. Being alone ultimately was really helpful, so my art definitely

reflects me more now after the pandemic and going through the pandemic than it did before, because I was doing what I thought people wanted to see, but now I'm creating art that I want to see, which I think is really cool.”

ALI: Sandra Perez-Ramos spoke to us frankly of the impact of the pandemic on her and her art and her life:

[clip] SANDRA: “Well, ok, I have to say, and this is important because I had just moved to a new place because I had just separated, and I was in the process of divorce. It had been a week, and I was so excited about my new life. I had so many plans, I had so many ideas of what I was gonna do, I was going to visit my family in Puerto Rico for a while because I haven't been there since 2018. I had a lot of projects, and suddenly that hit me like a brick on the head. There was so much uncertainty, the information was so scary, everything that I was hearing was confusing. In the beginning I wasn't sure if it was something that was real. And then, well I, creatively, I felt paralyzed for a while. I remember logging into Facebook and Instagram, and I was seeing art organizations, trying to put - they were creating these activities to get artist members engaged and moving and producing. And I just felt out all the time, I just felt so out of it, because I was like - I was even angry. I was feeling angry! Like, how - how are they producing? How are they being able to think about anything other than this situation in which we do not know what's gonna happen? And I would see, I would see other people producing, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, my God, this would be the most wonderful thing if it happened to me, because art heals you! And I cannot leave without creating, producing, or absorbing, observing, to create! But I am not just feeling blank and blocked, I am feeling helpless!' So I think there was some depression there, but then suddenly, you know, like you say, a catalyst, even, that I'm so grateful for, and it, you know, helped me get back.”

Ali: Sandra also spoke movingly about how this pandemic has been especially hard as a parent, fearing for her children and wanting to be supportive of them. Luckily, things have started to turn a corner for her.

[clip] SANDRA: “I once again feel I'm back in track. I'm happy to be vaccinated, it gave me hope. I remember being in the, doing the line to the vaccination, and I was tearing up, just thinking, 'Wow. This is big! I hope it doesn't show that I'm about to cry,' so I was keeping very still, you know. But to me, that was huge, that step knowing that there was a little bit of hope that we will be getting out of this nightmare, you know? I am currently working on a mural in Wheaton at the intersection of University Blvd and Veirs Mill, and the experience has really shocked me in a very wonderful way because it's a very hectic, busy corner, you know, concrete, heat, and traffic, and you know, sirens and ambulances all the time, very, very urban. The typical urban scenario. And there have been people going walking to the bus stops, passersby, parents with children, and even people from the cars shouting, 'Good job! Thank you for doing this!' And there were two women who stopped and said, 'God bless you, God bless you for doing this.' And I - that's when it hit me, I was like, 'Wait a minute, this is bigger. This is a collective need for color, for hopeful, for some hope of going back to normality.' And in the middle of something that's so harsh, the city, the urban area right there that's so harsh and so

tense, they're seeing color, they're seeing a little bit of whimsy, and it's giving them good vibes. So, that's when I said, 'Wow, this is it. We needed this.' We all needed this after this year and a half that we've all had? We need art. Art is essential. And art in harsh places like this? Essential. All forms of art. I mean, theater, music, visual arts, it just changes us and affects us, and so, I think it's wonderful to have seen that reaction. That collective need of something that makes them smile, you know? And reminds them not everything is horrible news, not everything is negative, every now and then there's a little pocket of something good that can happen, and it can be art, you know?"

ALI: For photographers and twin brothers Tyler and Darien Henson, the pandemic brought an opportunity to look at life through a new, thoughtful, more intentional lens. Darien Henson shared:

[clip] TYLER: "It might just kind of feel like, "Oh man, like, maybe we should take a little bit more time just to kind of slow down and take a step back away from, you know, our day-to-day lives. You know, everybody has things to do, everybody has, you know, a job to go to and things to get done. Let me take some time just to kind of refocus on maybe my mental health, or my spiritual health, or my physical health, my emotional health, make sure my family is okay. And I'm not saying that those things weren't done pre-pandemic, but I think the pandemic really just shined a light on how quickly life can be taken."

Ali: Tyler Henson added:

[clip] TYLER: "We really don't know from day to day what the day will bring, so as we move forward both collectively as human beings in this world and personally, it's beautiful just to see days unfold. As we move forward, the hope is there that we understand now better what's really at play and we don't have any control over a lot of things that we thought we did. But that's ok. It's ok to kind of sit down and take your time with this life and not have to feel like we're rushed to get to any certain areas or certain points in our life when this life is way too delicate, way too delicate to assume anything. So hopefully we move forward in a direction where we appreciate more friendships, relationships, jobs, life, love, interactions, thoughts, books, music, everything. It's just.. Hopefully it feels more beautiful than it did in the past or did pre-Covid, because I feel like it was kind of, we're in a day and age where things are taken in so quickly and not really, you know, stick with you to the point where it's like, 'Oh wow, I really appreciate what this is.' Hopefully, things are kind of just like, let's take the time to really understand what this is, or understand this person, where they're coming from, who they are, what this sounds like, what this tastes like and feels like, and then more beautiful things could possibly be made and we could see each other as simply brothers and sisters all on this one planet, trying to figure it out."

Emily: We asked artists about their thoughts and hopes for the future.

[clip] DARIEN: "Just a word of encouragement if I may for all artists, and even people that aren't artists but find themselves in a field in which they love to do what they do. I think it's just important to, regardless of what you may want to see the end result of whatever it is you may be

working towards, just keep in mind the importance of failure, the importance of growing, the importance of experimentation, the importance of communication. I think all those things can oftentimes be overlooked when you're just like focused on, 'Okay, I've gotta get this step done to get to the next step, to then get to the next step, to get to the next step, to get to the end result,' and I think the journey between, you know, when you start something and then when you finish it, I think that's just as important as the end result because many lessons can be learned."

[clip] KELSEY: "I think everyone should create. I think you should create whatever medium you want. I think it's a very freeing experience, and share your art with all your friends and your family and anyone on social media. Please don't feel like you have to be born with talent to be an artist. Art can't really be taught, contrary to all the art lessons I teach and everything, everyone *is* an artist, artists are just people who choose to do art. So if you want to do art, just do it, and don't let people stop you or tell you that your art isn't good, because everyone's going to have an opinion, but you have to be your number one fan. Keep going. If you believe in something, others will believe in it because they'll see your passion. So, create something."

ALI: We're coming to the end of the final episode of this limited series, and so looking at all that we've talked about here and with the people who shared their stories with us, I'm curious- Emily, do you have a takeaway from this project? What are your own hopes for the future, post-pandemic?

EMILY: Well, I'm still a newcomer to Wheaton, so it's been so fascinating to get a deeper understanding of who this community is by working on this project. I feel like I've learned so much. Looking at the bigger picture, I know this last year has really shown me what I need in my life- the people I need to see and talk to, and the ways I want to spend my time- even if I learned it by having them taken away. I hope going forward, that I don't take those moments and people for granted when they're what I really care about and value in my life. What about you, Ali?

ALI: Oh, you know, for me, I've been so touched and honored by the people who've been willing to share their stories with me, who've been able to open up, and really tell me about their experiences in this pandemic. I've really just felt honored and humbled by the trust that people have placed in me to share their experiences with me, and I hope that we've done them justice, and that we've done them proud, and it's just really meant a lot to me to be able to share those stories. Going forward, in a post-pandemic future, whatever that may be, I hope that we will have time to, or that we'll make time to sit down and hear each other's stories, and have the bravery to tell each other our stories. That we'll really be able to connect with each other even more, and even more deeply. That's my hope.

EMILY: Yeah, yeah. I agree.

ALI: Well, thank you so much for joining us for this podcast series. The Wheaton community has done so much to support each other this year and to find a way through to the other side together. We've been so pleased to be able to share a few of those stories with you. Thanks for listening to this podcast series - we're so glad you've joined us here.

Community InterActions is produced by Emily Townsend and myself, Ali Oliver-Krueger. Theme music by Tom Teasley. Virtual Gallery on our website www.interactstory.com by Steve Wolf and Jordan Brown. Special thanks to Ryan Webb and Urban Artistry, Dan Thompson and the Wheaton Arts Parade, Luisa Montero-Diaz and Sidney Cooper of the Wheaton Urban District and Wheaton Arts & Entertainment District, Carlos Ramos, Kelsey Joyce, Dinah Myers Schroeder, Darien Henson, Savannah Scollar, Tyler Henson, Sandra Perez-Ramos, Richard Sigwald, and Anabel Milton. For more information about these stories and the people telling them, visit www.interactstory.com/pod.

Emily: This project was made possible in part by a grant from Maryland Humanities, through support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Maryland Historical Trust in the Maryland Department of Planning. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Maryland Humanities, Maryland Historical Trust, or the Maryland Department of Planning.