



## 2020 Schwartz Prize Nomination



Nevada Humanities is proud to nominate our program, [\*Humanities Heart to Heart\*](#), for the 2020 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs in the category of COVID-19 responses.

*Humanities Heart to Heart* is a series of essays and multimedia presentations that highlight diverse, personal perspectives from all corners of Nevada, reflecting on life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Program Description**

Nevada Humanities developed and launched *Humanities Heart to Heart*, our first entirely virtual program, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Envisioned in April 2020 and launched in July 2020, *Humanities Heart to Heart* is an ongoing program series that features commissioned essays and creative works by a wide spectrum of diverse Nevadans about the day-to-day concerns of what it means to be human in a time of isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty. The pandemic has altered the fabric of our lives in dramatic ways that range from economic distress to physical and mental health challenges to major alterations in our patterns of relationships and daily living. In a time when we can no longer gather together safely in-person, this online program has provided an opportunity for Nevadans to learn about and connect with their fellow community members through shared stories and human experiences.

Taking inspiration from the *Double Down Blog*, a weekly online publication by Nevada Humanities of musings, poetry, and essays that complement in-person humanities programs, *Humanities Heart to Heart* has become a consistent touchstone between our organization and our community members. *Humanities Heart to Heart* posts have fulfilled a need for consistent



George Floyd vigil near the Believe statue in downtown Reno.  
Photo/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor MJ Ubando.

programming for Nevada Humanities, during a time when we could not host in-person programs. *Humanities Heart to Heart* has also provided a much-needed forum for people to address deeply personal topics and experiences that have statewide, national, and global relevance. This is the only forum like this in our state. We have encouraged our contributors to express themselves through whatever medium they felt most comfortable with; this has lent itself to a diversity of media formats published on our website, including photographic essays, artwork, and original

poems with accompanying reflections, audio documentaries, and presentation slides.

Contributors are selected by casting a wide net across the state, reaching into our deep well of contacts and to program partners, friends of friends, staff and board member relationships, and stepping beyond our normal sphere of humanities friends and family.

Every week, three to eight essays and/or creative works ranging between 500-2,000 words are published on the Nevada Humanities website, sent electronically to more than 2,500 email inboxes via a dedicated weekly eblast, and shared on our social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Monthly themes such as Inside/Outside, Comfort, Contact, Transformation, and Progress, align the stories shared by our contributors. When deciding which pieces to publish weekly, we select those that focus on similar topics (turning to creative projects for comfort, the meanings of contact during a pandemic, etc.) in addition to ensuring that there is a diversity of representation in our authors.

This program has been dedicated to finding alternative ways for people to share their stories via diverse mediums and to as wide an audience as possible. A live series hosted on Instagram, [\*Humanities Heart to Heart Live\*](#), supplements the pieces published on our website. In these short videos, the program's staff curator, Kathleen Kuo, converses with a featured *Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor. Viewers can comment and ask questions during the segment, and the recording is saved on Instagram and Vimeo for people to watch afterwards.

Through this program, we have provided a rare forum for first-person stories and experiences that are shared widely around our state, as well as for people to learn about the ways in which the humanities play a role in connection and healing. The collections of short essays, artwork and photography, poetry, and first-person experiences - published every week - have been very popular and well-received, and we have reached record-breaking numbers of new visitors to our website since our program's inception. The stories and perspectives shared as part of this new program take into consideration both past and current events to reflect the thoughts of Nevadans and their communities in this moment and beyond. We hope that these stories serve as an archive of sorts, a collection of thoughts and memories from a time in our history that will inevitably change us, and shape us for generations to come. We are proud to have created a program that has demonstrably connected people around our state during this time through honest and heartfelt reflections on issues that matter.



Protests in downtown Las Vegas.  
Photo/Humanities Heart to Heart contributor  
Quindo Miller.

Human connection is more important than ever as we collectively face the COVID-19 pandemic. The humanities have taken on new immediacy and significance during this time, and the ongoing success of *Humanities Heart to Heart* is a testament to our ability to effectively pivot and continue our mission at Nevada Humanities of sharing and amplifying the stories, ideas, experiences, and traditions of the diverse people of Nevada.

### Program Aims

"I think it's great that this program is giving a voice to so many different people with different perspectives and views. It opens a dialogue and provides people with views and ideas they may not have otherwise have been exposed. It also allows people to connect with others by reading personal stories and experiences they can relate to."

-*Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback from Shaughn Richardson, author of [Inflection Point](#)

"I think the program has been effective in highlighting underrepresented voices. The pandemic poses unique challenges at the intersections of gender, race, and class. This program puts the community in contact with these particular experiences, while shedding light on our common

desire to reach out and connect... Storytelling creates a ripple effect for both the artist and the viewer. From a writer's perspective, stories compel me to keep making art. From a reader's perspective, I find comfort in recognizing my own hopes and fears in someone else's story."

-*Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback

How do we still connect with others during this time? As a humanities council, how can we continue to serve our constituents when we are no longer able to gather in-person? What kind of programming can we produce during a pandemic that will still demonstrate the relevance and importance of the humanities and contribute to community health and resilience? These were some of the questions we sought to answer when we first envisioned *Humanities Heart to Heart*. As a story-driven program, *Humanities Heart to Heart* directly connects the people of Nevada by sharing their COVID-19 experiences and enables them to learn how others are navigating this crisis in their lives.



Photo/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Sheila Bock.

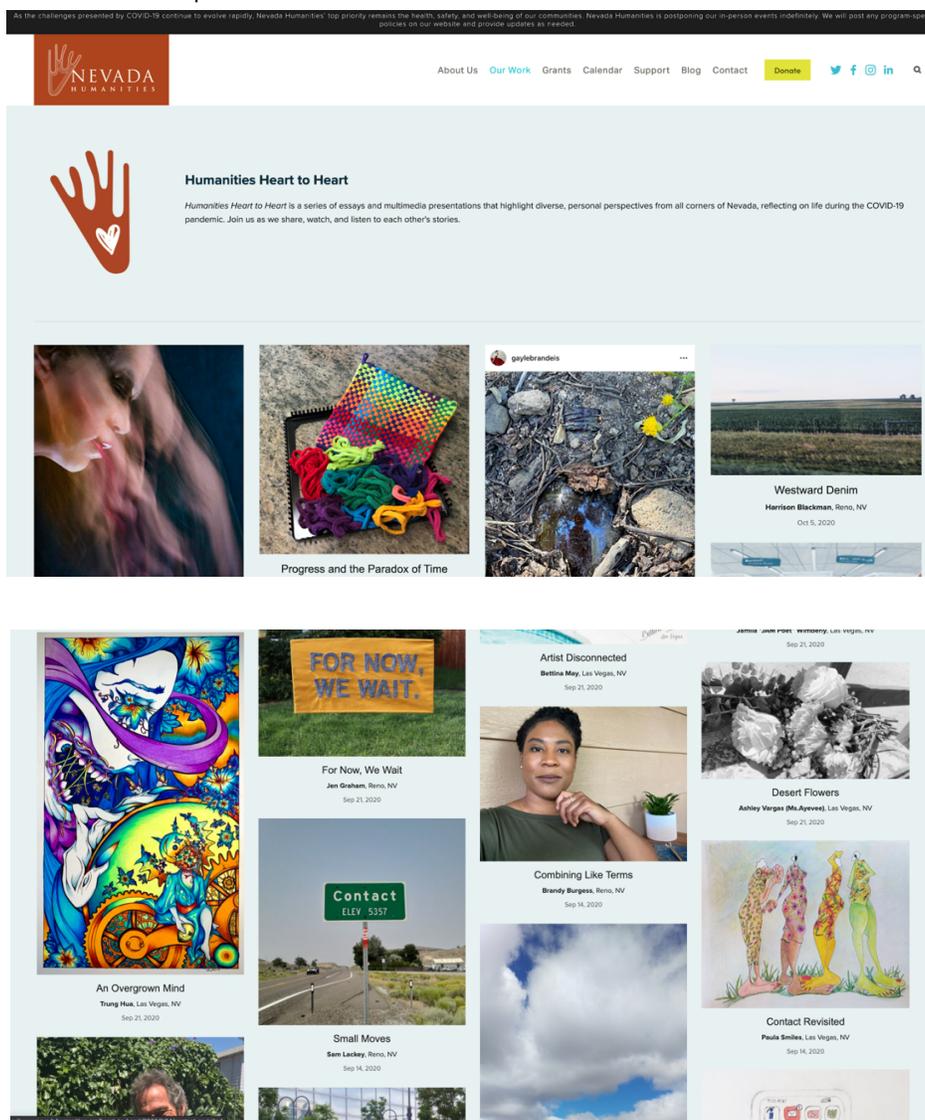
Our primary goals with this program were the following:

- Increase diversity and representation of authors from all over the state, giving them a platform with which to share their work and experience
- Curate thoughtful and meaningful reflections that speak to the real concerns of the people of Nevada during a pandemic
- Invite public participation and engagement through our website and social media
- Create a high-quality, high-visibility, sustainable platform where these stories can be found, and an archive preserving these stories for future generation
- Facilitate community health and resilience

At the time of writing, we have had more than 80,000 reported cases and upwards of 1,500 deaths in Nevada. Nevada currently has the highest unemployment rate in the nation, hovering at 13.2%, in large part because the COVID-19 pandemic has obliterated a tourist industry that the state so heavily relies on for revenue and jobs. Several contributors have noted this economic devastation in their pieces, whether it affected their own work or threatened the industries they depended on for employment. In addition to capturing the effects that COVID-19 has had on our everyday lives, such as job loss and economic spirals, and mask mandates and social distancing, *Humanities Heart to Heart* also captures the public response to current

events around our nation. Our contributors note the ongoing protests in response to George Floyd's death, the upcoming election, and more.

This mosaic of experiences is reflected in our program page's design. With *Humanities Heart to Heart*, we wanted to emphasize interpersonal connection, and how we all relate to one another during this time; the layout of *Humanities Heart to Heart's* landing page enables these pieces to build upon one another in a visual wall, with the most recently published pieces added weekly to the top. The location of each writer is included underneath the thumbnail preview for each piece, and individual pieces include headshots and short biographies. To promote public participation and engagement, we also added a comment section on our website at the bottom of each individual piece.



Screenshots of the program page for [Humanities Heart to Heart](#).



Original comics/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Jean Marie Munson.

### True Heart to Hearts

“There’s been a diverse range of voices and topics that really captures the various emotions and shared experiences — some universal, some uniquely Nevadan. I think, years from now, people will look back on this program as a time capsule. [Writing] was extremely cathartic. With the pandemic, losing work, not being able to see my family, etc., I was struggling to make sense of everything happening around me and within me. It wasn’t until being approached with this opportunity that I attempted to clear my head and put it all on paper. I wrote about something deeply personal — my relationship — which I’d never done before (I’m not very forthcoming with \*my feelings\*). In doing so, it made my bond with my partner stronger and served as a declaration of our love. I got a lot of “So, when’s the wedding?” texts once it is published. Needless to say, my partner was also very happy to read it.”

-*Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback

Just as COVID-19 has universally affected every facet of our lives, we endeavored to make *Humanities Heart to Heart* all-embracing and all-inclusive of the diverse people of Nevada. In addition to working with past collaborators and arts and literary leaders across our state, we made a conscientious effort to invite new contributors with whom we had not previously worked, as well as individuals from traditionally underrepresented and underserved communities. It was important to us that we highlight a wide range of voices, giving everyone an equal platform and opportunity with which to share their experience and work.

We are proud that our efforts to increase the diversity (racial, gender, geographical, professional, generational) of our writers and posts have been noticed and appreciated by our community. We have also tried to keep in mind the perceived Nevada-specific regional split between north (Reno and Carson City) and south (Las Vegas) and our rural communities. This work is part of a larger organizational effort to seek racial diversity and equity in all arenas of our organization.

Of the current and scheduled participants through the end of December 2020:

- 49% identify as white, 18% Black, 17% AAPI, 12% Latine, 2% Middle Eastern, 2% Indigenous
- 58% from Las Vegas/southern Nevada, 31% from Reno/Carson City/northern Nevada, 11% from rural communities
- 61% female, 36% male, 3% identify as non-binary
- 33% work in the education sector (professors, public school teachers, administrative staff), 15% are students (high school, college, graduate school), 18% work in the literary industry (journalists, writers, and poets), 17% work in the arts sector as artists, photographers, etc., and the rest of our contributors are retired, unemployed, or work in other industries
- Almost 60% of contributors are community members we have not worked with in the past, and the rest are grantees or past collaborators

The stories shared as a part of *Humanities Heart to Heart* encompass perspectives from people of different generational, ethnic, cultural, geographic, and professional backgrounds. These contributions do not just reflect upon COVID-19, but also highlight a multitude of other issues and concerns important to the people of Nevada. Issues that are mentioned in our program pieces include but are not limited to: homelessness, unemployment, physical and mental health, dysphoria, workaholism, and more. As our contributors come from both academic and non-academic fields, the tone of these pieces also range from scholarly essays with citations (architecture and designing safer living environments, historical comparisons of cholera and

COVID, the history of Asian American relations in our country, etc.) to straightforward snapshots of what it is like to live as an essential worker during this time, or to lose one's job and livelihood and move back in with family.

Below, we share some selected excerpts from some of the pieces authored by our *Humanities Heart to Heart* contributors, calling attention to the myriad effects the pandemic has had upon our Nevada communities:

- Mary Bennett, the Producing Artistic Director of Brūka Theatre in Reno and The Carson City Ghost Walk, shares in her piece, [Cold Comfort](#), how all of her places of work and outlets for creativity were closed because of the pandemic:



Photo/Mary Bennett.

**Excerpt:** "I walked through the Peppermill Casino in Reno, the venue that I work in as a wedding officiant. The weddings and events in the foreseeable future were being cancelled. What would these couples do with their weddings they had already emotionally and fiscally invested in?... As I walked out, the slot machines turned off one by one on the casino floor as people finished their gaming, just one last time. I could literally feel the power shut down. The energy, this intense capacity that constantly needed to keep this monolith going was palpable, especially when it wasn't there."

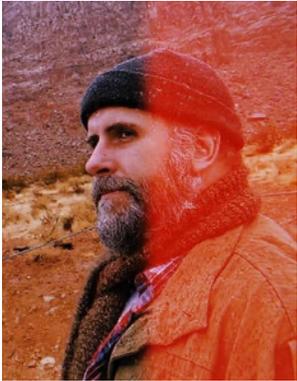
- In his piece [Cross Curricular](#), public school art teacher and sculptor Ross Takahashi described his experience in early spring when in-person education shifted to distance education, and the effect it had on teaching art to young students:



Photo/Ross Takahashi.

**Excerpt:** "'Log on, record, edit, voice over, comment, meet, contact, and log off; this was life. It was exhausting, a new kind of exhausting. Students were expected to be present, and I was expected to maintain constant contact, and continue their art education. The students, parents, administration, and I were asking the same thing, 'how?' The answer relies on a shift in art education, away from the physical and into the conceptual. One of the biggest challenges was understanding the needs of my students. Homelessness, poverty, and a lack of essentials created a situation where some students were left without pencil and paper. Art education has shifted from having students review basic concepts, to students using their creativity to solve artistic puzzles in a more abstract sense. A girl using Starbucks straws and a quilt to make a composition highlighting line work, a third grader creating a fully reimagined television set as a way of connecting with the past. All creative forms I never thought possible in the classroom or at home. The end of the school year offered some relief, but there was more to come."

- During the initial statewide lockdown when businesses and venues were closed, the Majestic Repertory Theatre in Las Vegas pivoted to create drive-thru performances. Troy Heard, Artistic Director, writes in [Pivot, Step, Walk, Walk, Walk](#):



Photo/Troy Heard.

**Excerpt:** “Every 15 minutes a carload would arrive at the alley behind the theatre. They had strict requirements: they must remain inside the car at all times and any engagement would be done with a mask. When they turned the corner, they entered the MRT Decontamination Zone and were confronted by a large mountain of a man in a full-body hazmat suit, with goggles, an N95 mask, a clipboard and a bullhorn...

Was this theater? In the broadest sense, yes. Was it entertaining? Judging by the smiles and laughter coming from the cars, yes. But most important of all, it reaffirmed the need for connection, to be an audience, to share space. I was the mountain-sized interrogator, and each time I asked, “Have you left the house?” I’d see this look cross their faces. It was a mixture of exhaustion and relief. For some, this was indeed the very first time they’ve left their house in months. They could stream Netflix into their living room and order in groceries, sure. But for the opportunity to experience a live, visceral connection, they left their homes and drove downtown.”

- Reporting on emergency sheltering and the effect of the pandemic on the homeless population in northern Nevada, University of Nevada Reno journalism professor and former reporter Nico Colombant created an audio documentary with accompanying text in [#StayHomeForNevada but What if You Don’t Have a Home](#):



Photo/Nico Colombant.

**Excerpt:** “It’s not easy to keep tabs on our unsheltered neighbors, pandemic or no pandemic. If it’s not police or shelter workers shooing us away from them, their phone has no power when we try to call them, or they’ve moved away from their previous encampment. Even their best friends or romantic partners don’t always know where they are anymore. Statistics about the homeless are unreliable or simply non-existent. When the homeless die, unless it’s related to a crime, there is usually no mention of them in the news, no cause of death, but every year, according to our interviews, dozens die locally in the cold, along the river or on the streets.”

## Public Reach and Impact

“As mainstream audiences continue to grasp the importance of mental health, programs that bring a positive effect to our communities are vital. Showcasing true humanity through social media is definitely impactful. Social media and the current mindset of American audiences are so divisive, any attempt to bring people together is an amazing goal.”

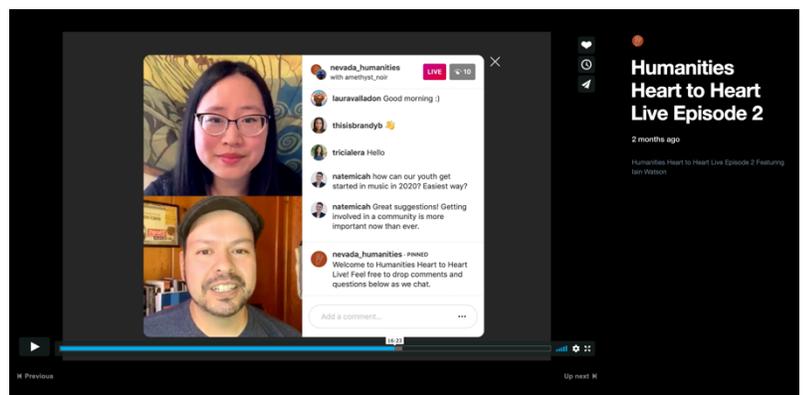
- *Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback from Christopher LaPorte, author of [Laundry Day in a Virtual World](#)

“It allows us to self-process the outside world. The best thing that has happened to me with this pandemic is it has allowed me to look intrinsically. The limitations have allowed, I believe, many to grow within the bounds they are provided, and seek new opportunities. Storytelling is a direct reflection of humanity, and if there was ever a time to share stories, now is it.”

-*Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback from Ross Takahashi, author of [Cross Curricular](#)

The success we have seen with *Humanities Heart to Heart* reaffirms the importance of public humanities programming during this time. Through this story-based program, we have been able to generate awareness of how the humanities are alive in our communities during this time. The pandemic led us to pivot and create a full-time online program with weekly updates and extensive social media promotion; thanks to digital analytics, we can see in real time how people are responding to these stories, that they are finding solace and solidarity alike as they read, and our subscribers tell us that they look forward to receiving their weekly dose of heart-to-hearts in their inboxes and through social media.

Through social media, not only are we able to reach people through our own platforms, every individual contributor who then shares their own piece or those of others on their respective social media pages adds another node in our ever-growing network. Our program has been shared online by news outlets, university student journals, department media accounts, and more. Each new share introduces our work to new members of



Program Manager Kathleen Kuo in conversation with *Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Iain Watson. *Humanities Heart to Heart Live* screenshot, July 2020.

our community, with the possibility of it being shared yet again. Our stories invite the public to participate, and we are proud to see the positive growing ripple effect that our program is creating throughout our state.

Keeping in mind reader fatigue, we wanted to add another way for our followers to engage with our program. Our live companion series on Instagram, *Humanities Heart to Heart Live*, has been an effective way with which to further engage the public, and especially younger audience members. These short videos range in length from 15-20 minutes and feature Kathleen Kuo, the program manager in charge of curating *Humanities Heart to Heart*, in conversation with a contributor. After the video ends, the recording is saved on our Instagram page and a copy is added to our Vimeo account, so that those without Instagram can still view these conversations (link in the Attachments section).

At the time of writing, we have published 69 pieces on our website. Since our program's inception on July 13, 2020:

- The *Humanities Heart to Heart* landing page and all published pieces have over 10,000 pageviews to date.
- Web traffic has gone up almost 60% since the launch of the project three months ago, compared to the prior three months. (April–June 2020)
- On Facebook, an average of over 500 people per week see our posts.
- On Twitter, we have over 2,000 average total impressions weekly (people who see our posts), with more than 100 active engagements a week.
- On Instagram, we receive an average of 40 likes per week.
- As individual contributors share their pieces on their own respective social media pages, the number increases.



Illustrations/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Jess Vanessa.

**Financial Structure**

*Humanities Heart to Heart* is funded by the State of Nevada and a number of private donors and foundations. We have found several organizations eager and willing to help sustain the work we have started with *Humanities Heart to Heart*. Renown Health Foundation, a not-for-profit health system in northern Nevada, awarded a \$2,500 grant to Nevada Humanities to support *Humanities Heart to Heart*. In addition to soliciting writing from people in our humanities world, including scholars and artists, this call has been extended to health professionals, front line workers, and mental health professionals, to learn about the ways COVID-19 has had a lasting effect on our community and how the humanities play a role in connection and healing. We have published pieces around the topics of loneliness, mental health, and teen suicide, in alignment with Renown Health’s current strategic goals. We firmly believe that the humanities are part of what makes a healthy community, and access to these stories and ideas will contribute to the health and well-being of Nevada in the years to come. We have not partnered with Renown Health Foundation in a number of years, and this flexible, innovative program has allowed us to rekindle relationships outside of a more typical humanities world. We are also currently seeking additional funding.



*Calabaza Mask, Morph2020. Art piece/Humanities Heart to Heart contributor Tia Flores.*



Plywood boarded doors at the *Prada* store located in the Las Vegas Strip. Photo/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Laura Brennan.

We believe strongly in reinforcing the value of and supporting creative work by paying an \$100 honorarium to each contributing author. Ten percent of our contributors waived their honorarium, making an in-kind donation to Nevada Humanities in the process, citing that they wanted this money to go to others who needed it more and especially underrepresented members of our community.

This program is curated and run by one program manager, with the support of two contract communications staff, and input and guidance from the whole team at Nevada Humanities.

## Sustainability and the Road Forward

“Stories connect us. They help us to realize we are not alone and give us courage to move forward.”

- *Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor

“I think, at its most basic level, it gives folks something to relate to. A lot of people, especially early on, felt isolated and alone. Not everyone can articulate their thoughts and feelings (something I struggle with myself). I think this series let people know that there are others going through the same motions and struggles, too, with an air of hopefulness.”

-*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor

“Telling stories takes away the fear (the fear of what might happen). It places emphasis on our experience of what *\*already has happened\** and the potential of that experience to impact our future.”

- *Humanities Heart to Heart* survey feedback from Brandy Burgess, author of [Combining Like Terms](#)

We plan on continuing *Humanities Heart to Heart* through the duration of the pandemic, while it is still relevant to our communities. While we expected that this program would have our contributors reflecting and commenting on the upheaval in their lives and communities caused by the pandemic, we could not have anticipated the full spectrum of views and topics that they have shared to date. Week to week, we are touched by the raw emotions and honesty shared through these reflections (one board member thanked us for “keeping it real”). It is even more impressive that so many of our younger contributors have written about some of the most difficult topics: battling cancer during a pandemic, experiencing dysphoria, the need to fast-track through adulthood, calling for us to come together as a community to battle racial discrimination and injustices. Even more heartening, we find that as our contributors share their own experiences, they also share messages of hope, togetherness, and encouragement to their fellow Nevadans.



Near empty store shelves from the beginning of the pandemic. Photo/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Melissa Melero-Moose.



*Shelter in Place Project* kits created for close friends. Slide excerpt/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Gail Rappa.

The relationships formed with contributors to *Humanities Heart to Heart* are invaluable, and we look forward to working with people in our in-person programming, once that resumes. In a post-publishing survey sent to our contributors, we received feedback affirming our program's effectiveness in connecting people across our state and generating hope, inspiration, and solidarity. Reading comments about the writing and publication process, we were proud to hear that this program had achieved the

goals we had set for ourselves, and more. We have received multiple notes from our contributors thanking us for sharing their story and giving them a creative and cathartic outlet with which to process their pandemic experience. Contributors stressed the therapeutic benefits of writing for *Humanities Heart to Heart* and the positive responses they received from friends, family, and acquaintances when sharing their individual pieces. Others noted that they appreciated the interdisciplinary nature of our program, lauding the benefits of storytelling, educational moments, and shared human experience during a pandemic.

Through this program, we have successfully called attention to the relevance and significance of the humanities in our communities during this time. The online nature of *Humanities Heart to Heart* enables us to reach a wider audience not only in Nevada, but also across the country and globe. Outside of the digital world, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that *Humanities Heart to Heart* has been used in a high school creative writing classroom in northern Nevada. The students choose stories that they relate to and analyze them, before writing their own essays reflecting on their COVID-19 experiences, and we look forward to publishing these student submissions in the near future.

Over the last few months, we have gained much valuable knowledge as program producers. We have been able to promote our virtual programming and draw viewers to our website as effectively as our in-person events. Our focus on accessibility has further allowed us to create reciprocal relationships with people throughout the state, broadening our connection to them

as we learn their story, and their connection to us, as they learn about the role of public humanities and their fellow community members throughout the state.

We firmly believe that the humanities - as the sum of our knowledge, traditions, heritage, and culture - are part of what makes a healthy community, and access to these stories and ideas will contribute to the health and well-being of Nevada in the years to come. In light of this health emergency, we believe that these essays and ideas are more important than ever to articulate and share with a broad audience. The success we have seen with *Humanities Heart to Heart* demonstrates that this format has the flexibility to become a sustained program that explores issues that matter to the people of Nevada, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.



A glimpse of Comet Neowise from Searchlight, Nevada.  
Photo/*Humanities Heart to Heart* contributor Mikayla Whitmore.

We will continue to reach out and share the stories of people around our state, and we have plans to potentially publish a physical compendium and/or create an exhibit and gallery of these stories in the future. While we are only four months into our program at the time of writing, we believe that these stories have lasting, transformative effects upon our contributors and communities. We hope that the success we have seen with sharing these stories, and the deliberate steps we took to ensure that we were hearing from diverse voices across our state, can inspire other humanities councils and organizations when it comes to COVID-19 programming.

### **Links and Attachments**

*Humanities Heart to Heart*

<https://www.nevadahumanities.org/humanities-heart-to-heart>

Vimeo page with *Humanities Heart to Heart* Live recordings

<https://vimeo.com/nevadahumanities>

Samples of *Humanities Heart to Heart* on social media

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1vW-UImE\\_T-n30jur-3ULj-2GXclxIQV8?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1vW-UImE_T-n30jur-3ULj-2GXclxIQV8?usp=sharing)