

BROADCAST-Finding Purpose in a Pandemic

Mickey Lower of Bloomington is known as “The Zoo Lady,” which is also the name of her face painting business that has been on hold temporarily since Illinois Governor Pritzker issued his “stay-at-home” order March 21.

Lower said she went from being so busy with birthday parties, festivals, even regular appearances at local businesses, typically seeing as many as 500 kids over a weekend to having nothing on the calendar.

Soon, she found herself getting what she refers to as a “case of the sad sorries,” so she decided it was time to drag out the sewing machine and use all that cloth the former Home Economics and Theater teacher hoarded over the years.

Lower began sewing masks for OSF HealthCare and anyone else in need. The extrovert converted her garage into a sewing shop to enjoy fresh air and to chat with anyone passing by. She has made 500 masks to date and she’ll keep going with demand likely ramping up as a new masking order taking effect in Illinois this week.

The new order requires that people older than two years wear a face covering or mask “when in a public place where they can’t maintain a six-foot social distance” to prevent individuals from spreading the virus when they cough, sneeze or talk. That includes visitors and patients to OSF HealthCare hospitals and medical offices as well as Mission Partners (employees) when interacting with the public. Those doing direct care will be provided medical grade masks.

Making masks has helped Lower feel she has a purpose after initially feeling very depressed.

SOT-Volunteer Mask Maker Mickey Lower

“It’s selfish in that I’m getting a lot more ... a lot more from this. Of course, it’s saving my life in a sense. My personality, and being down and wanting to sleep all day.” (:16)

Lower, who suffered a mini-stroke six months ago, emerged with an even greater appreciation for health care workers and she wants to do everything she can to keep them safe.

SOT-Volunteer Mask Maker Mickey Lower

“With the health care workers, they really need them. It’s not like me who needs it to run into the Dollar General to get some pipe cleaners. They really need them and I appreciate what they do and you know, this is not going to end tomorrow.” (:15)

So, Lower has been cranking out masks, creating about five per hour. She uses pipe cleaners inserted into a seam to create a tight fit around the nose, and they have a felt-lined pocket inside to insert a coffee filter as an added barrier.

Drawing inspiration where she can find it, Lower has been returning often to the anonymous sentiments embedded on a thrift store find that hangs in her makeshift sewing studio. She says it embodies her approach to life.

SOT-Volunteer Mask Maker Mickey Lower

“We go this way but once oh heart of mine, so why not make the journey worthwhile ... taking those who are on the journey with us, a helping hand, a word of cheer and a smile.” (:10)

Lower spent more than three decades in the classroom so she a few tricks for entertaining kids. She has several at-home craft projects she’s been sharing with others including a fun, rock painting idea. Along with sewing masks, Lower has been painting rocks (instead of children’s faces) and she’s giving them away to spread a bit of cheer.

SOT-Volunteer Mask Maker Mickey Lower

“I don’t have the 2-20 but I wanted to put a 2-20 (on the back) so they could kind of remember this year, so that’s fun. The way you do the dots are with Q-Tips and any kind of acrylic paint.” (:13)

Using her creative talents to help others during this pandemic has fed Lower’s soul and has made her feel needed. Behavioral Health leaders at OSF HealthCare recommend finding ways to help others if you are able because doing so can boost your mood and feel very rewarding but they also stress [seeking help if you need emotional support](#).

OSF HealthCare [has set up a page on its website](#) that offers a variety of ways you can support frontline workers responding to COVID-19.