

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Lisa L. Higgins
Director

On March 11, 2020, MFAP staff began to truly see the impact, professionally, of the COVID-19 pandemic with a university-wide travel restriction. In the subsequent forty-eight hours, our staff calendar for March and April was wiped clean, as site visits, public events, meetings, fieldwork, and workshops were postponed with Missouri's stay-at-home order. Ultimately, all eight events that staff co-planned with partners for the last quarter of FY2020 were cancelled. The ensuing days, weeks, and months have been anything but typical, and these days have been incredibly full.

Rather than conduct site visits to witness apprenticeship lessons at artists' homes and workshops, staff shifted to lengthy phone calls, email exchanges, and video meetings to stay in touch. Rather than coordinating outside evaluations, staff developed a written self-evaluation for artists. Rather than produce in-person public events, staff worked with traditional artists and apprenticeship teams to record virtual events for the MO Folk Arts YouTube channel (linked to our website at mofolkarts.missouri.edu). Rather than conduct fieldwork in person

as planned in southern Missouri, staff and consultants interviewed artists and culture bearers on Zoom, FaceTime, and Messenger.

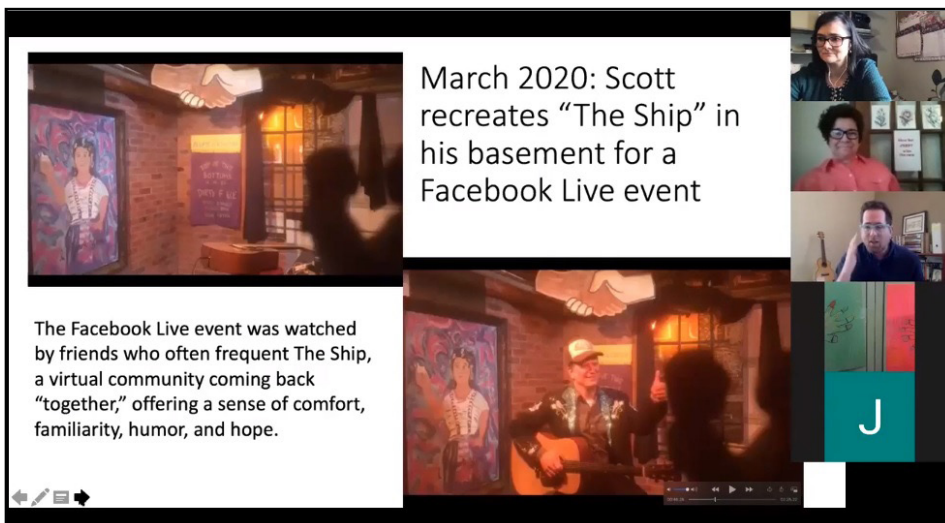
The national field of public sector folklore took on a new tenor and fervor through the accessibility of Zoom, Google Hangout, and other video call apps. MFAP joined with the American Folklore Society to produce a webinar series to encourage ethnographers in Missouri, the U.S., and beyond to press on with fieldwork—from a distance. MFAP connected with folk arts managers in Mid-America Arts Alliance's six-state region to develop six new outreach fellowships to launch in 2021. MFAP staff united with folk arts managers from around the U.S. to discuss, then assess, the impact of the pandemic on every aspect of their apprenticeship programs. MFAP staff bonded with a diverse cadre of folklorists, culture workers, and award-winning traditional artists for a weekly think-tank, first dubbed Traditional Arts Recovery and now called the Living Traditions Network (LTN). That network shares emergency relief opportunities for artists and organizations; promotes online performances; elevates



Early in the pandemic, Kirksville, Mo., quilter Andrea O'Brien of The Splintered Spool worked with a cohort of quilters to make masks for essential workers, as well as surgical caps. *Photo courtesy of Andrea O'Brien.*

artists and innovative projects in our increasingly robust virtual world; and encourages advocacy for, and within, the creative sector—both non-profit and for-profit.

Still, even in mid-March, MFAP staff knew that individual folk artists would persevere, as their traditions are infused in their day-to-day lives. The blacksmiths still made their way out to their workshops. The woodworkers still built tools, furniture, and instruments. Quilters still quilted. The dancers still danced, and the musicians still played. Their communities, however, were disrupted. The ones hardest hit by the pandemic are the traditional artists who earn their livings on the road, playing concerts, festival circuits, as well as celebrating cultural events. St. Patrick's Day parades and *ceili* dances were some of the first cultural casualties. In the folk arts, though, tradition is married to innovation, so staff watched as Irish fiddler Eimear Arkins, harpist Eileen Gannon, and friends, spaced six feet apart, played a live Instagram concert on St. Paddy's Day from a gazebo in Forest Park at St. Louis. In Ripley County, woodworker James Price found projects in his brush pile, while carrying on extra lessons with his apprentice by phone. Missouri old-time musicians connected with existing and new audiences via

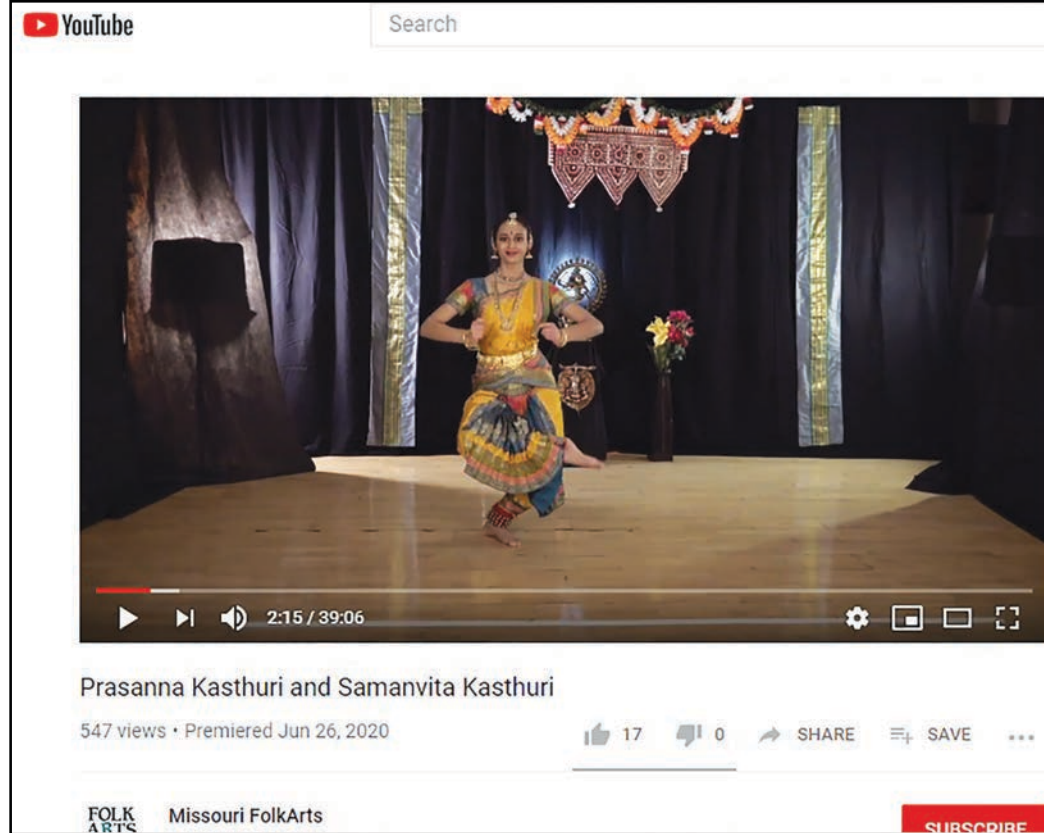


The Facebook Live event was watched by friends who often frequent The Ship, a virtual community coming back "together," offering a sense of comfort, familiarity, humor, and hope.

American Folklore Society Executive Director Jessica Anderson Turner (top), MFAP Director Lisa L. Higgins (middle), and Independent Folklorist Thomas Grant Richardson hosted a professional development webinar to discuss how ethnographers and traditional artists made the best of "remote situations" due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

virtual events like Quarantine Happy Hour, a nightly Facebook Live broadcast that reaches audiences everywhere in real time or on-demand. Quilters put aside guild meetings and sewed masks for essential workers, family, and friends; some organized impromptu guilds online, using Google Docs to track orders, materials, and resources to produce hundreds of fun, safe, and durable face coverings.

Over the last months, arts patrons and participants faced the hard reality that social distancing is not yet compatible with festivals, fiddle camps, concerts, or any events in close quarters. The Sugar Creek Fair & Festival Board postponed its decades-old Slavic Festival from June until September, then recently cancelled it for 2020. Folk Alliance International (FAI) was due to bring its annual performing arts conference back to Kansas City in February 2021, then announced a conference gap year. FAI shifted gears to provide professional development and relief weekly via virtual sessions with seasoned performers. Historic Bethel and Ozark Mountain Music saw the wisdom of cancelling their youth fiddle camps this year; both are working on virtual lessons to fill that void and encourage young musicians. At MFAP, staff worked with a few artists to record performances, demonstrations, and narrative histories. With the assistance of contract video editors and closed captioning transcribers, staff plans

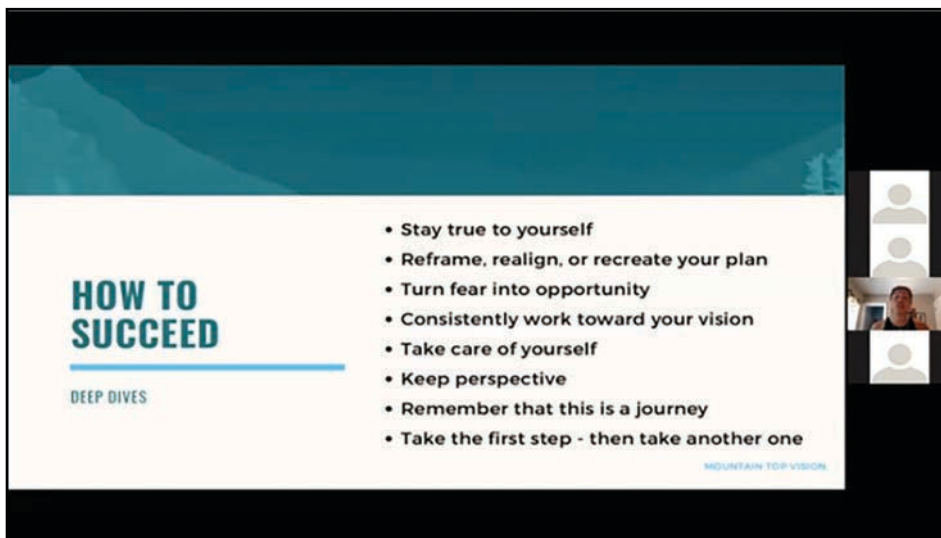


Apprenticeship team Prasanna and Samanvita (his daughter, pictured) Kasthuri recorded this post-apprenticeship video for MFAP to premier on its YouTube channel.

to premier traditional arts videos on YouTube in a series over the next several months.

While the last five months have been full of surprises, they have also been full of opportunities. The National Endowment for the Arts offered Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act grants to organizations; MFAP submitted a successful proposal in the highly competitive pool, which was perfectly

timed when FY2021 state budget cuts arose. Additionally, MFAP staff has stretched and learned from newly-produced webinars in anti-racism; best practices for producing safe public events in the pandemic; remote oral history and ethnography; language justice and cultural equity; and arts accessibility for people with disabilities. Simultaneously, staff has contributed to launching a pilot arts and healing grant program in St. Louis, organizing a series of professional development sessions for colleagues in public sector arts, and coordinating projects with Missouri Bicentennial partners. The future may look different, but it will definitely be robust and fruitful. ■



Mid-America Arts Alliance, the regional arts organization serving six states, hosted the webinar [Practicing Resilience: Activating Your Anti-Racism and DEI Commitments](#) in July, featuring Dina Bailey of Mountain Top Vision, who has also worked with organizations like the American Association of Museums.

