



A YEAR GONE VIRAL

AN EARLY EXIT

Coronavirus takes life of 39-year-old North Mankato woman



Pat Christman

Jared Roberts sits in the kitchen decorated by his wife, Brandy. She died from complications related to COVID-19 in December.

Brandy Roberts was region's youngest victim

By Natalie Rademacher
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Brandy Roberts possessed a strong empathy for helping others and lived a colorful life. She cared deeply about people and filled her home with decor and seasonal and holiday displays.



Brandy Roberts

Roberts was only 39 when she died of COVID-19 on Dec. 6. She had rheumatoid lung disease, which made her more susceptible to complications from the novel coronavirus. She is the youngest person in the Mankato region to die of complications from COVID-19, according to data from the Office of Vital Records.

Fishing with her husband and spending time with her black Labrador, Bailey, were Brandy's two loves, said Valerie Roberts, her mother-in-law.

Brandy and her husband, Jared Roberts, met on the Plenty of Fish dating site in 2015. "We just clicked," Jared said. She eventually moved from her

Please see ROBERTS, Page A11

Four stories of coronavirus deaths

A total of 229 residents in south-central Minnesota had COVID-19 listed as a contributing factor on their death certificates from March 2020 through February 2021.

Behind the numbers are people who our region lost — and their loved ones still here who mourn them. No matter the ages of the departed, COVID-19 took too many people too soon.

Randi Mark always had a smile on her face and cared deeply for others, spending her younger years taking care of her mom. Friends and family say she was a positive spirit who loved to watch the sun set.

Lorraine Carroll was a hardworking lifelong Mankato



Lorraine Carroll



Lucille "Suzie" Johnson



Randi Mark



Bill Montag

resident. She managed several stores in Mankato and helped build her home on Lor Ray Drive. She was often reading four books at once.

Lucille "Suzie" Johnson was a loving and social person who gave great hugs. Her family and friends in Mapleton will remember how important faith was to her, and how devoted she was to her family and friends.

Bill Montag was one of the Mankato area's first certified public accountants. He was a business leader who kept active in his community, taking pride in the Mankato area he called home for so long.

Their stories appear on Page A10.

Deaths up 13% over 12 months

By Brian Arola and Natalie Rademacher
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The number of annual deaths in the Mankato region varies year to year, usually staying within 5% of the previous year's total.

Slight rises and drops can come down to how severe influenza seasons were or differences in population from one year to the next. One year might also just randomly be more or less deadly than the next.

The period between March 1, 2020, and Feb. 28, 2021, in south-central Minnesota wasn't random or heavily influenced by the flu. Cause of death data from the period showed COVID-19 played a large role in a staggering 13% increase in total deaths from the previous year.

There were 2,280 total deaths in south-central Minnesota's nine counties between March 2020 and March 2021. None of the previous six years had more than 2,150 deaths during the same date range.

The Free Press analyzed death data from the Minnesota Office of Vital Records to look at how the region was impacted by the pandemic. No area counties were spared from the novel coronavirus' wrath, but some were hit harder than others.

"Whether it was people getting COVID, whether it was businesses or industries shut down or schools closed, nobody was untouched by this global pandemic. Nobody," said Eric Weller, coordinator of the South Central Health Care Coalition.

Area toll relatively low In certain key metrics, south-central Minnesota wasn't as severely impacted by the pandemic compared to Minnesota as a whole, which experts say may be because there weren't as many large outbreaks in the region.

Area counties hold about 4.2% of the state's population but accounted for only

Please see DEATHS, Page A8

COVID upended normal society

Lockdowns, shortages and masks the rule

By Tim Krohn
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As warnings from health officials began surfacing in the first couple of months of 2020, there was a mix of concern and confidence that the coronavirus would be a relatively short-lived discomfort.

When Gov. Tim Walz in mid-March declared a peace-time state of emergency, closed schools and ordered all non-essential employees to work from home, there was increased worry about what could come but also a sense of shared sacrifice and for some a psychological boost by the novelty of spending more time at home.

It wasn't until late March that the first COVID death in Minnesota occurred, and case numbers in the nine-county Mankato region were still being measured in the single digits.

But those in health care were bracing for what they knew would come.

"Back in February 2020 we saw those massive surges in Asia and Italy, and we knew what was coming," said Dr. Brian Bartlett, an emergency medicine physician at Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato.

"We were prepared for the tidal wave. While we were hoping it might not hit the United States like Wuhan and Italy, we knew it could. We just took it one step at a time and learned as much as we could. It was scary, but we were preparing."

Paula Meskan, CEO of River's Edge Hospital in St. Peter, said they set up an incident command post early on and held daily briefings and training for staff.

Please see YEAR, Page A11

Pages A8, A9

The pandemic stories of three health care professionals.

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Mankato, Minnesota

229

deaths from COVID-19 in the nine-county Mankato region through February of 2021

20,420

COVID cases reported in the region through Feb. 28, 2021

13%

increase in deaths in the region from March 1, 2020 through Feb. 28, 2021 compared to that time the year prior

3.5%

of the state's COVID deaths were in the region

4.2%

of Minnesotans live in the nine-county region



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“You’d see even younger patients where (oxygen levels fell) suddenly and then need to be intubated. It can go quite fast. That’s the scary thing — people can seem otherwise healthy then need to be intubated.”

JUSTIN LEGRED, PROGRESSIVE CARE UNIT NURSE AT MAYO HEALTH SYSTEMS MANKATO

YEAR: More than a half-million deaths nationally

Continued from Page A1

“We did a lot of planning early on. Thankfully a lot of that planning we didn’t need here.”

But even while health officials were making dire predictions, many people were still suggesting the coronavirus would have little more impact than the normal flu season while others saw it as a manufactured crisis that would end after Election Day.

Even when infectious diseases expert Dr. Anthony Fauci predicted the potential for between 100,000 and 240,000 deaths before the pandemic was over, the eye-popping number seemed unlikely in a wealthy, medically advanced nation.

Now, a year later, the COVID death toll has topped a half million in the United States. And while vaccinations have brought the greatest hope yet, the advent of virus variants and the realization that herd immunity may not occur until this fall have left a weary public even more fatigued.

Spring/early summer 2020

Students at Bethany Lutheran College, Minnesota State University, South Central College and other colleges learned March 12 that classes would be suspended starting the next week.

On March 15 and 16, Walz ordered the closure of all public K-12 schools until at least March 27 and the closure of in-person service at restaurants, bars, coffee shops, gyms, theaters and breweries until at least March 27.

Those orders would be extended and in some cases reinstated throughout the summer and fall.

Maybe it was the thought of kids eating at home instead of school cafeterias or maybe it was panicked hoarding, but local supermarkets on March 15 were nearly overrun with shoppers filling carts and emptying shelves.

Targeted items seemed to be determined mostly by scarcity. At Cub Foods West, the meat department and bread aisle were cleaned out while frozen foods and canned soup were plentiful. Every variety of potato had disappeared by late afternoon while other fresh fruits and vegetables were almost untouched.

And, of course, toilet paper — along with potential substitutes such as paper towels and facial tissues — was most coveted of all. While the food shortages generally subsided quickly, the TP shortage continued for months.

In early June, after bars, restaurants and entertainment venues were allowed to reopen after three months, there was a renewed sense of regaining something near normal.

“It feels really good to get back to work,” said Allison Jennings as she reopened the Wow Zone. “It almost feels like I’m at a new job for the first day. It’s the same but it’s very different.”

Still, the financial burden of being closed was already taking a toll.

“I don’t know how you shut down a business for three months and expect them to thrive,” Chad Ziemke, manager of Fitness for \$10 on Madison Avenue, said as



File photo

Mankato Clinic hematology manager Nancy Benschhof tests a patient for the presence of the coronavirus at the North Mankato clinic’s drive-up testing center in July.



Pat Christman

Barb Heller instructs a voter on how to fill out and seal her ballot during early voting in September at the Nicollet County Government Center in St. Peter.

he was reopening in June with capacity and other restrictions in place.

On June 15, Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges announced the Fourth of July fireworks had to be canceled. It was the same for small-town community celebrations, then county fairs, then the State Fair.

On July 6, the Mankato City Council heard from dozens of supporters and opponents to a proposed citywide mask requirement in most indoor public spaces.

“It’s still a pandemic with no cure and no vaccine,” supporter Matt Rightmire said. “It’s unprecedented, and stopping it will take unprecedented action.”

Tim Bremer countered that mask-wearing would deprive people of brain oxygen while reducing their opportunity to strengthen their immune system.

“You’re getting dumber, weaker and more prone to get sicker,” Bremer said of mask wearers. “A vote for this is a betrayal of

America.”

The council voted 5-2 — the bare minimum required for an emergency ordinance — to impose the mandate.

A statewide mask mandate went into effect July 25.

Late summer/fall

As cases and hospitalizations jumped, pressure on health-care staff grew.

Justin Legred, progressive care unit nurse at Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato, said hospital staff helped each other cope with the demands of providing quality care for patients. He said what hospital staff saw in some patients was sobering.

“You’d see even younger patients where (oxygen levels fell) suddenly and then need to be intubated. It can go quite fast. That’s the scary thing — people can seem otherwise healthy then need to be intubated.”

In September, cases in the Mankato region remained high,

with Le Sueur County having an over 15% case positivity rate, far above the less than 5% rate health officials aimed for.

Late summer and early fall was a rollercoaster for businesses and residents in south-central Minnesota.

While entertainment venues were buoyed by being able to reopen in June and had the benefit of nice weather for more outdoor options in the summer, the hope for getting back to normal was temporary as Walz on Nov. 10 again ordered bars, restaurants and some other venues closed to in-person service.

“We have to move now. This has happened incredibly rapidly,” Walz said of the need to again impose the restrictions.

The restrictions came as COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths surged, with the state seeing many days of record numbers and the positivity test rate staying high. About 70% of new cases were tied to social gatherings.

After months of planning, area colleges reopened for the fall semester but to a very different college experience.

Many classes were held online or in a hybrid mode where students took turns attending in person and participating remotely to limit the number of people in classrooms.

Sports, performing arts events, and social gatherings were largely prohibited, and universities went to entirely remote learning between Thanksgiving and the Christmas-New Year holidays. Despite some pessimism in the community about the ability of college students to follow social-distancing rules, widespread campus testing repeatedly showed the young people having lower case rates than the broader population. Minnesota again led the nation

in voting on Nov. 3, and local precincts had all the elections judges needed as many veteran poll workers did their duty and younger first-timers signed up to take the places of elderly workers who didn’t think it was wise to serve during the pandemic.

Testing picked up late in the fall with the first local COVID saliva testing site opened in the former Gander Mountain building in Mankato on Oct. 22.

Winter 2020-21

As winter settled in, people finally got the hope they were waiting for as vaccines began to trickle out.

On Dec. 21, Legred, the charge nurse at Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato, became the first Mankato hospital worker to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

In early January, Walz eased restrictions on entertainment venues, allowing bars and restaurants to reopen with limited capacity.

February brought a sobering milestone as the number of known cases of COVID-19 surpassed 20,000 in south-central Minnesota. But the pace of vaccinations was increasing, with more than 30,000 Mankato area residents being vaccinated.

In early March, MSU announced that — for the second straight year — no in-person commencement ceremonies were planned for graduates.

By mid-month, the nine-county local area marked 211 COVID-related deaths since the start of the pandemic. In Minnesota the cumulative number of COVID-19 cases reached 496,395 as of Saturday and total deaths in the state were 6,741.

Staff writers Brian Arola, Kristine Goodrich and Mark Fisch- enich contributed to this article.

ROBERTS: Was on waiting list for lung transplant when pandemic struck

Continued from Page A1

hometown of Sleepy Eye (where she was Brandy Sellner) to the Mankato area to be closer to Jared. The two married in 2018. They liked spending time together fishing at the family cabin in northern Minnesota.

Brandy had a knack for decorating and wanted to be a decorator. Brandy and Jared’s home in North Mankato was decked out for all the major holidays.

There are bins in the house filled with Easter, Valentine’s Day and Christmas decorations. Brandy enjoyed sprucing up the home and created a coffee station decorated with cute signs and mugs. Valerie consulted Brandy when working on her own home. “She loved doing that kind of stuff and was good at it,” Valerie

said.

Family describe Brandy as kind, generous and family-oriented. She had a strong bond with her aunt and the two would go on shopping trips together. She was always there to greet Jared when he got home from work.

Brandy’s mother died when she was 6 years old. Brandy talked often about her mother and would say she can’t wait to see her mom again some day.

About a year into her and Jared’s marriage, Brandy was diagnosed with rheumatoid lung disease — lung problems related to rheumatoid arthritis — and learned she needed a double lung transplant. Brandy was on a waiting list to receive a transplant when the pandemic hit and surgeries were paused.

Due to the increased risk of

complications from COVID-19, Brandy wasn’t able to return to her job as a shuttle bus driver at Minnesota State University after campus shut down last March. MSU staff donated vacation days that allowed Brandy to stay home and still receive pay during the pandemic.

Brandy hunkered down, mostly staying home and wearing a mask if she went out.

“She was being really careful,” Valerie said.

In November, Brandy was taken to the emergency room because she was having trouble breathing. There she tested positive for COVID-19.

She fought the virus for a few weeks, spending 17 days at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. Family wasn’t able to visit and had to rely on video chat.

Brandy spent five days on a ventilator and her family made the decision to take her off of it. Jared was able to visit her in the hospital on the day she died. Valerie and other family members watched on video from the basement parking lot of the clinic.

Family gathered for a small funeral service in December, but a celebration of life was postponed because of the pandemic.

Even while she was sick, her love for decorating showed through. She helped Valerie pick out a paint color for her basement while in the hospital. Valerie would text Brandy pictures of colors and various woods from Home Depot and ask for input.

Brandy also ordered Christmas decorations and holiday gifts for family and friends before she died. Amazon and Target pack-

ages arrived at the house while she was in the hospital.

Valerie used Brandy’s notes and journals to piece together who the gifts were for and ensured family members received their gifts from Brandy.

“She was just always thinking of others,” Valerie said.

Last May, before Brandy got COVID-19, she wrote letters to family members in case anything happened to her.

“It was just something I think she thought about because of her lung disease,” Valerie said. Brandy dealt with a lot of pain because of her illness, Valerie said, but never complained because she didn’t want to hurt people.

“She cared about people and was very brave and courageous for what she went through,” Valerie said.

Accountant took pride in Mankato

By Brian Arola
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Bill Montag came to Mankato as one of the area's first certified public accountants.

He founded Montag Accounting, which eventually became Montag, Abdo, Gazzola and Morken Accounting — precursors to accounting firms still around today. Later, he served as chief financial officer at Johnson Reel Co. and Lundin Construction and owned the Montag Ford car dealership.

Montag, who took pride in the area he called home for more than 60 years, died at age 93 on May 26 after contracting COVID-19.

He was one of the earliest deaths in the Mankato area with COVID-19 listed as a contributing factor on the death certificate. Like so many others who died after contracting the illness, other health conditions contributed.

"I think it was like a final blow," said his wife, Marge, of COVID-19.

Montag was originally from northwest Iowa, where he



Bill Montag, a certified public accountant, lived in the Mankato area for more than 60 years. He died at age 93 on May 26 after contracting COVID-19.

graduated from West Bend High School. After serving in World War II, he graduated from the University of Northern Iowa and moved with his wife at the time, MaryAnn Bjonerud, to Denver so he could get his master's degree in business, according to his

obituary. He and Bjonerud had seven children. Along with his children, he's also survived by two step-children, 13 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

As active as he was in the business community, Montag was just as involved in community organizations. He served as president of the local Sertoma Club, Elks Club, and Mankato Golf Club — he had five holes-in-one — and on the board at National Bank of Commerce, Minnesota Valley Credit Union and Immanuel St. Joseph Hospital.

He was an active church member as well. Marge, who married him in 1978, said he loved playing cards with friends in his free time — pfeffer and poker among his favorites.

She described him as an intelligent and well-read person who

loved a good conversation and time spent with family. Being bedridden in his final months was hard on him.

The couple moved into assisted living at Oak Terrace in late 2019 as his arthritis grew worse, Marge said. Both tested positive for COVID-19 in spring 2020. He never recovered.

"You just feel so helpless because there's nothing you can do to help him," Marge said.

She suspects the novel coronavirus was brought into the facility by an asymptomatic carrier. In Montag's obituary, the family was thankful for Oak Terrace's care during his final six months.

After losing a loved one during the pandemic, Marge said she feels for all the other families who experienced losses to COVID-19 over the last year. What she'll remember about her husband, though, are the good times they had during 42 years together.

"We had many years of wonderful times," she said. "We played golf together, we moved to a warmer climate for 10 years, we met a lot of nice people. We had a good life."



Lorriane Carroll

A full life of work, family

Lorriane Carroll managed several stores in Mankato

By Natalie Rademacher
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NORTH MANKATO — Lorraine Carroll lived a full life. The lifelong area resident was a loving mother and wife and was well-known in the community because she managed several stores in the area.

Carroll died from COVID-19 on May 23. She was 91.

While Carroll had lived a long life, her daughter Kathy Farm said COVID-19 took her mother too early.

Carroll worked hard and liked to get her hands dirty. She gardened and she and her husband, James, built three homes in Mankato-North Mankato, with Carroll doing tasks such as sanding pipes and finishing the woodwork, including the hardwood floors. They lived at a home they built on Lor Ray Drive for more than 50 years.

"They were very proud of those homes," her son Patrick Carroll said.

Carroll was a frugal woman, which her children attribute to her growing up poor in the Great Depression. She saved most of her money throughout her life, although she enjoyed splurging on trips to the casino to gamble with her niece after she retired. She developed a love for scratch-offs and slot machines.

She was the youngest of eight children and a lifelong Mankato resident. She met her husband while working at a local canning company in her teens. Carroll worked most of her life and family describe her as someone who worked hard.

"She was very capable," said Catherine Folkema, Carroll's sister-in-law. "She seemed to succeed at work."

Carroll managed several local stores, including the Readmore Bookstore. She was an avid reader and often was reading four books at any given time.

"She wanted to be able to inform customers about what books were like," Patrick said.

The last time Farm and Patrick saw their mother was on May 11, her 91st birthday. They gathered outside Carroll's window at the Oak Terrace Assisted Living facility in North Mankato. Patrick held up a banner that said happy birthday, and Farm brought a cake.

Carroll tested positive for COVID-19 later that day. She was moved to a unit in the facility for COVID patients and her children were no longer able to visit her outside her window. She died fewer than two weeks after she tested positive for the virus.

"COVID took her," Farm said. She said her mother struggled after the pandemic hit because she wasn't able to have visitors. She had trouble understanding communication through video chat or phone calls, so it was hard to connect with her.

Patrick still visits his mom at her gravesite and often brings flowers. "I miss her. If it hadn't been for the COVID, she'd still be here," Patrick said. "We'd still talk every Sunday."

He wants people to protect themselves from the virus and wear a mask to help reduce the spread in the community.

North Kato woman appreciated every sunset

By Natalie Rademacher
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Randi Mark always wore a smile, had a strong religious faith and loved making people happy.

Mark, of North Mankato, contracted the novel coronavirus last May and died a couple of weeks later. She was 67.

Family and friends remember Mark as someone who could always find joy in the world. Most days when the sun would go down, Mark would call her sister, Charyl Korpala, and tell her to go outside and watch the sunset because it was so beautiful.

Before coming to the Mankato area, she spent most of her life in International Falls and was well-known in the community for her compassion.

She and her partner, David, volunteered almost daily at their church and a local nursing home, bringing residents snacks and spending time with them. The two would bike every day and stop by the local fire department with treats for the firefighters.

They moved to the Mankato area to be closer to Korpala. The sisters were incredibly close. Korpala spent the past 15 years as her sister's caregiver and was with her for at least five hours a day before the pandemic.

During her life, Mark was active and took leadership roles in 4-H and Special Olympics. She enjoyed traveling and Korpala said one of Mark's favorite adventures was traveling to Norway with her mother. Mark was a member of Sons of Norway while she lived in the Mankato area.

She loved classical music. She would attend concerts at Mankato East High School where



Courtesy Charyl Korpala

Randi Mark loved to smile and care for others. Friends and family remember her as being a positive spirit who loved music and sunsets. Mark died from complications related to COVID-19 in May at age 67.

Korpala worked.

"She loved to sit in the front row and smile and throw kisses," said friend Mary Lou Kudela, of Mankato. The two met when Mark attended these concerts and the two became great friends.

Kudela would bring her rescue dog to visit Mark at the care facility she lived at for the last few years of her life. Mark loved animals and would sit with and pet the dog during the visits.

"Randi was an exceptionally caring compassionate woman," Kudela said. She said it wasn't

easy for Mark to be as joyous as she was, but she tried hard to find the positive in the world.

Mark moved into a nursing home in the Mankato area because chronic pain made it difficult to function on her own. While living there she enjoyed visits from her pastor, Rev. Mike Omtvedt of Hosanna Lutheran Church.

Her room at the home was filled with pictures of friends and family and of her adventures.

Kudela said photos would make Mark smile and helped her get through life. They were a source

of comfort after Mark's partner died in 2018.

"She lived a full life," she said. "I miss her. I have never met anyone who was so full of positive spirit."

Mark grew up in International Falls and assisted in caring for her mother who was disabled. She helped design a pulley system to raise her mother in and out of a seat in the back of the family van.

Mark took care of both her parents until they died.

"She really cared about people and wanted to help," Korpala said.

Mother, grandmother remembered for her hugs

By Brian Arola
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Lucille "Suzie" Johnson hugged like she meant it.

She was a loving and social person who stayed actively involved in her church and community clubs. When she couldn't attend church or meet up with friends for coffee as often during the COVID-19 pandemic, it wasn't easy on her.

Johnson, who died at age 86 on Nov. 5 in Glenwood, Minnesota, is one of the thousands of Minnesotans who died from complications related to the virus during the last year, according to death data from the state Office of Vital Records.

Her family and friends in south-central Minnesota will remember her for her selflessness, faith and love for others.

"It was never about her," said her daughter, Linda Annis, of Mapleton. "It was always about everybody else."



Courtesy the Johnson family

Lucille "Suzie" Johnson died at age 86 on Nov. 5 in Glenwood after contracting COVID-19.

Although Johnson lived in Belgrade — a small Stearns County city north of Willmar — her mourners include relatives and friends in south-central Minnesota. Annis, one of her four children, hosted her mother in

Mapleton many times over the years.

Annis' friends and neighbors got to know Johnson through the years as well. One of them, Julie Johnson, fondly remembers when Suzie would come down for the weekend and they'd all gather on the patio.

"She was always happy," Julie Johnson said. "Seems like she always had a smile, and I never heard her say anything negative about a person for as long as I knew her."

Her faith and devotion to family always shined bright. When her husband of 65 years needed to go on dialysis before his death about a year and a half ago, she took on the caretaker duties so he could stay home.

"The love between them was always evident," she said.

Annis suspects her mother could've been exposed to COVID through her church quilting group. They were wearing masks, but one of the members

tested positive shortly after gathering.

For days after the exposure, Suzie Johnson didn't have any symptoms. Minor symptoms gradually arose, then breathing issues prompted a trip to the emergency room in Glenwood.

From there, the following 10 or so days felt like a rollercoaster with her condition up one day and down the next.

"It would be good, then not so good," Annis said. "Then it got to be where she just wanted to say I'm done."

She had another good day after family encouragement, to the point they thought about lining up a parade outside her hospital room to lift her spirits.

Another turn for the worse led to her dying the next day, Annis said.

"Even if she knew what the outcome was, I don't know that she would've changed anything," she said. "She was an outgoing person."