



# 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.

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 peacetime 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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# River's Edge changed CEOs amid pandemic

## Spring ban on elective surgeries hit bottom line

By Tim Krohn  
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**ST. PETER** — In mid-March of 2020, River's Edge Hospital in St. Peter set up a command center and staff lost no time in preparing for the coronavirus. "We had daily meetings. We planned for a reduction in staffing. We prepared for patients that may come in," said Paula Meskan. At the time Meskan was chief nursing officer. That role changed in September when the CEO, who'd been on board since March, resigned and Meskan was named acting CEO. Re-

cently Meskan was officially named CEO.

She said a goal early on was to keep staff informed of what was happening.

"It was important to be transparent with staff," she said. "Our mantra is: 'You'll know everything when we do.' We used emails, the employee Facebook page to be able to share information with employees who weren't working here at the time."

Meskan told senior staff to prepare for the possibility of up to 20% of staff being gone. "Luckily that never happened."

Staff also brought in temporary air handlers to increase from four to 13 the number of negative air-flow rooms that could be used for COVID patients.

"We opened a day care at no cost to employees. We didn't want staff to be stressed if their day care



Pat Christman

Paula Meskan, CEO of River's Edge Hospital in St. Peter, said the inability to conduct elective surgeries hurt the community hospital's finances.

closed," Meskan said. The hospital saw COVID

patients, but levels were never as high as some had

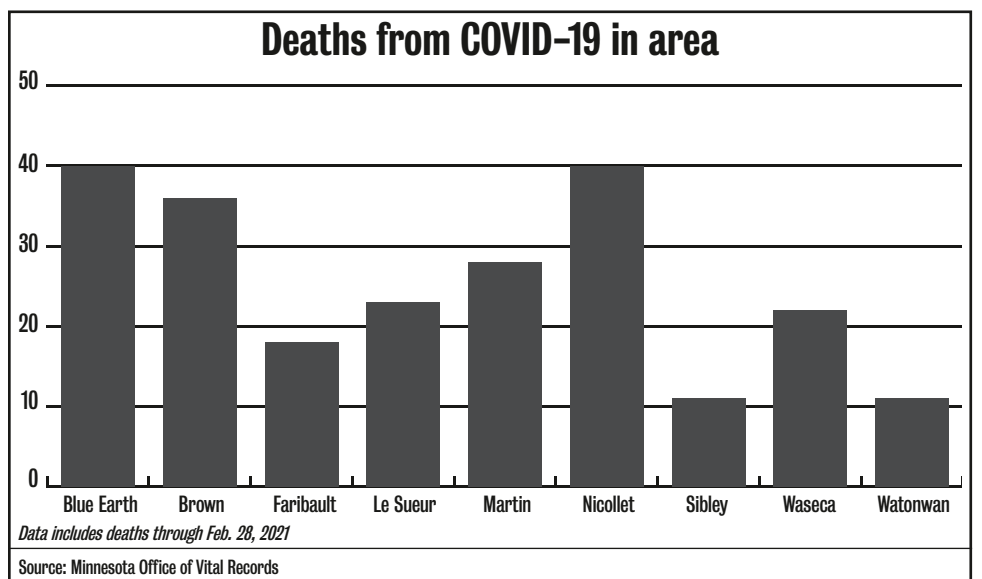
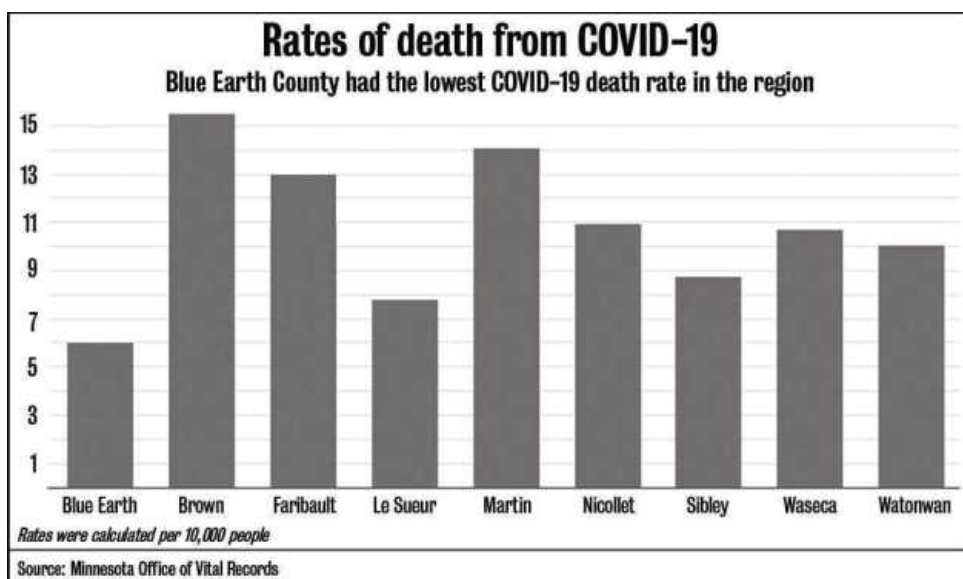
predicted. "Our Emergency Depart-

ment had patients who were symptomatic, some were more serious than others. Many we were able to send home. We transferred some out. We had about a dozen (COVID patients) admitted over the past year. "Thankfully, it was less than projected. I think the county, citizens did a good job. There was a lot of compliance to not spread COVID. It takes a village for sure."

While the patient loads weren't high, River's Edge was financially hit more than some other hospitals.

"One of the biggest impacts to us was the executive order to pause elective surgery. That's a lot of our business, so that was tough for us," Meskan said.

"We went from 70 to 80 surgeries a month down to about five. It was a hard hit; 90 to 95% of our business is surgeries."



# DEATHS: Blue Earth County's death rate region's lowest

Continued from Page A1

about 3.5% of the state's COVID-19 deaths. Through February of this year, 229 people who died in the region had COVID-19 listed as a contributing cause of death, according to state data.

Richard Danila, an epidemiology program manager for the state, said the lack of a large outbreak of the virus at places such as food-processing plants most likely played a role in more moderate case numbers. While the region had smaller outbreaks at places such as assisted living facilities, there weren't as many notably large workplace outbreaks as occurred elsewhere. Nearby counties, including Nobles and Jackson, experienced notable outbreaks early on centered around food-processing plants.

Despite the region accounting for a smaller percentage of statewide COVID-19 deaths than its population share might indicate, south-central Minnesota generally followed the state's pandemic path. Both the region and state had spring waves of cases, hospitalizations and deaths followed by an even more devastating surge starting in the fall.

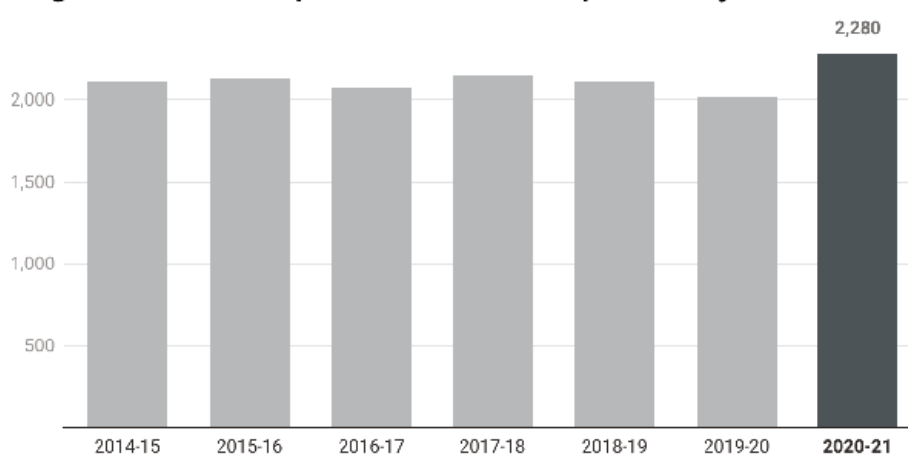
Hospitalizations, deaths and positivity rates — measuring the percent of tests coming back positive — all peaked in late 2020. The months since have been gradually milder.

## Virus hit unevenly

Within south-central Minnesota, the virus impacted counties differently. Nicollet County had a higher increase in deaths from COVID-19 than most counties in the area, with 22.5% more deaths over the last year compared to the previous six-year average. For this analysis, The Free Press looked at years ranging from March 1 through February of the following year because it coincided with the timeline of the pandemic.

COVID-19 was a cause

## Regional deaths in pandemic exceeds previous years



of death for 40 people in Nicollet County over the past year, according to state data. An outbreak at an assisted living facility in May contributed to the higher number of deaths compared to other counties in the region. According to the data, 10 residents at Oak Terrace Assisted Living who died in April and May last year had COVID-19 listed as a contributing factor on their death certificates.

Family members of a couple of Oak Terrace residents who died from the virus said they were told that an asymptomatic worker brought the virus into the facility.

Outbreaks were more common at assisted living facilities in the first few months of the pandemic because testing and personal protective equipment were not as accessible at the time. People were still learning about how the virus spread and much was unknown about asymptomatic people, according to Patti Cullen, CEO of Care Providers of Minnesota.

Sibley County wasn't hit as hard by the virus as other parts of the region. It was the only county in the area to have a decrease in total deaths during the pandemic, about a 19% drop, compared to the previous six-year average. The county also had a lower rate of cases compared to most counties in the region; only Blue Earth County had

a lower rate of cases per 10,000 residents.

Blue Earth County, the most populous in the region, had the lowest death rate among area counties. A relatively high proportion of younger people could've contributed to fewer fatalities, said Kelley Haeder, Blue Earth County's community health supervisor.

"We have 20% or more 18- to 24-year-olds in our county," she said. "We know the virus carries more risk for people as they age." Mankato's status as a medical hub within south-central Minnesota may also have played a role in Blue Earth County's success.

"When you put all of that together, that certainly can explain a little bit of it," Haeder said.

With varying degrees of rises in yearly deaths in eight area counties, the 229 deaths related to COVID-19 over the last year pushed the regional death toll to about 9% higher than the average for the previous six years.

## Disaster prep, testing

When looking into how the south-central region has fared one year since COVID-19 cases started arising, preparedness and testing capacity provide clues into why deaths weren't higher than might be expected based on raw population totals.

The pandemic tested the regional emergency

response partnerships established after the 9/11 attacks. Training and smaller-scale health crises since then helped the region prepare, Weller said.

H1N1 and Ebola required coordinated responses, just not for as long and not on as large of a scale. The work back then, though, wasn't for naught.

"We don't have plans that sit on the shelf," Weller said. "We do testing of those plans, table-top exercises, full-scale exercises and real-world events. All of those things are important in bettering yourself for the next response."

No one would have guessed the next response would be as monumental as it's been. It wasn't like a tornado, where the storm rips through, causes destruction and the cleanup begins. The pandemic was more like if a tornado touched down in every city in every county about a year ago and has continuously wreaked havoc to this day.

"This is a much longer and sustained response than almost anybody has ever done," Weller said.

Challenges included having to adjust the response and messaging as guidance changed at the state and national levels. Some degree of change could be expected due to the new nature of the illness, but the pandemic coinciding with a presidential election year wasn't helpful, Weller said.

The timing injected more politics than usual into pandemic response.

"That just made it even more challenging because it was at such high national levels," he said. "Everything was hyper-sensitive and supercharged, and it was tough to navigate through some of that."

Strong testing infrastructure, both due to local health care and county and state efforts, seemed to help the region get a grasp on case spread. Better testing leads to better data to work with during the response, helping schools, businesses and public health officials get reliable information to factor into their decisions.

Minnesota invested heavily in testing early in the pandemic. An analysis from the COVID Tracking Project found the state accelerated testing from an average of 1,500 tests in a day to 10,000-15,000 in a day over a two-month span.

Minnesota's testing prowess even served as a model for lawmakers elsewhere. When South Carolina legislators were trying to expand testing, for example, they cited a paper using Minnesota as an "exemplar" state for testing.

And within a state doing well on testing, the south-central region stood out in a good way, said Derek J. Wingert, a local data analyst who volunteered for the COVID Tracking Project.

"Pretty much the entire time we've had above-average testing rates, rather significantly, than the state," he said.

Few if any people tracked COVID-19 metrics in the south-central region as closely as Wingert over the last year. He sees testing as one of the state and local area's big "wins" during the pandemic.

Examples of local and state efforts on testing included mass events in Mankato and Waseca. Mankato also got one of the state's saliva test sites, which remains open.

"One of the themes we've had throughout the whole thing is our leadership

## This analysis

For this story The Free Press looked at death data from the Office of Vital Records. To find the number of people who died in the region of COVID-19, The Free Press pulled numbers of people who had COVID-19 listed as one of the contributing factors in the person's cause of death. Many of these people had other factors that contributed to their death such as pneumonia. Others had underlying conditions such as diabetes.

When looking at how deaths in the region during the past year compared to prior years, The Free Press compared deaths from March 1, 2020, through Feb. 28, 2021, to the average number of deaths during that time for the previous six years. This is to help diminish random yearly variations in the number of deaths in the region.

Whether looking at the average death toll for the previous six years or the prior year's toll alone, the last year was an especially deadly year for south-central Minnesota.

The Free Press

understood the value of testing and did the best they could to develop more of it," Wingert said.

Robust testing did contribute to some less than rosy metrics for the region as well. Positivity rates were higher than the statewide rate more often than not.

South-central Minnesota had higher rates than the statewide average for 21 weeks and lower than average rates for 15 weeks since late June — when county-level testing data first became publicly available.

Minnesota regularly had lower positivity rates than its neighboring states, however, so south-central Minnesota's rates would likely look favorable if compared to most counties in nearby states during the pandemic.



**“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.”

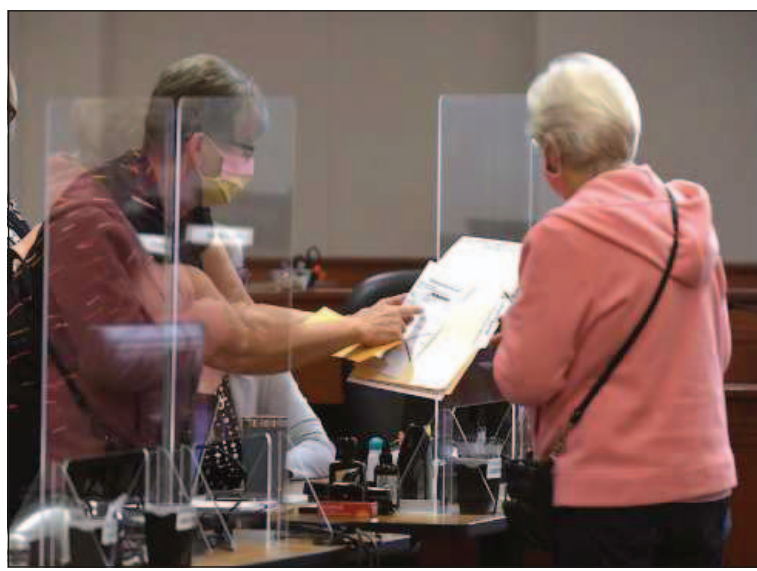
Still, the financial burden of being closed was already taking a toll.

“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 Benschopf 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.