

From the Desk of Mayor Coffey

May/June 2020

Two months ago, most people would have guessed that COVID-19 was a Russian spy satellite, the name of an 80's cover band from Long Island or a banned food additive. Today, there is nobody from Kathmandu to Kokomo who doesn't know COVID-19 is a virus that is disrupting life and lifestyles across the globe, decimating economies, overwhelming social networks, and crippling governments. COVID-19 has descended upon us so quickly, fiercely, and completely that we tend to forget the fact that only two months ago most of us looked at it as a matter that only involved other countries, something that we could read about or watch on TV comfortable in our detachment from the devastation it was actually causing to the afflicted people and countries. Like most of the trouble and turmoil that we see every day in the news, we viewed COVID-19 was a terrible problem for the people of countries other than ours and, while we felt bad for them, we all had, as Harry Chapin sang, "planes to catch and bills to pay," so our lives went on as usual. Then, it became our problem.

When COVID-19 first reached our shores, it really didn't seem like a big deal. We did the math. COVID-19 had killed a couple thousand people, but upwards of 500,000 people lose their lives to the flu virus each year globally and nobody seems to notice, so we wondered what all the fuss was about. We're accustomed to the flu virus. We get flu vaccines and our pharmacies are filled with over the counter flu remedies we take during the "cold and flu season." The flu is so ingrained into our lives that it has its own season! Like the Kardashians, the seasonal flu and the deaths that go along with it are just an accepted part of the human condition. We soon came to learn, however, that COVID-19 isn't like the flu and COVID-19 is NOT part of the human condition. It is something else entirely. And it is here, changing our lives as quickly and profoundly as it has all over the world.

By now, we all know somebody who has all the symptoms of COVID-19, is self-isolating and trying to fight through the cough, fever, headaches and body aches that accompany the virus. We all know somebody who has recovered from the virus and we probably all know someone who has not. Even if we "flatten the curve" and New Jersey re-opens, life isn't going to be the same. Something as simple as a handshake, a kiss or a hug is going to be problematic. That doesn't mean things will be better or worse than they were before, they'll just be different. And that's OK, because as human beings our ability to adapt to changed circumstances may only be exceeded by that of our ability to change circumstances. And change them we will.

Oceanport is a town of a little less than 6,000 people. People with the ability to change circumstances walk among us. We have actual heroes living in Oceanport, people who change circumstances. Nurses, doctors, hospital workers, volunteer firefighters, volunteer first aid workers, OEM personnel, police officers, cashiers, truck drivers, social workers, postal workers and a whole host of others --- some of them who don't even realize that they are on the front line

--- leave their families every day to change the circumstances in which we live. And Oceanport has no shortage of people who adapt to changed circumstances. Our municipal employees have kept our local government running as if nothing has changed, our residents have been exemplary at practicing social distancing protocols when in public and our parents and teachers have continued to educate our children remotely. Nothing is the same as it was before. But, somehow, despite all that has been imposed on us, everything is the same because we have come together as a community and done ourselves proud.

On April 15, Oceanport lost a man who would have been very proud of us and how we have handled the COVID-19 crisis on all levels. Clement V. Sommers, who had been alive for 91 of Oceanport's 100 years, passed from this earth taking with him a treasure trove of first-hand accounts of Oceanport's history, but leaving behind countless examples of the incredible, lasting impact he had on Oceanport's development. Clem was the President of his Wolf Hill School graduating class, was Oceanport's Troop #58 first Eagle Scout, and served as our Mayor from January 1, 1976 through December 31, 1983 and as Councilman from January 1, 1960 to December 31, 1968 and January 1, 1972 to December 31, 1975. He was an instructor and treasurer of the Oceanport First Aid Squad, recognized in 1973 as First Aider of the Year. He joined the Oceanport Hook & Ladder Co. where he served as 2nd Lieutenant, Captain and President and was a 50-year Life Member and Exempt, served as 1st Assistant and Chief of the Oceanport Fire Department and for over 50 years served as Treasurer of the Oceanport Fireman's Relief Association, and was vested with Port-au-Peck Chemical Hose Company Honorary Membership in 2011. It is fair to say that nobody has served, or will ever serve, Oceanport like Clem did. In recognition of the impact Clem had on Oceanport's development, on April 23, 2020, our Borough Council passed a resolution whereby the Borough's new municipal building will be named the "Clement V. Sommers Municipal Building" when it is completed later this year. Clem was prone to say "keep smiling" at the end of every conversation and I would ask that everybody in Oceanport keep smiling in honor of this great man.

Finally, as you may or may not be aware, due to the COVID-19 crisis our Borough Council meetings are taking place remotely. Members of the public are encouraged to watch our remote meetings on FIOS Channel 28. Members of the public can also watch our meetings on their smart phones, computers or tablets by going to the Borough's website at www.oceanportboro.com and clicking on the "Watch Live" button. **Members of the public can participate in the remote meetings via land line, smartphone, computer or tablet by going to the Borough's website and clicking on the "Instructions for Participation in Virtual/Remote Meetings" button and choosing the option (voice, text, e-mail, phone call, etc.) that best suits their needs and available technology.** We're even going to figure out a way to have Buddy Brocklebank at these remote meetings. Please note that the Borough's website has also been updated to include videos of previous meeting (this is an ongoing process) and our home page has a whole host of COVID-19 related material including all of the town's COVID-19 updates, Governor Murphy's Executive Orders, and links to every COVID-19 site imaginable. We need your input and insight, so please take the time to visit the website and participate in our meetings.

Stay healthy, wear a mask and wash your hands!