

SILVER LININGS: CONNECTING DURING COVID

by

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As a designer, I look at my work in terms of problem-solving, an approach that I developed through my background in biology and my various work experiences. I like to think of each design as a puzzle made up of given and created information. I assemble the puzzle by connecting the pieces of information with images, color, and graphics in ways that emphasize strong visual relationships. My main goal differs for each design I create, but I always look for solutions that exhibit energy and strong communication.

For our senior shows, the graphic design class of 2020 was assigned the overall theme of data visualization. From this starting point, we branched out and chose topics of interest within the theme. Based on our topics of interest we were sorted into groups of 4 students. The topic that I chose to focus on with my group was connection and shared experience.

The original outcome of the project was intended to be an installation in the gallery of the Main Campus Student Center. However, this outcome had to be modified due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the circumstances surrounding the Spring 2020 semester. The project now takes the form of a digital portfolio site that showcases our research, graphics, and findings associated with the project. Because of these circumstances we also chose to modify the topic and scope of the project. While the topic remains connection and shared experiences, the focus of the project became connection and shared experiences in the COVID-19 era with a specific focus on the events of March and April of 2020. The purpose of focusing on this topic was to collect and share instances of positivity that have occurred during this time that has been extremely difficult for many people. The goal of the final portfolio website was to share data and highlight stories and experiences that create hope.

By focusing on this idea of creating hope, we were able to connect to the people that participated in the project and with each other. The topic became especially meaningful because each member of our group was experiencing the same things that we were researching and collecting data about. It was no longer just a project about a topic of interest, it became a project about something that was affecting each of us individually. By attempting to create hope for others, we were able to create hope for ourselves and to finish the project with a more optimistic mindset than we started it with.

Rather than gathering research from outside sources, we chose to collect the data for our project ourselves. We did this in the form of a survey that was shared via social media and email. We

were not targeting a particular audience with the survey, we were just hoping to receive as much feedback as possible from those willing to participate. The survey asked a variety of multiple choice questions regarding the participants' experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. The final question of the survey was open-ended and simply asked participants if they had had any positive experiences or stories from this time that they were willing to share. Additionally, the participants' were given the option to share a photograph to go with their story or experience. We compiled all of the information that we collected from this survey in order to create a series of graphics that used statistics, type, and imagery to illustrate our findings.

We chose the name 'Silver Linings' for the project because it perfectly illuminated the goal of the project, which was to acknowledge the hard time that we are in, but to focus on the good things that have occurred in order to transmit hope. We paired the title with the subheading 'Connecting During COVID' to give context to the title and provide more information on the scope of the project. We wanted to emphasize the feeling that we are all in this together, even while we are all separated.

The overall creative process consisted of a lot of trial and error. We had to take a large amount of data, pair it down, and communicate it in a way that was compelling, interesting, and visually appealing. By sorting the data, images, and stories into groups, we were able to create connections between all of these pieces of the puzzle. The graphics we created for the project are all simple, geometric and slightly abstracted. We based the appearance of graphics on traditional scientific and mathematical charts and graphs, but with playful elements that have more visual impact, since the purpose of our project was based more on the communication of feelings rather than numbers or facts. The graphics appear in all different styles and formats to display different kinds of information. These different graphic styles also help to create variety throughout the entirety of the composition. We tied all of these different graphics together by treating the type and color similarly in each one so that they would all connect.

We chose our color scheme of light peach-tones, blues, and greens, as a tribute to the time of year, spring, and the typical bluish-green color of health care workers' scrubs. We thought it was important that our color choices have a deeper meaning that reflected the severity of the times we are living in and honored those working on the frontlines; putting themselves at risk to save lives. However, the overall message of our project was one of hope and positivity and the pastel colors still reflect that.

The entirety of the project features the typeface, Franklin Gothic URW. Because we knew the project would be web-based, we knew from the start that we would be looking for a sans-serif typeface with a large family that would be versatile in many different sizes and weights. We were also looking for something that would both read well in longer paragraphs and within graphics and charts. Franklin

Gothic URW is a clean, simple, typeface that matched the style that we were looking to achieve with our overall design. We could create variety through the large family, but it was simple enough not to be overwhelming among all of the information that we were trying to convey.

We described the final project as a 'time capsule of hope generated by real people's stories and experiences. We sorted through all of the madness to find the good, the humorous, and the wholesome, with the goal of highlighting positivity when we all could use a little optimism'. The resulting creation is a portfolio-style website that combines visual and written stories, quotes, graphics, statistics and humor. We took the data that we collected and combined it with the photographs we received to create a composition that feels like a social media feed. This style is reflective of both how we collected the data and how many people are leaning on social media more than usual, since we can not physically be in the same place as others. We used color to connect stories based on topic and sorted the images so that when users view the page they can connect to the experiences that may be similar to theirs. We also included a section of the project that illustrates the unique trends that have occurred during this time. We felt that this added humor and provided context for some of the stories that people shared. These trends also help to emphasize shared experience, since they become trends when large numbers of people participate in them.

Overall, the project taught me a lot about communication. The majority of the planning, research, and construction of the project took place while North Carolina was under a Stay At Home Order, meaning we had to create our senior show as a group without being able to meet in person. This required much more planning than would've been necessary with in-person meetings. It also meant that work had to be delegated differently, we could not all work on the same part of the project at once, which drastically changed the process. Outside of working with my group, I was able to experience the process of data collection and how to communicate with strangers about the kind of information I was looking for. I also learned a lot about how to create and write a survey in a way that allows you to collect the kind of data you are looking for without being biased or giving too much suggestion to the participants. Communication became important again when we were trying to put the final portfolio site together. How could we communicate a topic that was both serious and lighthearted? This is when our graphic, color, and type choices became even more important. We had to make sure that each of these choices was intentional and meaningful in order to transmit the right message through our final project.

The goal of the project was to create something that people could look at to remind them that there is still some good in the world. The resulting work reminds us all that we are not alone and that though it may not seem like it, we have done a lot more in the past two months than sit at home. The project was successful in being able to collect and connect positive stories from everyday life. The data

that we collected was not about celebrity or grand gestures. It was about how a phone call or a walk with a dog can make someone's day. In hard times, the little things become more important. Through this project, we were able to remind people how much the little things really matter and how choosing to focus on them can create a more positive outlook. We were very aware in creating this project that nothing can make up for what many people are going through right now, but by sharing the positive and not creating more focus on the negative, we can encourage optimism. People have adapted to this new kind of lifestyle in all kinds of inspiring ways. Even in times where we can not physically be with others, we have found ways to connect and share our experiences.