EDITORIAL

Celebrations snatched away

From the Olympics to birthdays and services, little is untouched by the coronavirus

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Time is marked and enlivened by the special events that grace our communal calendar. They help us organize the year and provide anticipation and excitement that is difficult to match or replace.

That’s true even in times like these, when our attention is riveted on a dangerous new virus threatening the globe. If anything, these events become even more important as each of us looks to the comforts of familiar rituals amid an unnerving death toll that marches steadily upward.

But that expectation has been shred-ded by the coronavirus, which last week claimed its biggest spectator spectacle yet when the Summer Olympics were postponed until 2021. A cultural touchstone, the Olympics are the pinnacle of athletic achievement and must-watch viewing for millions in the global community. Competing in them is the ultimate accomplishment for thousands of athletes, who sacrifice so much to get there. Their stories often are the stuff of inspiration. For some, that dream ended when the Tokyo Games were pushed back; they won’t be able to successfully qualify to compete the next time around.

Emotions run high

Similar emotions were felt by the many local high school and college athletes about to compete in state or national championships that were abruptly shelved. For some, these competitions are steppingstones on the road to greater athletic glory. For others, they are the culmination of their sporting careers. These athletes worked hard, too, and their hurt is just as real. The same is true of the actors, actresses, singers and musicians whose plays, musicals and concerts were called off.

But the larger truth is that many among us are struggling in similar fashion. We might not be on the front lines of the fight, but we understand all too well what those Olympians are going through because each of us is experiencing the heartbreak and frustration of having special moments delayed or outright canceled by the virus or the policies for combating it.

We’ve lost weddings and birthday parties, graduations and retirement parties, bar mitzvahs and baptisms, Easter and Passover celebrations, and many other occasions that inject our lives with so much spirit, meaning and color. Some will be held later. Some will not. How do you compensate for the twirl not taken across the dance floor, the candles not blown out, the diploma not proudly cradled?

Isolated in our homes and apartments, separated from our families, both real and workplace, we crave the social contact that is our life-blood now more than ever. A celebration with loved ones would sure feel good. Because when times get tough, as they are now, we look to each other, and especially to those closest to us, for support. And we look to sports and the arts for escape — but virtually all of that also has been stripped away. Many of us don’t even have the comfort of organized religion to call on, with the suspension of so many services fracturing that fellowship.

No longer there

Whether it’s a first birthday party enjoyed by a handful of family members or the March Madness college basketball phenomenon that exhilarates tens of millions, these events help bond us together via the power of a shared experience. And when they’re taken away, life’s disappointments big and small take a toll on us.

The number of Americans who say that their emotional well-being worsened over the previous week increased by nearly half, from 29% to 43%, according to the most recent polling conducted last week by the Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index.

The good news is that humans are, if nothing else, resilient. We refuse to let our lives be dictated by the obstacles placed before us. We find ways to adapt. And that in itself is something to celebrate.

So brave to the friends and families who are organizing caravans of cars to do drive-by birthday parties past the houses of children despondent over not being able to mark their special days. Mazel tov to everyone who is using our modern methods of communication to video-stream all sorts of celebrations, from weddings to parties of all themes and types to, yes, even funerals. It’s essential at this moment that we somehow maintain our rituals of grieving together for those we love. The nature of our shared experiences might be changing, but we still are sharing.

As the days wear on, as the fears increase and the coronavirus crisis worsens with mounting casualties, it’s important that we continue to find new ways to mark old occasions, and let these virtual hugs suffice until we can wrap our arms around one another again for real.
A different kind of war

Dread creeps into fight against COVID-19, but front-line heroes give us reason for hope

The images are from a nation at war.

The Navy medical ships in the harbors of New York and Los Angeles. The hospital tents in Central Park, military field hospitals on the grounds of SUNY campuses in Old Westbury and Stony Brook, and triage tents sprouting all over the region. Emergency morgue trucks ferrying body bags. The streets empty and silent, except for the sirens. The shuttered businesses with boarded windows. The intent focus on news developments, with the climbing count of casualties broadcast on a split screen. And the glimpses, fleeting at first but growing in number and duration, of the victims with their tubes and stretchers, and of the heroes, the doctors and nurses armored in protective gear from head to toe.

For many people, this war, like the one waged decades ago in Vietnam, was distant at first, a battle against an enemy we couldn’t see and didn’t really understand. Now, dread is creeping closer for more and more people, as it did back then.

Closer, closer to home

The first to feel it were those with loved ones on the front lines, who heard their stories and understood the danger they confronted. Next were those who knew someone who got sick, or who died. Now the circle widens daily — as more victims fall, and more families say final goodbyes over cellphones held by intensive care nurses with tears streaming down their masked cheeks, and more medical professionals talk about being overwhelmed by the strain of seeing so many people die despite their best efforts. In three weeks, the number of Americans who say the coronavirus crisis has not affected them personally has fallen from a majority of 52% to just 9%. Now, it’s hitting everyone.

Dread feeds on this anxiety. Suspicion fuels attacks on ethnic groups falsely believed to be the enemy. Unemployment filings are up, bills are mounting, some store shelves are empty, people who are diligently practicing social distancing look with suspicion at those who are not, and the president who not long ago was saying the virus would just disappear is now saying that holding the death toll to 100,000 to 240,000 Americans would be a success. As was the case with Vietnam, distrust in the federal government is corrosive.

But as the unease grows, we’re also hearing other stories. And these are sources of comfort, and fonts of inspiration. These are accounts of people who have exhibited extraordinary courage, what Ernest Hemingway defined as grace under pressure. And as these stories start to surface, we need to understand the sacrifice of these heroes, honor what they’re doing now, and not forget it later.

These are the doctors and nurses functioning amid shortages of protective equipment, some reduced to wearing homemade gear, frightened that they will bring the virus home to their families, knowing they are being exposed and concerned that they inevitably will get sick. But still they soldier on.

These are the EMTs, the cops and the firefighters, the first responders who have no choice but to respond, and they do, despite not knowing the status of the person who needs their help. Passion overcomes fear, commitment triumphs over nerves.

These are the grocery workers, the truck drivers, the warehouse workers, the delivery people, the transit workers, the takeout cooks, the postal workers, and the farmers and fishers and ranchers, who are putting aside their personal peril to keep what’s left of our economy alive.

These are the nursing home staff, the home health care workers, the cleaning crews, the garbage collectors, and the teachers creating new online lessons for children who have had their schooling interrupted. They’re all fighting the war on their own home fronts.

All hands on

And it needs to be all of us, who tend to our families, keep our ties strong, watch out for neighbors, cheer up those who are anxious and suffering, and most of all maintain the social order that cannot break down.

Remember that in the days ahead. The images will get darker, the news will get worse, and the tales will become more horrifyingly personal as the roster of the dead keeps growing on Long Island, across New York, and as the tentacles of this monstrous crisis spread across the nation, trapping new communities in its maw.

But we also will hear more stories of heroism on the front lines that will lead us to tears, of generosity of the many who support our medical troops that will leave us smiling, and of kindness and goodwill among our friends, families and neighbors that will make us proud. Focus on that. Because that will provide all of us with the reassurance that we will get through this war and emerge in a place where we all can find some peace.
The timetable is uncertain, the exact steps not clear, the risks large. That’s the nature as New York considers the complex calculus of returning to some semblance of post-coronavirus normalcy. As Long Island and state officials wrestle with those decisions, it can be difficult to see the road back.

But the reopening, underway in some places, will begin here at some point, too. That will force our nation, state, region and each of us to deal with the many flaws the virus has exposed in our systems, organizations and ways of life. We must reckon with those flaws, and resist the temptation of thinking that a vaccine and improved treatments for COVID-19 will resolve everything. They won’t.

Our economy is staggering. More than 287,000 Long Islanders filed for unemployment over the past eight weeks. National unemployment is near 15%, and higher for lower-paid workers, minorities and young adults. A severe recession looms, perhaps a depression if our leaders don’t act smartly. Local government revenue has cratered; services might soon follow. Mental health services are under increasing strain from people suffering from a toxic brew of job losses, health worries and isolation. Shuttered school systems are responding unevenly; students in wealthier districts are positioned to stay on track while children in poorer districts risk falling further behind.

How do we make fundamental changes in the way we live to try to ensure that this doesn’t happen again, and to better prepare us if it does? How do we reexamine every aspect of our society to strengthen what works and revamp what doesn’t? We need big ideas and big changes. Some things already were happening, like remote learning and the use of robots in the service industry, but the virus is accelerating our pace into the future. We can adapt because we’ve already done it.

A few months ago, many of us would have dismissed what we’re doing now — staying home as much as possible, keeping our distance from one another, wearing masks when we’re out — as impossible, something from the realm of science fiction. Now, most of us want to continue doing it even as some agitate to return to life as we knew it before COVID-19.

That shows that collectively we understand that we can make a difference through our behavior — and that we must make this difference for our common survival. It also shows we understand that in the face of a threat like this, our lives cannot remain the same. There is no going back.

The coronavirus that caused COVID-19 is not the first to infect our generation, nor will it be the last. The next pandemic is a matter of when, not if. So this virus presents a challenge we all must embrace. How do we change? Here are some issues for Long Islanders to consider.

WORKPLACES

Many Americans already have seen changes in their workplace, with no loss in production. Will telecommuting remain in place, especially for Long Islanders who work in the city? What changes should occur to accommodate social distancing, and how will that affect productivity? Should admission to large workplaces depend on some medical testing criteria? Will videoconferencing permanently disrupt the business trip?

For essential workers from MTA train and bus conductors to medical staff and grocery clerks, staying on the job sometimes led to contracting the virus. Do workers need more protections, like sick leave, hazard pay and a better minimum wage? Is a universal basic income now essential? Will unemployment increase as robots and artificial intelligence systems are deployed? When the pandemic is over, will we still see as heroes the underpaid and overworked essential workers keeping us alive now, and compensate them as such?

GOVERNMENT

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it’s that government is critical,
Join the conversation: A post-pandemic LI

This is the first in a series of editorials in which the Newsday editorial board will explore the fundamental changes that must be made in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The virus has exposed many cracks and fissures in many aspects of our society—from health care to government to education, from the way we work to the way we recreate to the very way we live.

Newsday’s editorial board does not want to make this exploration alone. We want to hear from you, our readers. We want to know what you're thinking, and what ideas you have for addressing the problems laid bare by COVID-19, to help guide the discussion in the weeks and months ahead.

Please post your thoughts, up to 500 words, at newsday.com/FutureVisionLI.

Join the debate about our future. Thank you.

— The editorial board

Nearly 90,000 people have died in the U.S. from the virus.

and that those working in it must be competent and skilled. That requires training and experience. Will we demand those traits of those who run for elective office?

The virus also has exposed the sorry state of technology and digital infrastructure in government, especially at local levels. Elected officials have starved technology of resources for too long at the expense of other priorities or flashier improvements. Antiquated computers and software, data collection problems, and the inability of state and local governments to connect with one another plagued the response in New York and elsewhere. How will we resolve this crisis? How should we modernize government to better prepare for emergencies, so that warnings and information can be sent and benefits like unemployment delivered more efficiently? Why did the state need so many emergency executive orders to address so many situations? Can voting be modernized so elections are conducted mostly by mail, and polling sites made safe for workers and voters?

How do we ensure that all levels of government examine their response to the pandemic and produce blueprints for the next one? What should the federal government do about broken supply chains, especially for medical supplies and pharmaceuticals? Can they be rebuilt and safeguarded, or should each nation build its own supply chain, which could mean incentivizing off-shore manufacturing to return to the U.S.? Should the pandemic force a reconsideration of what government spends money on and what it does not?

EDUCATION

Besides abruptly stopping in-person learning, COVID-19 also has shined a harsh light on differences in education received by students in wealthier and poorer districts, a chronic problem on Long Island. Can technology address this bedrock issue of equity? Should resources be distributed differently? School districts reorganized? Can taxpayers still afford to fund education at the same levels as before? Does distance learning become a routine part of K-12 and higher education? What are parents’ roles in this vision? Can college dorms be retrofitted to increase safety? What will happen to higher education business models if students refuse to return in September? Will Long Island’s community colleges become temporary landing spots for students leery of going away? Will others shut their doors?

HEALTH CARE

The most profound changes are likely to come in the delivery and cost of health care. How can the system be made more flexible and more efficient to better deal with surges of patients? Can resources be better deployed? As we fix cracks in the public health system exposed by COVID-19, how can we finally ensure access to affordable health care for all Americans? This virus has taught us a lesson of biblical proportions: our own health depends on the health of others. How to address chronic issues of health equity, the systemic differences in overall health and health care access for people of different races and ethnic backgrounds?

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & PRIVACY

Technology can help stop the spread of highly contagious viruses via the tracking capability of smartphones. But Americans express deep skepticism about losses of privacy. How can those competing interests be balanced? How does our faith in science, experts and data emerge from this? Will this crisis highlight the need to adequately fund science?

CITIES & SUBURBS

Density helped spread the virus. But it’s not the enemy, it’s the lifeblood of vibrant communities. How can cities be re-engineered for virus protection? Should some streets be shut to auto traffic, some sidewalks widened to allow more distancing, and more bike lanes and walking paths created? Should buildings be improved by increasing ventilation, filtration and humidity to control microbes and reduce susceptibility to germs? How will suburbs that desperately need more housing stock meet that demand while smartly designing for public health? Will the ease of telecommuting prompt city residents to relocate to the suburbs and drive up single-family home prices? Or will they demand more centralized downtown environments? Will their workplaces relocate part of the operations here as well? How will these new considerations affect development at the Nassau Hub, Ronkonkoma Hub and the Heartland project in Brentwood?

TRANSPORTATION

For reasons ranging from air pollution to congestion to climate change, metropolitan areas like New York have been urging commuters to abandon cars and embrace mass transit. Capacity is being increased on the Long Island Rail Road and improvements made to city transit. But progress is threatened with commuters now saying it's safer to drive. Beyond enhanced cleaning, how can government remake mass transit so it is seen by riders as safe? Can air travel survive social-distancing policies and still be offered at a reasonable cost? Will ferry service, long-struggling to gain a Long Island foothold, become an attractive option?

PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

As coronavirus guidelines grounded rituals and celebrations that define our sense of community, resourceful Long Islanders replaced them with drive-by birthday parties and family gatherings on Zoom. How much will we blend old and new? Stung by sudden distancing from loved ones, will we be even more attuned to family and friends? Will we be as helpful and attentive to others? Will COVID-19 alter the bounds of the nuclear family by bringing grandparents, now isolated, into the household with parents and children? Will we continue to live as much of our lives online? Will we keep walking? Or will the virus teach us to be more wary of intimacy and contact?

LEISURE & TRAVEL

Their reliance on communal experiences dictates a steep climb back. Likely to be among the last sectors to fully return, they face a daunting obstacle in convincing people of their safety, critical for a tourism-dependent region like Long Island. How will we spend our vacations and leisure time? How can beaches, so essential to life on Long Island, be safely reopened? Will we feel comfortable visiting big cities, staying in hotels, going on cruises, flying, or patronizing restaurants, bars, movie theaters, Broadway shows, museums, sporting events and concerts? How will businesses dependent on crowds survive? Will large swathes of people prefer less crowded experiences, and how will the industry adapt?
A moment to be seized

Recovery from virus and search for racial justice can bring LI to a better place

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

On Long Island, as in much of the country, the killing of George Floyd and the cries for racial justice that followed have dominated our attention and shifted focus away from the coronavirus pandemic. But we're still dealing with COVID-19.

What's more, we're facing critical moments on each of these challenges. When we understand how closely both are tied to other big issues like housing, education and environmental justice, it's clear we must continue to attack each problem with extraordinary vigor.

As the hot light is trained on the search for new laws and policies on policing in the endless pursuit of racial justice, we must also continue to do the quieter work of reopening from the region's virus-induced shutdown. We're in the early stages, and it's apparent we're not yet hitting the ground running, even as we get ready to move into phase 2 this week. That's OK. The road ahead is still so uncertain that slow and easy is the right way back. Most New Yorkers, indeed most Americans, feel that way, too. The more diligently we play our part, the more likely this comeback goes well.

Millions of Americans who lost jobs, and battered governments at all levels face difficult financial situations. But when our region successfully emerges from this, and the economy rebounds as infections continue to drop, we must not fall for the idea that this crisis was overblown and hyped, that shutting down the economy was an overreaction. Nearly 110,000 Americans, including more than 24,000 New Yorkers, have died in the past three months. Ignoring that would dishonor them and the heroic efforts of doctors, nurses and first responders to try to save them.

Our memories can't be so short that we forget the teeming intensive care units, the daily four-digit death toll, the bodies piled in morgues and refrigerated trucks, and the searing heartbreak felt by so many families who suddenly lost loved ones. We cannot do to them what we have done with the many victims of racial violence who preceded George Floyd, and ignore what happened as it recedes in the rearview mirror.

There will be times going forward from this virus, as there have been all along, when the way is not clear. Navigating shifting, incomplete and sometimes contradictory information can be exasperating. That's normal in a crisis and especially true in a crisis like this, where there still is so much to learn about COVID-19.

From the start we've received mixed messages on whether to wear masks, the accuracy of antibody tests, the behavior of the virus and the ways it can be transmitted, the effectiveness of various medicines, the rates of infection, and the death toll itself. Some regulations have changed, some advice has morphed. That's not ideal, but it's the process. Science doesn't arrive at the whole truth quickly. Fully unlocking the mysteries of this virus and developing a vaccine will take time. Science is still our best bet to emerge from this, as it has been throughout human history.

Despite the understandable frustration some of us feel, we need to trust that and adjust as new information arises.

Recent studies, for example, show that the virus can linger in the air for hours, and that six feet might not be enough distance to keep between us. Such revelations are reason not to lash out and reject fundamental findings, but to remain calm and adapt our behaviors. Respect the business owners allowed to deny entry to customers without masks. Resist the temptation to emulate what some people in other parts of the country are doing, like crowding into bars without masks.

While many in our region worry more about opening up too quickly than reopening too slowly, it's also clear that plenty of us are aching for small doses of normalcy, stepstones that can be used to measure progress. There are possibilities.

One proposal from state legislators asks Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to allow outdoor high school graduations in July. He's given the OK on drive-in and drive-through ceremonies but outdoor ones also can be done safely. It's a matter of math. Keep students an appropriate distance apart on a football field and do the same with crowds limited to parents in stands.

We've had so many rituals sadly but necessarily stripped away. Bringing back a powerful emotional touchstone for students and families like a high school graduation would do wonders for many psyches, just like the newly accelerated timetable for restaurants to offer outdoor dining will nourish the souls of diners.

As we frequent the curbsides of our favorite small businesses, encounter the sights and sounds of construction sites rumbling to life, and dip a toe once more in our precious sand and surf, let's remember that the story of our recovery from the virus — like the story of our quest for racial justice — has many threads that must be woven together properly for the story to end well.

So let's continue to be smart. Let's remember not to be so self-centered that we forget that our behaviors can affect the health of others. Whether we're moving gingerly back into public spaces or marching lustily in the streets, let's take with us a basic respect for our fellow humans. Then we can reach the goals we're seeking.