

Good evening everyone and welcome. Thank you for joining us. My name is Nancy Rafi and I'm the Chairperson of the NK COVID Memorial Committee.

When someone we loved has died, the customary ritual is to gather together and remember them, to honor their lives and their impact on the community, and to embrace each other and share our grief. But all of our traditional forms of grieving – bringing food, hugging loved ones, gathering as a community – these are things we've been told not to do over this past year and a half. And yet they are the very things that people need most when they've lost someone they love. These are the rituals we depend upon to help us move through our times of grief. We've been asked to shoulder so much devastation, without the comfort of a loving embrace, or holding the hands of the dying as they move into eternal peace.

Monuments have been erected for war veterans and victims, leaders both heroic and malignant, honoring conflicts that reshaped the world. But memorials dedicated to victims of a devastating disease are far less common.

At least 675,000 people died in the U.S. from the 1918 flu epidemic, a figure that surpasses the numbers of U.S. soldiers who died in combat in all the wars in the 20th century combined. That global pandemic was the deadliest since the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, killing

more than 50 million worldwide, yet the staggering loss spawned very few statues or other structures.

Cloaked in a narrative of people dying in service for the greater good, wars are easier to memorialize. It's so much more difficult to memorialize deaths to devastating diseases, because what's the greater good that the deaths are serving? But still...don't they deserve to be remembered?

This temporary solution, like putting flags out like this, is really going to need to be replaced by something that people can go and touch and mourn and get some of their feelings out. Maybe something like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the black granite wall in D.C. designed by Maya Lin, that honors service members killed in that war. Because we must remember their names.

I hope that people who are fortunate enough to have not been affected so directly by this pandemic will have the capacity to be compassionate. These people who once lived in our town, now represented here by white flags - they meant the world to somebody and if we can't care about somebody else's loss, I just think we've lost a part of our soul as a community.

This pandemic has taken almost 600,000 lives of citizens here in the United States. Here in Rhode Island, we've lost more than 2700 people so far – and in North Kingstown alone we count 81 dead. They were our neighbors, our mothers and fathers, teachers and nurses – each vibrant, each one loved by someone. It's only fitting that we come together now to honor their lives and what they meant to this community. I wish that we could do more – but at least this is a start.

And if all that happens from this event tonight is that one person here feels just a little bit of comfort from this gathering – received one heartfelt condolence, was able to hug one person safely for just a moment and felt a bit of the sadness lifted – well then, our efforts were certainly worth it. As Dickens said “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of another.”

I think it's important to remember that time is linear – grief is not.

When there's a death, which is one of life's milestones, we're often told not to talk about it. We put timelines on our grief, because it makes other people uncomfortable for us to be sad, or lonely, or heartbroken. Oftentimes we're told to just move on.

I want to tell you that you don't have to stop talking about your loved ones who have passed on. Talking about them, remembering the things you did with them and how they impacted your lives – it means that you honor who they are to you, and how much you loved them.

Love doesn't go away just because someone is no longer with you physically. The depth of your grief is often equal to the depth of your love. It's the price we all pay for loving each other.

Every person here has a story that will break your heart. Death is a life event that no one escapes. And COVID has been so unforgiving – bringing so much devastation so quickly to so many. So when you ask yourself what can I do to ease my friend's sorrow, here's what I can suggest. What we can do for each other is to be present enough to listen to those who are left behind. Be available. Be kind. Be patient. Grief doesn't understand time.

I'd like to take a moment to personally thank the NK Arts Council – when I approached them with my proposal for a flag garden they had already been discussing some kind of memorial project, they graciously listened and stepped up to support my efforts. Several members of the Council worked with me along the way, brainstorming and offering resources that have made this project become a reality. I'm incredibly grateful for all their help.

And to Suzanne Mancini from the Sew Op in downtown Wickford – your generosity with your time and talents to help me create the memorial flags was integral to the success of this installation.

Your immediate YES to all of my requests reminds me of why I love living in a small town. I hope you know what an asset you are to this community.

And as for me – the pandemic is still here, but I'm not ready to give up hope yet, and I still see things through rose colored glasses, my glass is half full and I do see the light at the end of tunnel. We're all working towards a safe, new normal – many of us are already fully vaccinated, others are on their way there. Life may never look like it did before the COVID19 pandemic, but I'm hopeful that we're getting closer to once again being able to gather with our loved ones and move forward safely. And part of moving forward includes being able to honor those who are no longer with us on this journey and remembering just how important they were to each of us.

Tonight's event is the very essence of the strength of what community means. Gathering together – moving forward – being hopeful. After all, HOPE is our state's motto – and it's still my favorite four letter word.

I'd like to invite Pastor Sharon Baker from North Kingstown United Methodist Church to open our program tonight with a reflection.