

# Heart-shaped art brings hope amid pandemic

By DAVID SHARP  
Associated Press

FALMOUTH, Maine — Donald Verger has been putting heart into his art during the coronavirus pandemic.

And images of those intricate hearts made from vibrant sea glass are flowing back to schools and hospitals that have been hard hit by COVID-19 during the pandemic.

“The hearts hit a sweet spot for people,” Verger said. “People love sea glass, the color, the patterns.”

Across the country, many artists find themselves struggling during the pandemic, but they’re also finding ways to give back during a health crisis that has claimed more than 465,000 lives in the United States.

Verger’s efforts represent his small but colorful contribution to the effort to bring people a smile, or maybe a moment of calm and peace, amid the isolation of the pandemic.

He’s sent about 25,000 postcards of his hearts and landscape photography to schools and hospitals. He delivers them at 1,000 or 2,500 at a time. Employers and teachers give them to staff, students and patients.

Recently, he’s donated at least 10,000 with LOVE superimposed on them. Another 10,000 had HOPE superimposed on them.

“It seems like a great privilege to do something that supports happiness and some sense of hope,” said Verger, whose studio is in Falmouth, Maine.

Eileen Skinner, an administrator at Shriners Hospitals for Children — Boston, was handing out



Robert F. Bukaty/AP Photo

**Donald Verger arranges sea glass in the shape of a heart on Thursday in Maine. After photographing his art, Verger donates photos and cards to schools and hospitals as a way of giving back during the pandemic.**

cards with hearts with the word LOVE to more than 400 workers ahead of Valentine’s Day.

“You have to be in a health care organization to understand the COVID fatigue,” Skinner said. “It’s just encouraging to the staff that somebody is thinking of them.”

Verger, 72, grew up in New York but considers himself a New Englander. Living in Massachusetts, where he raised his family, he founded the Children’s Discovery Museum and Science Discovery Museum in New England, in the town of Acton, Massachusetts.

As a photographer, he’s renowned for his stunning images of landscapes and lighthouses in New England. His best known photo is “Dawn of Peace,” which depicts sea smoke greeting the sunrise on a subzero morning on Thompson Lake in Otisfield, Maine.

He merged his photography with colorful sea glass that he began collecting on the coast of California. He began arranging the sea glass into images reminiscent

of a Monet or Renoir painting.

His first donations came about after a brush with a tornado in Missouri while photographing the dramatic storms in 2011. The storm chasers became the ones being chased by a massive tornado that left the town of Joplin, Missouri. More than 150 people were killed.

After returning to Maine, he put some of his images meant to soothe and to calm onto postcards with a message and the name Joplin. All told, he sent about 25,000 of them to the Red Cross, schools and other organizations.

During the pandemic, he’s sent postcards to schools and hospitals. He recently donated to Northern Light Mercy Hospital in Portland, Maine, and other facilities, in addition to Boston’s Shriners hospital.

Skinner and Verger first met in Maine, when he donated framed photos to be used at Mercy Hospital when she was CEO.

“Donald is a warm and generous person,” she said. “He shares what he does best.”

# Struggling restaurants feed health workers to survive

By GILLIAN FLACCUS  
Associated Press

PORTLAND — It was the week after Christmas and coronavirus case numbers and hospitalizations were soaring in Portland.

At Oregon Health & Science University, the state’s largest hospital, morale was low. Doctors and nurses caring for the most critically ill were burning out just when they were needed the most.

Then, the food started coming: hot and delicious individually wrapped meals from some of the city’s trendiest restaurants, a buffet of cuisines from Chinese to Italian to Lebanese to Southern comfort food. For staffers who only took off their N95 masks once to eat during a 12-hour shift, the meals were more than just food — they were emotional sustenance.

“It’s almost like having a weight lifted. It’s like getting a surprise dozen roses or something,” nurse Alice Clark said. “We’re so grateful.”

But the meals, paid for by a wellness grant from the Oregon-based insurance fund SAIF, also served another purpose: They kept struggling restaurants afloat. As fall and then winter set in, eateries were folding under the strain of a monthslong indoor dining ban. The hospital orders — sometimes 150 or 160 meals at a time — were a financial lifeline.

“It’s kept the doors open and a small workforce employed. It’s been the most heartfelt catering we’ve ever done,” said Kiauna Floyd, third-generation owner of Amalfi’s, a Portland institution that’s been serving up Italian cuisine for 62 years.

Floyd’s staff has prepared around 500 meals for OHSU, allowing her to keep a core crew employed after



Brittney Caldera

**From left, Oregon Health & Science University nurses Nick Greenwood, Callie Harling, Derrell Wheeler and Orion Meredith as they eat a meal delivered to the hospital’s front-line COVID-19 health care workers in January in Portland.**

laying off three-quarters of her employees. The restaurant has been limping along with seven tables on an outdoor patio in the height of winter, as well as takeout orders and pre-packaged meals-to-go.

Amalfi’s focused on manicotti and lasagna dishes for the COVID support meals — and the restaurant’s deliveries have proved to be among the most popular with the recipients.

“We want to do something as comforting as possible so when they are on their break and do get that lunch, it warms their soul,” she said.

For now, though, meal deliveries to OHSU have dried up with the grant funding, and the program ended on Jan. 19. Leaders are hoping for a new funding source to get meals running again soon. The three-week effort paid local eateries a total of \$39,000 at a critical time.

A similar effort funded by private donations through a now-defunct nonprofit called Frontline Foods PDX connected restaurants with Portland-area hospitals and clinics early in the pandemic, but then donations began to fall off and

the effort slowed and then stopped.

That effort provided about 13,800 meals over three months to six facilities, including a veteran’s hospital and a homeless clinic, and was a major source of pandemic revenue for 14 restaurants — many of them owned by people of color.

“To be able to call and say, ‘Hey, I have \$2,000 of business for you’ is just the most incredible feeling,” said Shannon Tivona, who coordinated meal orders and delivery for OHSU and volunteered for Frontline Foods in its earlier work.

“The times where we’re not doing anything are really tough. The restaurant owners call me and say, ‘Do you have anything yet? Do you have anything?’ And it’s heartbreaking to have to say, ‘No, I don’t.’”

But many of the same restaurants were called upon to deliver 2,600 meals to OHSU doctors, nurses, physician assistants, custodial staff and other front-line workers in the emergency room and on two COVID-focused floors — three times a week, for both day and night shifts.

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