

Final Transcript: Rima Samman

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Following the death of her brother from Covid, Rima Samman, an artist from Belmar, New Jersey, created a memorial for him and others who died from Covid that started out as a small project that became global. She joins us today. Welcome, Rima.

RS: Hello, ladies.

VC: Thanks for being with us.

RS: Thank you for having me.

VC: You're an artist. Can you just tell us a little bit about your background?

RS: Sure. So I've been an artist since I was a little girl, to be honest. I did go to college at Middlesex County College and I took up professional commercial photography because there was more of a career in that avenue, but during my time there I worked at the college at the Performing and Visual Arts Center so I basically took every art class that was possible and I also, you know, utilized their lab as much as I can and since then I just kept up as a hobby doing some artwork on the side.

KK: Can you tell us about this incredible memorial you started after your brother passed? How did you create it? What made you think about doing this memorial?

RS: Prior to the pandemic I belonged to a Facebook group called Jersey Shore Shells. What people do is, they randomly pick up shells off the beach and then paint them with motivational messages or something and re-hide them for people to find, and the person that finds them has the choice of keeping it or re-hiding it, you know, just little fun games. So when my brother passed away we were at the peak of the pandemic. At that time only 80,000 people had died in the US but the restrictions were very, very strict so the maximum at the

funeral home would have been ten people. We basically didn't get to do anything for my brother. His birthday was January 25th. He would have turned 41 years old so prior to his birthday, about a month before, I was just trying to think of something I can do to kind of celebrate him, honor him and then also symbolize the idea that it's a birthday. So I started brainstorming on what I can do with the clamshells, like originally my idea was to just do a yellow heart made out of clamshells but just the yellow heart was too simple so I decided to create a yellow heart made out of clamshells but instead of filling it with more shells I decided to get river stones or pebbles and I messaged people on Facebook, like support groups for Covid 19 victims and family members and basically asked if anyone was from Jersey if they wanted me to include their loved one's name in it and I got about 100-120 names that day so we placed them all within the heart and I placed around 100-150 candles around the heart and my partner and I lit them and the idea was my brother is looking down from heaven, he can blow out his own candles. So my mother came and about 15 or 20 locals came. This was on January 25th. Originally, there was just one heart and my concept was that I would go home that night and I would return the next day and I would go clean it up. Like, it was just supposed to be a one night thing, so I never thought of getting permission because I literally thought I would be there for an hour or two and we'd be done with it. But what basically happened is, the next day when I woke up we had over 198 requests, people asking to put their loved one's name inside the heart and my thought process was, "Okay, it doesn't hurt, I'll add these names in," and we'll keep it up for another week or two, and I'll take it down. I mean, its winter time and it doesn't hurt, nobody's coming to the beach anyway, but then it's 198 messages almost every day and, you know, one heart grows into two and the two hearts grow into four and we're at twelve hearts right now.

VC: Can you just describe what the memorial looks like?

RS: Sure. So the clamshells are painted yellow and they form a heart. The heart is approximately about 4 x 4 feet, or 5 x 5 feet, you know, give or take a little bit and inside the heart is about, depending on the size, is about 200 or 300 names, and the names are written on pebble stones. If you look them up on line they're called artist stones but basically it's just like a little river rock and the loved one's name is written on there.

VC: Now are these special stones people have to get if they want to put a loved one's name in there or can they just, let's say they're walking along the beach, they find a rock, and say, OK, could I use that?

RS: Yes, you can use that, absolutely. We do keep a small pile next to the memorial in case you're visiting and you want to put your own loved one's name, I know it's more personal that way. The majority do request us to do it but what's gotten really, really interesting are the locals that do come by not only write their loved one's name but they make the rock very personal. So for example, one of my favorites – I don't know the last name but I know the first name is Ida, because her rock comes up all the time, whoever her loved ones are they have painted a wine glass on there. There's another one that somebody did for their father, it has a shot glass and a cigar on there, and they're very interesting. Somebody else has done one for their grandmother and it looks like it's been dipped in sparkles and then laminated, like, it's amazing. (VC Wow). Yeah, so if you want to personalize it that way you're more than welcome to or if you just happen to be walking by and you have a loved one and you just spur of the moment want to write their name you're more than welcome to, too.

VC: So tell us now how this project got to be global and the growth, where is it now?

RS: So somehow, through social media again, the UK got wind of it first and so we started getting requests from the UK. From the UK it went to Ireland, from Ireland we got someone from South Africa. The irony of it all is that most of the requests, even though they're international, do have some sort of connection to the beach and Belmar as well. One gentleman in particular from Ireland, I always think of him. His parents died nine minutes apart. He had vacationed here about 21 years ago with his father and growing up he has fond memories of being on Belmar Beach.

KK: That's so lovely. I know that this is growing in leaps and bounds and I know that you're looking for a permanent home for this memorial. I mean now that the summer is coming Belmar Beach is going to be packed. So that has to be some sort of a deadline, I would imagine, for you.

RS: Yeah. It has put a lot of pressure on us, so we have been trying very, very hard to find a home and preserve the hearts for at least five weeks now. Unfortunately, the things that have come our way don't seem to be fitting for the memorial yet. There's some restrictions, the reality is that there are over 2800 names in there and connected to those 2800 names are family members and I just don't want to break their hearts again so what we've done at this point is taken the initiative. We found a local carpenter who was willing to donate his time and we literally created a registry on line and we actually, today, Woodhaven Lumber, which is

a local lumber shop is going to donate all the plywood and all the molding for us and we're going to create, something like a shadow box for each one of those hearts so this way they can be framed and protected from weather and stuff like that and Trav and I will be able to take them off the beach in time for Memorial Day so this way there's no harm done and we will store them until we find the right place for it.

KK: Are you—I'm sure you are—going to not only your local New Jersey elected officials but also even further. I always think of Senator Booker.

RS: Senator Booker's office has been the most helpful, honestly. They couldn't directly find us a place but what they have done is educate us around grants that are available, like art grants and museum and gallery grants that we can apply for, which I really appreciated. We are officially a non-profit organization as well, so they basically have been giving us some sort of guidance as to where we can get more funding and more assistance from. And what I really appreciate about Senator Booker's office is, they've been following up on a bi-weekly basis to see where the status is and what's going on and, I believe her name is Caitlin, who works for Senator Booker, I can tell she's well invested, she tries to give me more advice on what to do next and so on.

VC: That's great, so they're really giving you more than just a list of resources, they're really giving you support in how to best reach out to those resources and apply to the various grants. So how many hearts are you up to now?

RS: So we announced that we were pausing at ten hearts and overnight somebody went over there and built an eleventh heart, and that eleventh heart got filled so we decided, when that heart was built it was white, it wasn't yellow like the rest with the shells, so we finally transitioned the eleventh heart to a yellow heart and now we have a twelfth heart built by some locals as well (VC Wow), which is also filling up so we're at twelve hearts now.

VC: That's great. And what would be your ideal home for this project?

RS: My ideal home is to create some sort of gallery or museum where people can come in and see these twelve hearts, but at the same time we can continue to honor other victims that are not yet included, maybe create some sort of mural or something inside the museum, but also a place where people can gather to

mourn their family, to celebrate their family members. And it could be a place that we could educate people on the pandemic. And my real goal here is to also create a network where we could have some sort of resources for those who need counseling. With the way things were handled so many of us did not get the social closure that we're so used to. Many of us were forced to disregard cultural, religious beliefs or cultural traditions so I would definitely love that. And lastly I would also love to create some sort of networking and funding for what we call now long time, long haulers of Covid which, I listened to your podcast about that and without that podcast I didn't know some of the things I'm experiencing are normal, being a survivor of Covid myself, I wonder what the long-term damage is going to be. For me I lost my sense of smell. It's still not 100% back at all. It's not even nearly, on a scale of 1-10, I'm probably a four or five. I'm curious if I'll ever get back to the ten level. So I would love to have that kind of facility, where not only is it visually healing and visually supportive for what these Covid family and friends need but also it has a network for medical and psychological help as well.

KK: For people who are long haulers.

RS: Exactly.

KK: Well, also what you're describing will give you the opportunity to know that you're not alone. Lots of people are experiencing what you have experienced and hopefully you will get your taste back and your smell back.

RS: And that's the thing, it's, I think that this memorial has grown the way it has because it has shown people they're not alone. I know that for myself it has taught me I'm not alone, and on January 25th when we did the lighting, you know, it was okay, there were about 15 or 20 people like I said, but we did a second lighting on March 13th. That was when the memorial had ten hearts at that point. We did the second lighting because people were asking me to and I chose the week of March 13th because it was the anniversary of the beginning of the lockdown for the pandemic. So I thought maybe 50 or 100 people would show up that night. 350 or 400 people came. The event was supposed to start at 6:30. People were already there as early as 4PM. Yeah, the local news, channel 12 covered the entire event. So that evening it was such a reality of oh, my gosh, like I'm really not alone but look how many people are affected by this as much as I am, and I heard people tell me, like there wasn't a dry eye on the beach that day. I had written a speech I didn't even bother reading it ---

I couldn't see, I was so emotional. I think that's what's making this so big is that people need that camaraderie and doing some research on this, that camaraderie normally would come traditionally again, from those funeral ceremonies that we did not get. So the sad part of all this is not only did their loved ones die alone but we grieve alone so doing the memorial, doing the lighting, and creating these types of avenues for everybody is not only showing them that they're not alone but it's also allowing us to meet each other to share stories and to be able to connect with each other and even help each other heal through it all.

KK: You can support each other and you should be so proud of what you have accomplished in a short time, I mean that is amazing.

VC: Yes indeed. You really have done a beautiful thing.

RS: Thank you. You know my partner and I, we talk about this all the time we realize that what we're doing, if that makes sense, because we're so in it we don't realize what we're doing and I think that we won't be satisfied until we've reached that ultimate goal, you know, I think once we reach that goal I can sit back and say "Wow, I did all this?" But right now to me it's like taking it day by day or minute by minute.

VC: For those of us who are seeing what you're doing and learning about what your plans are I think it's a beautiful thing and it will help all of those people that can access it. So, if people want to learn more about this project, donate or participate, where can they find you, where can they contact you?

RS: We have several different avenues. We have a Facebook page right now, that's the main avenue where we do daily updates, photographs and all that stuff. The Facebook page is called Covid 19 Memorial Belmar, New Jersey. We do have an Instagram page. So our non-profit now is called Rami's Heart, which is my brother and so on Instagram we're Rami's Heart. We have a GoFundMe as well. The GoFundMe is, again, to support the expenses but also the main thing is so we have funding for finding a location and then the last thing is, if anybody really needs to reach out they could always email us directly as well and the email is very simple, it's Ramisheart@gmail.com and Rami is r-a-m as in Mary, I and then the word heart at gmail dot com.

VC: Okay, can you tell us something about your fundraising efforts other than the GoFundMe page, what are you doing?

RS: So we are starting to get creative. One of the things that I do is called the memorabilia package.

VC: And what does that consist of?

RS: It's basically, we ship you a painted clam shell, just like it would be on the beach, it's a little jar of the sand that's surrounding the memorial as well and then we take three images of the rock that represents your loved one, you know, one close up of the rock itself, a little bit farther away and one of the heart itself so this way you know exactly where your loved one was located. And then I also include a yellow heart made out of paper but its planting seeds so when you receive it if you plant it it'll grow into wild flowers.

VC: That's beautiful.

KK: How are you getting that out to the people?

RS: So we posted it on Facebook and right now we're cataloguing all the names in each heart for the Monmouth County Museum because they're going to keep a digital record of everything so once the heart gets digitalized we announce it, like we'll say, okay, Heart Number Four was digitalized today and when we post pictures of it and once your heart has been catalogued then you can order your memorabilia by inboxing us through Facebook. Thankfully we do have a volunteer that's working on a website for us so we hope to have a website up an going in the next week or two but right now it's through Facebook .

VC: What a terrific idea.

RS: It's a way to have a piece of the memorial at your own home for you, especially because eventually it's not always going to be there.

VC: Is there like a set charge for this or is it just, make a donation and we'll send you a... how does that work?

RS: Basically we ask you to make a donation of \$25.00. We utilize the GoFundMe link or we actually have a Zelle for the nonprofit account and then we also have Venmo as well and so the \$25.00 gets you the memorabilia package and the shipping is included.

KK: I'm sure everybody that has a shell will want this.

RS: Right?

KK: A little bit of memorial.

RS: Yeah, I sign it on the back and I like put that it's Belmar, New Jersey and I put the year so they have it. For me I have three of them for myself because; just to keep forever.

VC: That's lovely.

KK: Well, after hearing this and listening to what you have done, it has grown in so huge a proportion I think people are going to be interested and reach out to you, I hope they do and I really hope you do find a permanent place.

RS: Thank you.

VC: Yes, I'm sure you will. Please keep us posted on your progress.

RS: I definitely will.

VC: So thank you so much for being with us today and for sharing your journey with us and we think you're doing a beautiful thing.

RS: Thank you, thank you so much for having me and letting me tell my story

VC: It's our pleasure.

KK: It is.