

Queens residents yearn for a place to rest their COVID grief

By Annie Burky
Special to the Eagle

On the first Saturday in May, EmyLou Rodriguez stood in the Forest Park Bandshell and recounted the lives of her parents whose portraits sat displayed on park benches.

The images of Antonio and Estelita along with 268 others at the center of Queens COVID Remembrance Day will soon be used in a memorial to the victims.

Almost a year after the pandemic began, many New Yorkers are still yearning for a place to lay their grief. Architects and designers across the world are offering ideas for how to memorialize the cataclysmic event that has affected nearly every person on the planet.

Sanitation workers have already unveiled their own statue, Mayor de Blasio has promised a memorial to frontline workers, Governor Cuomo one to victims, President Biden a national monument. However, before any plans can begin to crystallize there needs to be thought given to the same questions that haunted the 9/11 memorial — what physical form should a monument take, what function should the space serve and whose story should it tell?

In the early 1970s, Antonio and Estelita both immigrated from the Philippines and landed jobs in the U.S., Estie as a nurse and Tony with the U.S. Navy. They met through mutual friends when living in Rego Park and soon fell in love, marrying in 1976.

Rodriguez said the two shared a strong faith derived from their Filipino birth. They settled in Queens and raised three children. Like any long marriage, theirs was filled with highs and lows — the birth of their three grandchildren and the unexpected death of their son Kevin in 2001. When it came time to retire they decided to stay near their family in Queens Village to be close for school plays and holidays.

“Our grandparents lived to be 80, 90-years-old so we thought we had a good couple more decades with them,” Rodriguez said.

Tony and Estie’s COVID story echoes that of many others in March 2020 — trouble breathing, frantic 911 calls, slow declines into the ICU and onto respirators they never got off. Nurses were their companions in their last days. Their children’s goodbyes were said from miles away on phones and iPads. After 43 years of marriage, the Solomons, Estie, 72, and Tony, 71, passed within two weeks of each other.

At the Solomon’s burials, their children were restricted from hugging one another as pallbearers in full PPE placed metal coffins in the ground.

“There would have been hundreds of people at their funeral if we were allowed to have one,” Rodriguez said.

Knowing that a permanent memorial could take years, Rodriguez began the long journey of creating something to fill the space left by grief. In the months after her parents’ deaths, she found solace through digital connections with other quarantined mourners within COVID-loss Facebook groups, specifically COVID Survivors for Change. With the help of other mourners she began plans to create a space for naming the masses of dead that ticked ever upward on the nightly news.

How we grieve

The first time Rodriguez expressed her grief in public was on a chilly October evening.

Accompanied by her sister Catherine Solomon, Rodriguez was welcomed at Greeley Square Park by Kristina Libby, a Manhattan-based artist who laid flowered hearts as a vigil for COVID victims. Solomon did not yet feel ready to speak about their parents’ deaths so Rodriguez spoke for the both of them.

“To be able to say their story out loud keeps their memory alive. That’s why I kept on doing it,” Rodriguez said.

Six months before in April 2020, Libby had begun laying wreaths in parks around the city. She was compelled by the din of ambulance sirens and the silence of the dead to provide New Yorkers a small space to express their grief.

She posted photos of the first few wreaths on social media and the messages quickly began filling her inbox. Families like Rodriguez’s brought candles, photos and stories of the deceased. Volunteers wrapped stems around twine in a labor of love. Flower companies donated roses, tulips, orchids or whatever else was in season. And visitors



Catherine Solomon speaks about her parents, both of whom died of COVID-19, at the Queens COVID Remembrance Day.

Photo courtesy of EmyLou Rodriguez

to Libby’s Floral Hearts Project website signed a petition for a permanent memorial.

“What this is about is making space so that everyone who has lost someone or something has a space to tell their story,” Libby said.

Assembly member Ron Kim said he hopes a memorial acknowledges government negligence in the age of COVID, similar to how the 9/11 memorial calls for an end to terror and the AIDS quilt links a chain between mass death and mismanagement.

Kim lost an uncle in an elder-care facility from a suspected case of COVID. He spoke openly about his discontent with the management of the pandemic at a recent event outside the Cobble Hill Nursing home where the bereaved created the “We Care Memorial Wall” filled with photos and small mementos remembering those lost.

Kim said that a permanent memorial to elder casualties would be a public acknowledgement of misguided policies and a grave injustice indicative of agism.

“Once people enter nursing homes, society almost views it as their duty to die,” Kim told the Eagle.

Grief doesn’t have borders

Unlike the 9/11 memorial that could only find a logical home near the footprints of the towers, there is debate as to where COVID memorials should be placed.

Cuomo first set his sights on Battery Park, an area already overpopulated with plaques and pedestals. However, Manhattan Community Board

1 returned with a resounding “No” and an invocation that it be moved to a more fitting location with fewer memorials. The board urged the government to place the remembrance closer to the epicenter in Queens.

Yet, the delicate nature of monuments has done little to discourage visionaries who foresaw a public and political desire for a COVID memorial.

Designer John Beckmann wants to illuminate Hart Island with 12 lights on the often-ignored corner of the five boroughs that would emit beams similar to those that can be seen on Sept. 11 each year. He finds the power of light to be ethereal in nature.

“What makes the lights significant is the sensation of viewing,” Beckmann said.

Until funds are allocated, locations are chosen and designs are approved, New Yorkers are not lying in wait.

The art of remembrance

The portraits at the center of Queens COVID Memorial day that are now being discussed as a future Queens memorial, began as a small tribute.

Hannah Ernst, a budding 16-year-old artist, began her COVID crusade with a pen and the appreciation for art that her grandfather instilled in her.

Ernst remembers visiting the MoMa with her grandfather, Calvin Schoenfeld, an abstract painter. When he died from COVID in May 2020 the choice for how to memorialize him was obvious — a portrait.

Ernst’s mother, Karen, posted the image on

Facebook, and soon the requests began pouring in. The teen was more than happy to oblige.

She now estimates she has made nearly 1,500 portraits.

While she has made digital portraits for people as far away as London, they have become especially celebrated in Queens, which is how Rodriguez heard about Ernst and asked for her help in designing something larger.

In January 2021, Rodriguez, Libby, Ernst and countless volunteers and donors began connecting through COVID-support Facebook groups. Rodriguez knew how much talking about her parents had meant to her and wanted to provide the same opportunity for others. She says she is actively advocating for a permanent memorial but doesn’t think families should wait years to begin filling the void that truncated or completely absent funerals left.

COVID Remembrance Day is born

On May 1, families trickled into Forest Park wearing masks and isolated by households. Empty benches with the portraits of their loved ones filled the center rows as guests sat along the sides.

The afternoon ceremony of songs and prayers ended with an invitation for the bereaved to find their loved one amongst the portraits.

Some families brought food to eat with the dead before Libby’s vigil. She placed a heart shaped wreath on the stage as three speakers remembered unique and unforgettable lives that were swallowed by the monumental numbers of Queens’ dead. For the first time publicly, Catherine Solomon, EmyLou Rodriguez’s sister, eulogized their parents.

Solomon is an oncology nurse so she knew what the doctors meant when they relayed her parents vitals to her and she knew that meant her parents would not walk her down the aisle at her wedding.

“I know the world has moved on and people want things to go back to normal, but things will never go back to normal,” Solomon said.

Rodriguez returned to the microphone to thank those who had come and to offer her own prayer of consolation. After wishing them a safe drive home, she stepped away only to realize the families were picking up the portraits, she rushed back to the microphone, asking everyone to leave them.

The crowd went silent, perhaps wondering if this was another loss to count on their fingers. Rodriguez assured them digital copies were available online but the Queens Museum and the Queens Library had asked to use these portraits of the COVID dead who called Queens home in a memorial. For the first time in a day of tears, grief was broken by applause.



EmyLou Rodriguez and Catherine Solomon lost both of their parents, Antonio and Estelita, to COVID-19 last year.

Photo courtesy of EmyLou Rodriguez