**ER nurse reflects on death, mourning and rites of passage in the COVID era**

*By Bram Sable Smith, WPR / Wisconsin Watch*

Mariah Clark is no stranger to dealing with COVID-19 in her work as an emergency department nurse at UW Health in Madison. As the coronavirus pandemic enters its fifth month, the virus as of July 20 claimed nearly 133,000 lives in the United States, including 846 in Wisconsin.

The virus unexpectedly touched Clark’s personal life in late June.

Clark and her “sweetheart” were returning home from a Father’s Day gathering with Clark’s immediate family members (who also make up her quarantine bubble) when a text message informed her partner that the couple’s friend had died of COVID-19.

“He was more than sad. He hadn’t even realized his friend was sick,” Clark said late that night while watching the rain fall as she sat on her porch.

The couple memorialized the friend who, like them, was a sailor. They guzzled black rum sprinkled with lime and recounted stories about him, “as sailors are prone to do.”

Just weeks earlier the friend had “very happily” called the Madison couple out of the blue.

“He was checking on how (Clark’s partner) was doing with his music, how I was doing with nursing. And then decided that he was going to send us a pizza, just to be nice,” Clark recalled.

“We sent him a photograph of us eating it and promised we’d meet for drinks sometime, even if it was just online,” Clark said.

“We never did. And then tonight we get the text that he is dead.”

As the night lingered, Clark reflected on how personal and collective rites of passage — and even social movements — continue to unfold during the pandemic: “People are still getting married, having kids getting divorced, dying.”

A different sailor friend was planning a virtual baby shower over Zoom. Some funeral homes are offering multiple visitations to reduce how many people pay their respects at one time.

And of course, Clark said, there are the nationwide protests sparked by the police killing of Geroge Floyd in Minneapolis. The youth-led events, which Clark attended in Madison, featured speakers who were “breathtaking in their righteous anger and their passion and their love and their eloquence and their rousing, heartbreaking, community-building talk,” she said.

“I think that that’s one of the hallmarks of the pandemic — when you’re not just in that blank limbo of routine,” Clark said. “This conflict of emotions for all of these very important things happening, and all of these very important other things going under the radar.”

Clark said all she can do is offer support for the grieving and remember those who the world has lost in recent months — whether that means showing up to local memorials for George Floyd and others killed by police or remembering the life of a friend, stolen by the pandemic, from the isolation of her porch.

“Because we’re not going to get to go to a funeral.”

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*Bram Sable-Smith joined the Center in 2019 as the Wisconsin Public Radio Mike Simonson Memorial Investigative Reporting Fellow.*