Memorial on Detroit's Belle Isle provides sobering tribute to the city's victims of coronavirus

Stephen Fuller, Helen Halyard
4 September 2020

The City of Detroit declared August 31 Detroit Memorial Day and transformed Belle Isle Park into a large-scale memorial for the 1,500 residents who have died from COVID-19 so far this year. Photographs submitted from the families of 900 of those victims were turned into billboard-sized portraits that lined the main throughway around the island. The photos of the deceased mothers, fathers, grandparents and young people were a sobering and heartbreaking tribute to the immense toll the pandemic has taken on one of America's poorest big cities.

Detroit and Richmond, Virginia-based artist Eric Millikin assembled an image of the iconic Sprit of Detroit sculpture out of a collage of the portraits, which include wedding photos, graduation pictures as well as family photos showing multiple family members lost to the virus. "I want people to see the enormity of that and understand it. It's absolutely immeasurable." Millikin told the *Detroit Free Press*.

Millikin is an internationally exhibited multi-media artist who grew up in rural Michigan. His award-winning art addresses themes such as income inequality, the destruction of the environment, adult illiteracy and other social issues. Completing this project took a large emotional toll on him. As he explained to the *Free Press*, "I cried almost nonstop for 11 hours, I totally broke down…but as a difficult as it was for me to work on this, it's nothing compared to a family who has lost multiple family members."

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Millikin said, "Art is the most effective way to change society. It is an effective tool for political and social change. That's why governments historically try to so strictly to control art and other forms of expression. That's one of the things I hear most from people about this project, that seeing those hundreds of faces together finally made them understand our situation in a way that no number of news stories or press conferences ever could."

"I've been working on COVID-related artwork since last March, when people first started dying and we first started going into lockdown," he noted. "So, yes, for me art is the best way to try to memorialize the immense loss of our family, friends and neighbors, and to raise awareness to try to prevent more deaths."

The vast majority of the COVID-related deaths in Detroit took place during the height of the pandemic in late March and early April, when Michigan had the highest death rate in the US. Many of these deaths were preventable and took place due to conditions of poverty, lack of access to medical care and negligence driven by the domination of profit interests over basic health care.

Had it not been for the mass walkouts of autoworkers at plants throughout the Detroit area in late March, thousands more workers in the city would have perished from the virus. Four nurses who were fired from DMC's Sinai Grace hospital for exposing dangerous conditions that led to patient deaths are now suing corporate parent Tenet Healthcare for wrongful termination. At the same time, doctors filed a no-confidence petition against Michigan's Beaumont Hospital on the eve of its merger with Advocate Aurora Health System, charging that the administration makes it impossible to provide a safe place to care for patients.

Asked to comment on the constant refrain from politicians that we are all in this together, Millikin said, "Yeah, it's maybe true that 'we're all in this,' but we're certainly not all in this equally. We're in a country with huge gaps between working people and the wealthy. Some people can withstand being out of work longer than others.

"Some people can pay medical bills more easily than others. To put it bluntly, some people will inherit wealth if their parents die of COVID, and others will lose their family's only source of income and be evicted from their homes.

"Some people have lost multiple members of their families. Some people have lost both of their parents. Some have had to say goodbye to their young children they thought they'd watch grow up and outlive them. Some

© World Socialist Web Site

people have survived COVID and are still struggling with long-term health effects.

"So, yes, 'we're all in this together' in the sense that we all need to help each other out by wearing masks and staying home, but we also need to recognize that some of us are getting hit harder than others, and as people looking out for each other, try to help those of us being hardest hit, whether that's people in retirement homes, people in jail, people who work closely together at the plant, people who live close together in dense cities, whatever."

Expressing support for the work done by Millikin, James, a young worker living in Detroit who lost many friends and relatives to the virus, told the WSWS, "The exhibit honors the ones we lost very well. Although it is very sad, the photo display is of high quality. The lively pictures of the victims are shown smiling and in good health but you also know in most cases their deaths could have been prevented. I remember the days when we took the photos of my family members. They were happier days. Many good people in Detroit perished in this tragedy. People who made the city of Detroit unique."

Many families who visited the island expressed similar sentiments and were happy to have the chance to remember and say goodbye to those they knew personally and the many hundreds of others they did not know.

The daughters of Valerie Rhodes, Ciara Cravens and Taylor Blakes, visited the memorial Tuesday to remember their mother and reflect on all those who had died in the city. Rhodes had operated her own home health care business called Embrace Home Health Care, and also worked as a nursing assistant.

"My mother was 52 years old. She had no pre-existing conditions, no medical problems," Ciara explained. "When my mother died, they said that COVID was overworking her lungs and the stress produced by that traveled to her heart. She was on a ventilator for three days before she passed."

"This disease is nothing to play with, it's serious," Ciara said, reflecting on the impact of the pandemic. "I think they should shut down every state in America and I think nobody should be allowed to travel around right now. Not even by car. All 50 states should be closed. I don't think they should be reopening the schools, everything should be closed. Everything except grocery stores, gas stations and other essential businesses should be kept closed. The malls should remain closed and if people need to shop they should go online.

I mean look at how many people have passed. 1,500 in Detroit! Imagine how much worse it's going to get with the second wave. Another 1,500 dead. And if you push people to go back to work and you push kids to go back to school you're going have a lot more than 1,500 dead."

The response of workers and youth to the memorial stood in stark contrast to the official ceremony led by Detroit's Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan. Effusive praise was given to the corporate sponsors TCF Bank, Ford Motor Co. and others who are largely responsible for the devastated social conditions in the city which made it so easy for the virus to spread and to kill. Having been thrown into bankruptcy after having suffered from decades of mass deindustrialization, Detroit has gone from having the highest per capita income in the country to one of the lowest in America.

Workers in Detroit, 80 percent of whom are African-American, have witnessed a shocking decline in both their living standards and health conditions as a result of deindustrialization. Nothing was done by the city of Detroit or the state of Michigan, both controlled by the Democratic Party, to prepare the population for the pandemic. It is well known, based on statistics maintained by the Detroit Department of Health, that city residents have substantially higher rates of death from heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, pneumonia, stroke and cancer than in the state of Michigan and across the US.

Under these conditions, impoverished working-class communities were left on their own when the crisis hit. It took the actions of autoworkers to shut their plants down as the virus raged through their workplaces, and the government forced their reopening before it was safe to do so with minimal protections, causing additional sickness and death. Detroit teachers recently voted over 90 percent in favor of striking to halt plans to reopen schools. Last week, Metro Detroit and mid-Michigan were recently upgraded to the second-highest risk level for virus spread.

As the pandemic continues to rage, having killed more than 190,000 across the US and 870,000 worldwide, it will take the independent initiative of the working class to implement the necessary measures to stop the virus and save lives. Workers have formed rank and file safety committees at auto plants in Michigan and throughout the Midwest. Teachers are following suit to prevent the bipartisan reopening of schools. The work of socially conscious artists like Millikin are a welcome development in exposing the contradictions of the capitalist system and memorializing its victims.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site