

A year ago this week, when the global pandemic was first declared, I had no idea that one of my job duties would soon become writing weekly inspirational and supportive messages for our readers.

The afternoon of Thursday, March 12, 2020 may be permanently etched in my psyche. It started out as a typical work afternoon, including having coffee meeting at Kit Café in downtown Peterborough with a colleague. We were talking about a show his production group had coming up for Mother's Day at the Market Hall.

The World Health Organization had the day before declared a global pandemic, so we were aware of the news breaking. But the future was very unclear.

I recall that we talked about the possibility of our major performance venues needing to close, but we felt that, surely, it could never come to that.

A few hours later, I walked into a committee meeting at Peterborough City Hall and registered the shock on everyone's faces. Premier Ford, along with several of his cabinet ministers, had just announced Ontario's schools would be closed until April 5. The following week was March Break, travel was not recommended, and there was talk of airport and border closures.

And so it began. For all of us at kawarthaNOW.com, the weeks that followed were hectic and exhausting. I recall calculating that we were working 90-hour weeks to report on local pandemic news. The need to shift our news coverage was rapid and immediate. We were suddenly also monitoring Ontario and Canadian news, with daily briefings from politicians being available online for the first time. We also lost hundreds of events from our online event system — which typically runs at 1,200 events — as cancellations were rampant.

The following Monday, we were faced with a dilemma in planning our weekly VIP enews, sent to over 11,000 of our readers. Our enews has always been our recap of the week's top stories and has been sent every Wednesday without fail since 2015. We usually give away tickets to great local events, including concerts and theatrical events, as well as local promotions. We had always avoided hard news if possible, as our enews was intended to be a pleasant morning read — a lighter promotion of local and community.

We had never published a pandemic version of our enews, so it was a challenge to avoid dramatic headlines. Most of the major events that we promoted were cancelled. We quickly adjusted our enews format and called it a "special edition" version. I felt I should add a message to our readers to address this format change, and I tried to make it inspiring given the anxiety, uncertainty, and fear all of us were experiencing.

The feedback we received encouraged us that we were on the right track — people needed to hear that message. We had an opportunity and a responsibility to help our readers know that they were not alone and that their communities were working together. So I kept going, writing a new message every week.