

Ashland Daily Press

Random Thoughts as Holidays Set In

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Last week brought a stark reminder that the pandemic isn't over — and in fact may never be, as it more than likely becomes endemic.

A friend of mine tested positive for COVID on Friday, just as I was preparing to head to deer camp. I had spent Monday and Tuesday playing a few hands of cribbage with him, so I could have been exposed during his incubation period.

That immediately threw my plans into disarray; one of the guys I hunt with is in his 70s, so I called off my journey and missed opening weekend for the first time in years. As I've written before, I don't know how I could live with myself if I infected someone when I knew that I was exposed and selfishly decided to ignore warnings that I quarantine.

As I write this a week later, I feel OK and have tested negative. I am fully vaccinated, most recently for omicron variants — though my friend who contracted it was not. He had all his shots, but got his last one just before the omicron vaccine was released. As a result, he spent several days isolated at home with a non-stop cough, sore throat, headache and general exhaustion.

He had to miss the funeral of a dear friend, but he did the smart thing and stayed at home, alone.

We're headed into the holidays, when many of us will be traveling to see friends and family or gathering for parties and celebrations.

Learn from my friend. Just imagine if the final gift you gave someone was a fatal dose of COVID.

Stay home if you're sick.

- Opioid deaths hit another record high last year, with 1,427 people succumbing to the drug, and this year could set another record.

What's different is that fentanyl, the man-made opioid originally prescribed as a painkiller but deliberately marketed by drug companies in areas with populations susceptible to addiction, now is responsible for the bulk of the deaths.

Interestingly, despite all the fear-mongering about immigrants flooding our nation with drugs, 4 out of 5 of those arrested for trafficking drugs are born-and-bred American citizens, according to the libertarian Cato Institute, which analyzed arrest records from across the nation.

And the incredibly toxic fentanyl now is being used to lace everything from pot to pills. Literally no street drug is safe anymore, when just a few grains of fentanyl can be lethal.

"Fentanyl is found throughout the entire drug supply," Wisconsin Director of Opioid Initiatives Paul Krupski told Wisconsin Public Radio. "It's really unlike anything that we've ever, ever seen before."

If you know anyone susceptible to drug use, the best gift you can give them this year is the support and encouragement to get help. And please, keep doses of Narcan handy.

- Regular readers are aware of my love-hate — overwhelmingly hate — relationship with social media.

Some folks didn't let me down last week when we posted our story about local police and their efforts to crack down on speeding along Lake Shore Drive in the wake of the fatal crash involving state Sen. Janet Bewley. Back came the conspiracy theories claiming local police, state police, Crime Lab analysts and local prosecutors all were engaged in a grand conspiracy to cover up for Bewley.

Think the likelihood of that through for a moment.

But lest I spin off into another Trump-like ragefest over social media, let me also offer some love.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting and writing about Sasha Melnyk and her daughter, Anya, who fled Ukraine as Russian rockets rained down on their hometown.

I also met Don and Jodie Karr, who live near Washburn and offered Sasha and Anya safe harbor here.

They spent thousands of dollars from their own pocket getting Sasha and Anya here and helping Sasha get a work permit and driver's license and Anya get enrolled in school.

And none of it would have been possible without social media.

Several social media pages are working to link Ukrainian refugees with sponsor families in the U.S. and around the globe. They're helping to coordinate aid agencies and travel permits and much more.

It's what the tech whizzes who created it envisioned when they spoke of the democratization of information and ideas.

Since our story about Sasha and Anya and the Karrs ran, we've heard of several other local people and organizations working to bring Ukrainian refugees to the area.

Many are using social media to connect and coordinate. This is the power of social media when used for good.