

Ingrid vB. Porter

Ingrid vB. Porter is a nearing-60 Anglo female who lives in the University neighborhood of southeast Denver. She and her husband Eric L. Porter joined First Unitarian Society of Denver (FUSD) 15 years ago. Both artists, the couple made personal artwork at the Art Gym studio and ran a computer graphics business from their home. Eric was diagnosed with leukemia in late 2019, had a bone marrow transplant in Jan 2020, and died of complications on May 13, 2021. Ingrid is currently on the widow's walk and making her way through this new and unwelcome territory.

For me, the whole of 2020 – everything from October 2019 through May 2021 really -- revolved around Eric's health. He went from being well, creative, and energetic to a couple of days of abdominal pain to learning he had an aggressive leukemia. He was hospitalized for a month the first time. When he could come home, I had to clear his environment of plants and keep our cat separate to avoid bacterial or fungus infections and wipe everything down with bleach. Eric couldn't touch unwashed food or uncooked meat. Our days were filled with hospitalizations, chemotherapy, and testing. We could not attend church services because of his immunocompromised status, though we made it to Christmas Eve service in 2019 and to a blood drive that First Unitarian (FUSD) hosted for him in mid-January. For both, Eric had to mask and distance himself, and couldn't hug people; I was a nervous wreck throughout both events. We lived steeped in fear and stress. The transplant team located a bone marrow match in Germany and Eric underwent a bone marrow transplant on January 30, 2020. They told us to expect about a year-long recovery.

January through March 2020, Eric's immune system was at its most vulnerable. We were only beginning to come out of anxiety and isolation in March when the rest of the state shut down with the pandemic. Prolonged caregiving took its toll. I remember a point in February 2020 where I felt desperate for a break, but with everything starting to lock down, there was no break, no respite, no way that somebody else could stand in. I just kept doing the next thing in front of me because it had to be done and there was no other choice. Amazingly, I managed caregiving for more than a year beyond that point. I learned that I am a person who does what she has to do.

Early on, we didn't know how COVID was transmitted, so we just continued precautions we'd instituted around the transplant. Eric couldn't be around dust, do yardwork, or help cook. We had a system for grocery delivery, and for washing everything before he touched it. I didn't go into a grocery store the whole time. We hunkered down in a tiny tiny tiny world.

From May-October, Eric was as healthy as he would ever be again, though we didn't know that at the time. We resumed our long habit of night walking in late evening through various parts of the city. We rode bikes a little bit. We hiked in Castlewood Canyon. Twice, we went to Steamboat Springs and rented a condo. We took all our food, and when we arrived, I went in first to open windows and clean all surfaces. We hiked a bit and cooked our own meals. We didn't interact with other people, but it was great to look at four different walls!

By then, we understood COVID a bit more and the initial panic associated with it receded. We socially distanced with friends and family outside. We didn't go to many people's houses or yards but got good at hosting them in ours. We shared produce from our garden, leaving it on people's

doorsteps or talking over a back fence. We connected more with friends and family through Zoom. I found some postcards and wrote messages to my women friends. I got emails back that they loved getting something that was not a bill or advertisement in the mail.

Most of our lives centered around treatment and home. With our regular busy life shut down, the experience asked the question: *What is important to you?* The answer for us was to enjoy being together and spend time in our makeshift garage art studio. I gardened and canned. I'd make dinner and we'd eat outside and just feel grateful. I'd also hear neighbors together outside in their "pod" and feel envious and a bit lonely. Eric slept a lot. We hadn't played Scrabble in years, but I got out my mom's old Scrabble board and we changed the rules to allow each of us to take as long as we wanted on an answer before it was the other person's turn (sometimes a day!). Eric's thinking was not as clear due to the many medications, so maintaining connection meant we lived at a slower pace. I now feel out of sync with the faster-paced world. I hope we've all learned something about what matters during this pandemic, though we'll probably forget again.

I am thankful, in hindsight, that Eric and I had so much interim time together. Our focus on his recovery from the transplant shifted to another fight for his life when we learned in November 2020 that he had developed a rare complication of his suppressed immune system; lymphocytes multiplied out of control, and in his case, formed a mass near his brain stem. More chemo wasn't effective, so he underwent surgery on January 27, 2021. He never regained his ability to move or talk, though his mind was clear.

Through this whole time, we were cared for by FUSD in ways we didn't expect. I always knew that my women's circle would come through for me and they did, even organizing a blood drive at the church. But in addition, Rev. Mike Morran checked in with us and visited regularly, both individually and as part of the FUSD Gentleman's Craft Beer Appreciation Group. He suggested that FUSD members might like to sing the welcoming and closing affirmations outside our house when Eric was first home in hospice and the number of people who showed up blew us both away.

Mike formed the SoUUiful Men's group on Zoom just after the pandemic started and Eric really valued being part of that. They talked very deeply every other week. Even when he was in the hospital, even when he couldn't speak, he stayed awake to attend. They gathered on our deck to be with Eric two days before he died.

Though Eric and I have been members of FUSD for 15 years, I think we both saw ourselves as outsiders - in life generally, and in the church community. We always wanted to be more connected and involved and didn't know how to do it. The support he got from the men's groups, the caring committee, even cards from people we didn't know well, showed us that the outsider thing was probably more in our heads. We would not have said before his illness that we were important or very well-known in FUSD. I had no idea we would be held so gently in our time of need. It felt quite humbling to realize that we are more integral to FUSD than we would ever have thought.

In early days, Eric had to go to the Colorado Blood Cancer Institute two to three times each week, which was exhausting. We were masked but all personal protective equipment was in very short supply. One of our nurses told us she was given a single mask to use for the whole week! I joined

an online group of mask-makers and sewed masks of repurposed bedsheets. That gave me a way to feel like I was helping and keeping busy while Eric slept.

One of first things I did on hearing of the pandemic lockdown was to order seeds. I bought canning stuff way early, anticipating the later shortfall. We didn't know what supply chains would be like over the course of the virus, and concrete actions helped control my anxiety about the vast unknown. I focused more on the sustainability skills I learned growing up that have fallen out of fashion in our world: I like to hang my laundry out to dry, cook from scratch, make, and DIY. I didn't panic if there wasn't bread at the grocery because I knew how to bake. (It was funny to watch bread-making become *A Thing!*) I found pleasure gardening, planting our pots with vegetables, canning zucchini pickles, and making do. I felt closer in that time to my grandmother who has passed on, because that was her life as well. I felt both old-fashioned and relevant again, as the newest generation discovered that older folks have some things of value to bring.

I tore our house apart with renovation projects during the year. Though it was not something Eric could help with, it was something solid I could work on. Being as self-sufficient as I could be felt like coping in the face of all the powerlessness.

It was almost like stepping back 40 years, except that technology saved us, too.

Once FUSD went to Zoom services in March 2020, the virtual Sunday services were a solid in our week, a way that we could participate in community when we couldn't leave our house. The chat function was wonderful and felt like a way to connect with people who were also pulling together. Ironically, if the pandemic had not descended, we would have been totally isolated from participating in church services and groups for the duration.

The pandemic and Eric's health forced me to confront a couple of strongly held positions on technology and disposable plastics: I am wary of social media and big tech. I particularly find virtual personal assistants like Siri and Alexa a dangerous incursion of personal privacy. Prior to COVID, I was working on an art piece inspired by Botticelli's *Three Graces* to convey that. However, during Eric's illness, and subsequently the pandemic, technology saved us! Amazon brought us essential goods with minimal exposure, and social media and Zoom allowed us to stay in touch with people. Eric was able to work online throughout that summer. I became deeply grateful for the very things I had railed against. I am more empathetic to the predicaments of people with disabilities and people who otherwise can't get out. I had to scrap that art project while I take time to rethink the issue.

Before the pandemic, we were intentional about reducing use of plastic, particularly single-use plastics given their cost to the environment. At home, we recycle faithfully, but know our recycling is a drop in the bucket, and what happens in the recycling chain uncertain. But during Eric's illness I had to admit, disposable plastic kept my husband alive for a year and a half and I wouldn't have made another choice. At the hospital, and then, at home, there was *So... Much... Trash...!* I was caught between these two realities. But oh my gosh, the daily plastic disposal of one hospital has got to be... And what I can do as a person is so miniscule; does it even matter? It was an uncomfortable awkward confrontation.

While Eric's personal health stuff swamped everything, both of us were affected by the Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd's murder, and were constantly distressed by Trump, adding persistent pervasive angst to daily life. We couldn't march or interact with others at threat to Eric's health, which somehow made Trump's daily onslaughts more brutal and further isolating.

Eric and I value education highly and previously donated every year to our alma maters, Colorado College and Colorado State University. Belatedly, we had the idea to shift our small contributions to historically black colleges. We gave money to a scholarship that our dentist's son had started at Meharry, an HBCU. We donated to the American College of Building Arts in Charleston, SC that teaches stone masonry, metalsmithing and blacksmithing. I was a little embarrassed that it hadn't dawned on us before.

I volunteered for VoteRiders. We helped people register to vote, told them what their states required for documentation and where to show up. I manned chat lines and mailed pre-printed letters. I chatted online with people from all over who were SO READY to vote. I remember feeling emotional that the desire to participate and have one's voice heard was so strong. People's questions were mostly mundane: *I just got married; how do I make sure I can vote with my new name? I just moved, where do I go to vote?* Facilitating answers felt so good. It was something I could do from home while keeping Eric safe. VoteRiders helped fund taxi rides to get people to their voting places and paid fees for birth certificates. It was very cool! And we were instrumental in shifting the vote in Georgia Congressional races.

Shifting priorities and directions for our little money and time became our action. Our overall feeling of the year was inadequacy. We could do nothing about the world, nothing about Eric's health. Within all that powerlessness, we did what we could.

Mostly, we watched the world from afar.

Eric had always been more political than I. He read the New York Times and Washington Post, the Moderate Voice and the Bullwark, and followed the Lincoln Project. He really tried to avoid blinders. He was the guy who knew where key senators stood on any issue. He loved Clay Jones, a bratty cartoonist he found on the Moderate Voice. I don't have that same range. We had very different ways of being involved in politics.

Concert venues shut down for the pandemic, even the nearby outdoor Leavitt Pavilion. Our studio at Art Gym shut down. For me personally, I go there mostly to interact with other makers. Art Gym lost about half of their members and are considering a different model in the uncertainty about whether lost artists will return.

In some ways, our life changed surprisingly little during COVID. Eric and I had worked at home long before either his illness or the pandemic, often collaborating, so the stay-at-home part was not as drastic for us as for many other people.

Eric died at sunset on May 13, 2021. I was grateful to have a memorial service relatively soon after he passed, and to be spared the awful grief that so many people experienced of being unable

to mourn together after their loss. As intensely painful as it is, my journey through widowhood is following a relatively normal trajectory.