Pandemic puts plastic bag restrictions on pause

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Just weeks ago, cities and even states across the U.S. were busy banning straws, limiting takeout containers and mandating that shoppers bring reusable bags or pay a small fee as the movement to eliminate single-use plastics took hold in mainstream America.

What a difference a pandemic makes.

In a matter of days, hard-won bans to reduce the use of plastics — and particularly plastic shopping sacks — across the U.S. have come under fire amid worries about the virus clinging to reusable bags, cups and straws.

Governors in Massachusetts and Illinois have banned or strongly discouraged the use of reusable grocery bags. Oregon suspended its brand-new ban on plastic bags this week, and cities from Bellingham, Washington, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, have announced a hiatus on plastic bag bans as the coronavirus rages.

Add to that a rise in takeout and a ban on reusable cups and straws at the few coffee stores that remain open, and environmentalists worry COVID-19 could set back their efforts to tackle plastic pollution for years.

"People are scared for their lives, their livelihood, the economy, feeding their loved ones, so the environment is taking a back seat," said Glen Quadros, owner of the Great American Diner & Bar in Seattle.

Quadros has laid off 15 employees and seen a 60% decline in business since Seattle all but shut down to slow the pandemic. For now, he's using biodegradable containers for takeout and delivery, but those products cost up to three times more than plastic — and they're getting hard to find because of the surge in takeout, he said.

"The problem is, we don't know what's in store," Quadros said. "Everyone is in the same situation."

The plastics industry has seized the moment and is lobbying hard to overturn bans on single-use plastics by arguing disposable plastics are the safest option amid the crisis. California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New York, Oregon and Vermont have statewide bans on plastic bags, and Oregon and California have laws limiting the use of plastic straws.

New York's statewide plastic bag ban is on hold because of a lawsuit.

The Plastics Industry Association recently sent a letter to Alex Azar, head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and asked him to speak out against plastic bag bans because they put consumers and workers at risk. And the American Recyclable Plastic Bag Alliance is doubling down on its opposition to plastic bag bans under a preexisting campaign titled Bag the Ban.

Grocery worker unions, too, have joined the chorus. The union that represents Oregon supermarket workers is lobbying for a ban on reusable bags, and a Chicago union called for an "end to the disease-transmitting bag tax."

Critics argue people with reusable bags don't regularly wash them.

"If those bags coming into the store are contaminated with anything, they get put on the conveyor belt, the counter, and you're putting yourself in a bad spot," said Matt Seaholm, executive director of the American Recyclable Plastic Bag Alliance. "It's an unnecessary risk."

A study by the U.S. National Institutes of Health found the novel coronavirus can remain on plastics and stainless steel for up to three days, and on cardboard for up to one day. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it appears possible for a person to get COVID-19 by touching a surface that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes — but it's not thought that's the main way the virus spreads.

More studies are needed to fully assess the dangers posed by reusable bags, which are mostly made of fabric, said Dr. Jennifer Vines, lead health officer for the Portland metropolitan area.

"It's not clear that a virus that you can find on a surface — whether it's cloth or something else — is viable and can actually make you sick," she said.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks.

Story Miller's coronavirus chronicle

Editor's Note: This is the second installment of the diary that Story Miller, who grew up in Richland, wrote from her home in Italy, where she has lived since 2012. The first installment was in the Herald's April 9 issue and is also available at www.bakercityherald.com

Photo by Story Miller

An empty street in the Italian town of Rovereto sulla Secchia, where Story Miller lives. Miller, who grew up in Richland, has lived in Italy since 2012.

"Hug your kids tight. Give your family a call. You just never know. And please, stay safe as best you can while we ride out this perfect storm together."
— Story Miller

One day at lunch, we were watching the news and I was disturbed to hear that COVID-19 cases started "showing up" in the USA. "Of course it would, but it was in the U.S. long before," I thought. "Viruses don't care about borders."

With the globalization of today, all it takes is one asymptomatic carrier of this virus to infect an entire planet. All those infected people going about their daily lives. Visiting their 87-year-old mother on her birthday, shopping at the mall, playing recreational basketball, swimming in the public pool. They feel fine which equates to feeling invincible.

I think of the 34-year-old male who was one of the first Italians hospitalized for COVID-19. He had had dinner with a friend who'd returned from a business trip in China before the outbreak. The friend had been unknowingly infected and passed it on to this young man. The next day, this young man ran a marathon! Two weeks later, this athlete in prime health was hospitalized, along with his pregnant wife and meanwhile, the virus took his mother in a matter of days.

Taking a break, I scrolled through Facebook and to my horror, I read about how people back home were preparing for the Halfway crab feed. People from all over Western Oregon come in for the feed and Western Oregon and Washington are now getting reports of COVID-19 cases. I read how people I know are upset that it might be canceled *(Editor's note: The Halfway crab feed was canceled)*.

I read about how some claim it's the Democrats and the media blowing this coronavirus out of proportion. I read comments from others telling people to go if they feel fine and if they have a sniffle, to stay home. Some protested to protect their civil liberties. I feel like I've been sucker-punched in the gut. All this time, I had been focusing on keeping my immediate family safe, but I had totally just assumed that people from home knew what was going on in Italy. I forgot about all the political bickering that masks facts in the media. I realized that I was long overdue for a phone call home.

I check my watch. It's way too early in the USA to call. So I decide to do the next best thing. I start sharing what's happening here on the cities' Facebook pages. Maybe if people can understand how fast this spreads, they can save their friends and neighbors, or at least reduce the number of cases so as not to overload the small hospitals in Baker and La Grande. Italy has so many more hospitals and ICU facilities per square mile than these areas due to sheer geography and yet the hospital resources are completely exhausted (and please, it has nothing to do with "socialist health care"). No hospital is equipped to provide ICU services to 30% or more of a population and these numbers are growing too fast!

Thanks to the extreme exponential growth of this virus, the small area of Bergamo and other hospitals in the Lombardy region have been hit so quickly in an unmanageable volume that health officials have had to choose between who gets the ventilator and who doesn't. The winner is determined due to the cold hard probability of survival likelihood.

The news, both in Italy and the USA, reported convoys of Italian army trucks hauling the deceased to nearby crematoriums. I shared that too. Some people didn't like it so the post was taken down. Too depressing, I guess. Some claimed it fake news. Well, the fact is this: When one small area has over 700 people dying per day, what do you do with the bodies? Well, thankfully this isn't the Holocaust; bodies aren't being thrown into trucks and dumped in the Auschwitz crematoriums. These trucks are hauling the COVID-19 deceased in respectable coffins to crematoriums in nearby regions because the others' orders are too great. No town or county is prepared to cremate this large volume of people, 500 per day, on a daily basis.

Even more disturbing is the fact that this virus is so contagious that loved ones cannot even enter the room to be near and comfort the relative who is dying. People die alone here. Not because it's Italy, but because the hospital cannot risk you getting infected and spreading it further. The hospital has to protect the others, not just your relative. An English doctor just reported the same. She expressed her devastation when having to explain to and prevent family members from visiting their dying relatives.

Something else that is happening that many, including myself, haven't thought about. What happens when both parents get hospitalized and there are no family members nearby? Potentially orphaned kids are being picked up by social services left and right. It's disturbing to the core but what else can you do?

I'm not trying to scare people. But sometimes the truth is scary and maybe, just maybe, if I can get the word out sooner, the two little valleys in Oregon that I call home might have a fighting chance to reduce extremities that we are facing. Perhaps they can reduce the number of infected by self-isolating and flattening the curve. Again, geography can be a benefit, but all it takes is one asymptomatic person, like the 34-year-old male athlete, to come into town to spread it further. Please don't be fooled. But hey, as the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

I finally get through to talk with my family. I urge my grandparents to self-isolate, even from loved ones. I beg them to please don't take a chance. I share about how serious this is. I clarify that it is as bad, perhaps actually worse, than what CNN and FOX are portraying.

My grandmother starts sharing about how it used to be back in the old days. How sicknesses would spread, even to the most isolated of homesteads and how hunters would come across the house a year later to find the family had perished. Perhaps the older generations know a thing or two about viruses like this. Perhaps we could learn from them, before it's too late, about a past well forgotten that we may be doomed to repeat. But please don't go visiting them to find out. Use the phone!

Wow, I sound like I've gone bat crazy! Is this really coming from my mouth? I feel like crazy Sarah Conner from the first "Terminator" movie back in 1984. You know, the scene at the park where the people continue their own normal lives, completely unaware of the atom bomb that's about to explode? I think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ... then I push it out of my mind.

Week 5: Grim Reality and Peak Unknown (March 27)

I had a recent scare this week. I started running a slight fever, my asthmatic cough started becoming more frequent, and I was feeling run down. Great. I got checked out by the doctor, just in case. Most likely allergies. Phew.

Cases in my country are growing and therefore, further restrictions are in place regarding travel. I've received three emails from the U.S. embassy telling me that if I don't leave now, I will most likely not be allowed to return to the continental USA for an undetermined amount of time. My friends on the U.S. Army base here have also had to choose.

This is unsettling to me because even if I decided to go home, my asthma puts me at risk. The chances are too great for me to get infected on the plane. And then what, give it to someone in my family upon arrival because I chose to hug my relative at the gate? I'm disturbed because if anything happens to anyone in my family, I cannot come home. I had already decided to cancel my plans to return home this summer but this is different. The fact that I'm potentially not allowed back, even if, heaven forbids, one of my family members passes. This puts the distance between myself and home in a new, grim light.

But I quickly push the emotions aside. The fact of the matter is, it is ironically safer for me to stay here and right now, I cannot succumb to my emotions. Now is simply not the time.

My in-laws were running low on supplies this week and since we were out of fresh milk, I decided to make a store run. It would be nice to have some special things for Easter anyway. Wednesday turned out to be the perfect day because the wind was really whipping and the temperature had dropped to the 40s. No Italian in their right mind would be out in this weather (there's a superstition about how the air can hit and kill you) so I figured that the lines would be smaller. Dressed with my mask and latex gloves, I bet right as I was third in line, waiting for the store to open after the lunchtime siesta. Now they are only letting people in five at a time in the small grocery store that equates to the size of Old Pine Market in Halfway to keep people from clumping up. They let the volunteers go first so that they could do the shopping for the unfortunate quarantined, positive COVID-19 victims.

I also lucked out because a shipment had come in that afternoon and so the shelves were stocked, meat was plentiful, and fresh goods were exactly that, fresh and beautiful. Many others haven't been so lucky. My mother in-law had tried three times before and ended up with hardly anything. I loaded up extra in my cart and boy one could feel the glares as I walked out of the store.

I didn't care. I wasn't hoarding. I just bought enough for my in-laws and my immediate family to last three weeks so we could avoid exposing ourselves further. I knew most of them would be coming back to the store in two days' time anyway. Will it only be glares in the next few weeks? Will people still keep being civil or will they give in to unwarranted judgement, jealousy, and greed?

I'm clapping with joy and relief that the USA has finally closed down the schools and hospitals are starting to mobilize. At least it's a first step, but it's still too early on in the stages of the USA and consequently, simply doesn't seem like enough is being done as a national whole. Everyone seems to be experiencing the equivalent to the first two weeks of shutdown in Italy, aware but still delusional, regarding the gravity of this virus. People are unsettled but still feel safe in their own personal worlds. We did too.

The report today says that the USA has become No. 1 in the number of COVID-19 cases. That is to be expected, the USA is much bigger and more populated than Italy. Not to mention, the virus was just running rampant before testing started happening on a large scale. What you don't know can't hurt you right?

What disturbs me is the fact that in two weeks' time, this amount will have grown exponentially. I talked with my mom in Montana and my dad in Missouri. They are still out in the public working as they are "essential workers." I want them to stay home but I know they can't. The grey lines between what is essential and nonessential are different from Italy.

I talked with loved ones in Richland who recently had visits from family members. I cringed. I know that the social aspect is so important, but I know what is happening here too. A harmless visit to say hello and check on everyone has been a fatal death sentence here. You are literally an unknowingly armed kamikaze COVID-19 carrier, pushing the bomb button by hugging your friend. I know this sounds crazy, paranoid, and seems like an exaggeration. Except that too many have died just like this.

On average, if you are 80 years old and up, the odds are high that the virus will take you and will do so in a matter of days. I talk with others from home. Some are still equating this situation to the normal flu. Thousands of people die every day from the flu and nobody blinks an eye, they say. That's true too.

But can you answer this, "Do 1,000 people die from the flu in 24 hours in a small region not much larger than Baker County itself?" I just got a call from a friend who lives in Italy and her parents are in the USA. In less than 48 hours, she lost her father. She's distraught. I have to say that, despite my frequent complaints about Italy, I have to appreciate the national motto that translates to, "Do your part by staying home so that those around us with underlying health issues can fulfill their dearest of civil liberties, the right to live."

The times are scary and you should be reasonably afraid, not enough to panic, but enough to be sensible because you understand how important it is to take precautionary measures and stay away from those at high risk – it doesn't just attack older people. Is it really that hard to stay away? That birthday party can wait. I know prom and graduation are special, but they are a small memory in the bigger scope of life.

I hope that everyone can find the silver lining in this dark cloud. Enjoy the time at home, teach your children new things (thank a teacher if you're going nuts with home-based schooling). Drink in the special time you have with your kids. Enjoy living the one life you've been given to live while helping others fulfill their right too. Never has a greater moment existed than now to act and come together as humans, in the battle to fight this virus. Hug your kids tight. Give your family a call. You just never know. And please, stay safe as best you can while we ride out this perfect storm together.