

BEST LAID PLANS

WHAT QUARANTINE PROMISED, AND WHAT IT DELIVERED

BY DANA SHAVIN/CONTRIBUTOR

Last September, The New York Times ran a feature on what people had thought they might do with their time when the COVID-19 quarantine hit, and what, five months later, they'd actually done. We at Chatter Magazine decided to ask a similar question: What personal goals did you set or projects did you take on when Chattanooga shut down most of its businesses and schools and it looked like we would have months of downtime on our hands? Of those plans and goals, what did you accomplish — or, what did you do instead?

What we found was that there was no consistency across the board. Some people initially viewed the time as an opportunity for personal growth, set goals accordingly, but were waylaid by home schooling and other demands. Some people fell into projects they never saw coming. Some struggled with the isolation, until they found creative ways to cope. And there were the myriad of people we talked to — carpenters, small-business owners, restaurant workers and people in the medical field, for example — whose work continued to be considered “essential” and for whom the idea of a span of downtime to set and work on personal goals felt either alien or wishful or both.



BOB BERNHARDT

On March 12, 2020, Bob Bernhardt, Chattanooga Symphony conductor emeritus, flew from Chattanooga to Halifax, Nova Scotia, a total of three flights in one 24-hour period. There, he was to have a debut performance with the Symphony Nova Scotia in a Broadway “Pops” show.

Mindful of growing concerns about the coronavirus, Bernhardt had had his agent call ahead and confirm that the show was a sure thing. There were no virus cases in Halifax, he was told. The concerts were sold out. The show would go on.

Just after lunchtime the next day, as the orchestra was warming up for the first rehearsal, the executive director knocked on Bernhardt’s dressing room door.

“It’s great to meet you,” he said. “We’re canceling.”

After another three flights home, Bernhardt descended, along with the rest of the city, into pandemic lockdown. He hasn’t conducted a concert in over seven months.

So what, exactly, has he been doing with his newfound time? There’s the remote teaching at Lee University, where he’s been an artist-in-residence since 2011. He’s also doing adult education webinars. There’s reading — lots and lots of reading. There’s completing the daily Jumble. There are the long walks he takes with his wife Nora, as together they work to get in 10,000 steps a day “(and) you don’t want to see us at home in the evening trying to finish off the steps,” he assures me.

“But mostly,” says Bernhardt, “I’ve been trying to figure out my path. Turns out that my profession has been recession-proof, 9/11-proof and societal regression-proof, but it’s not pandemic-proof.”

How well is he coping? To answer that question, Bernhardt recounts a concept popularized by author Jim Collins

called the Stockdale Paradox. At its heart, explains Bernhardt, it’s a concept that suggests that individuals who find themselves in dire circumstances fare better if they are realistic — as opposed to overly optimistic — about their predicament.

“I think we’re in this [pandemic] at this level for probably another six months to a year, at least,” he says. “With

each passing month I find myself feeling more at peace with uncertainty.”

For now, Bernhardt’s plan is to continue to do more remote teaching. While he wasn’t sure at first how he would like it, given how much he loves interaction with students in the classroom, he’s been surprised to find that he really enjoys it. He says he’ll get back to trav-

el and conducting as soon as it feels safe to do so, but for now, he’s open to the idea that remote teaching may be “a new and lasting way to reach more people about the many joys of all kinds of music.”

In the meantime, his goals for 2021 are to “keep occupied and engaged, to follow the science, and to be a socially responsible citizen.”



STAFF PHOTO BY TROY STOLT

BRITTANY SHAW

Brittany Shaw is a digital media and online sales strategist for Pratt Home Builders and a fundraiser for Dare to Dance, an annual dance competition which benefits the Kidney Foundation of Greater Chattanooga’s Emergency Housing Fund. Believing that her workload might fall off a bit during lockdown, she set a few attainable goals for herself.

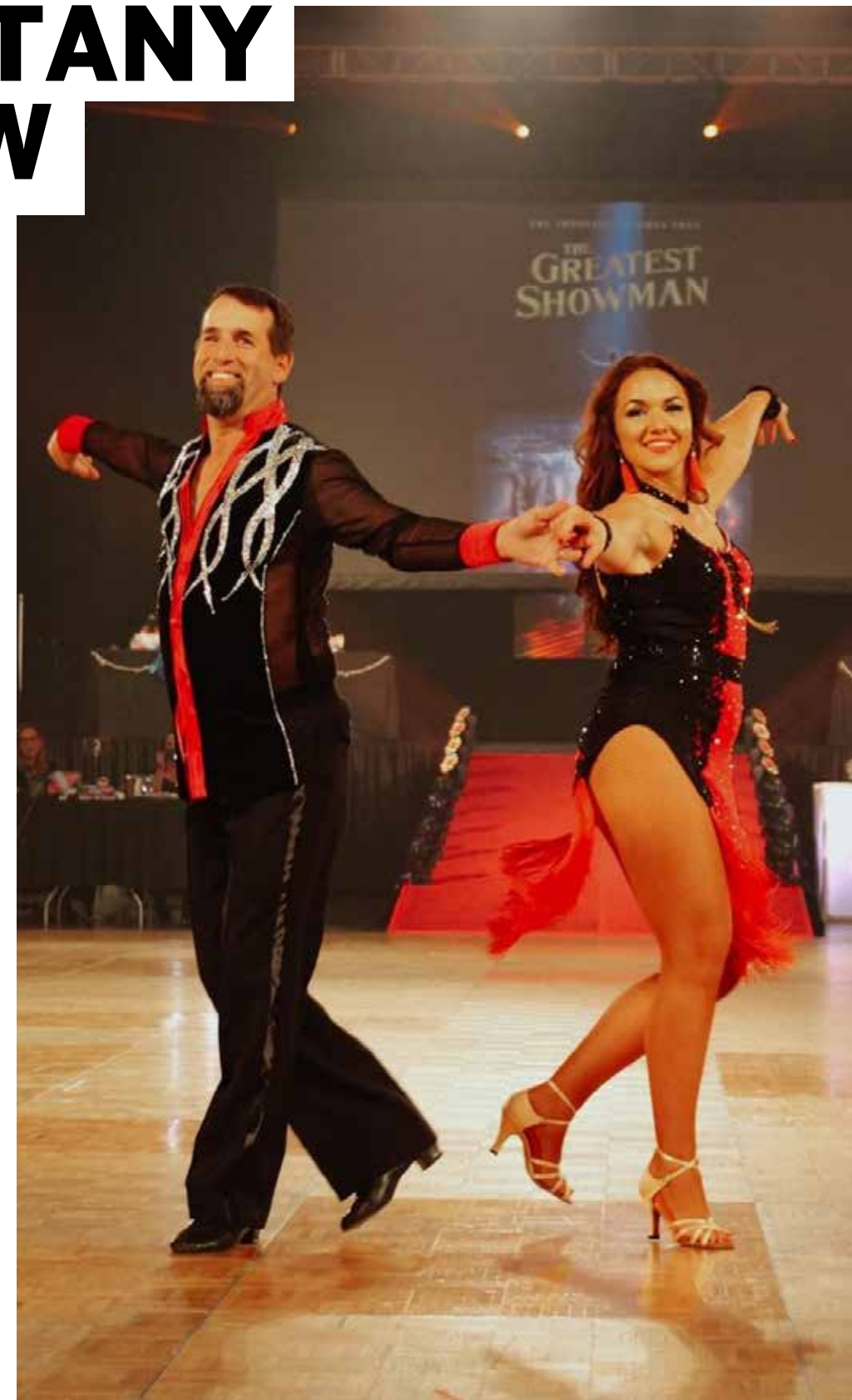
“I understood that lockdown, for me, could be really good or really bad,” she says, and because of that, she made a plan: She would keep up with her workload, whatever that meant. She would do a physical workout every day along with a friend (remotely) for accountability. And she would plant a garden.

Instead of a lull in her workload, however, business boomed. With so many people making the shift to home schooling and working from home, the demand for renovations to address new workspace needs skyrocketed. “We actually broke our company records for visits and sales during each month of quarantine,” she says.

Even with the heavier workload, Shaw met the other goals she’d set for herself. She worked out via FaceTime with a friend for three straight months. And she planted that garden she’d promised herself.

Quarantine was eye-opening. “I think that while most of us may be looking forward to when 2020 is hindsight, this unique experience has shed so much light on what is really important in this life,” Shaw says. “My 2020 resolution was radical honesty, and what a great year for that challenge. My 2021 goal is all about connection with my deepest self and with other people. I aspire to share more love and compassion with more people throughout our community.”

To that end, she has already



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signed up to volunteer at Erlanger and with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Chattanooga. Shaw hopes her surprising level of productivity during quar-

antine will be her “new normal.” She’s also looking forward to continuing to cultivate more “mind-body-spirit” health. “After a year of distancing and

Zoom fatigue, I can’t wait to live with all five senses and to keep creating, moving, dancing, laughing and finding ways to nurture others,” Shaw says.

BRYNIJA LOYD

For 19-year-old Brynija Loyd, the threat of COVID-19 along with working full time and going to school proved more than she could handle.

“At the start of quarantine, my workplace had to let go of over 90% of the staff,” she says — which left Loyd and two co-workers struggling to handle the workload.

In addition, she was attempting to take care of her roommate, who was working from home but seriously struggling with the isolation.

Loyd quickly found herself fully focused on taking care of herself and her roommate as best she could.

“Surviving and keeping my head above water was the main goal,” she says.

Early on, she was able to juggle school, work and “the heavy reality that things wouldn’t be fixed any time soon.”

Eventually, however, Loyd’s grades began to slip, and her roommate’s condition worsened. Some of her teachers were helpful, encouraging students to take care of themselves however they needed to and not pressuring them about schoolwork. But there were more setbacks to come.

As the Black Lives Matter movement gathered momentum, Loyd jumped on board, wanting to be a part of the cultural shift. “I went to marches, made Facebook posts, posted that little black square on Black Out Tuesday ... and none of it gave me the clarity I hoped it would,” she says.

Her job as a barista serving people who, she felt, spoke down to her, became less of a refuge and more of an antagonistic environment.

“I began to feel threatened in a place I once felt comfortable. My boss explained that there was more frustration in the air because of COVID-19 and more unleashed hostility



in the world,” says Loyd.

Still, she felt compelled to quit the job she’d once loved, which brought new trouble: financial difficulties.

“While my roommate had taken up hobbies and found new ways to fill her time, my days seemed to never end,” Loyd says. She promised friends and acquaintances she was doing fine, when in fact, she says, “I began to drown in my own self-pity and anxiety.”

Not long after quitting her job, Loyd attempted suicide. It was only in the aftermath

that she found the respite she so desperately needed.

“After a week of outpatient, I found solace in the quiet,” she says. “I picked up healthy hobbies like crocheting, writing music and playing with my dogs. I got a new job where I feel comfortable and safe.” And she made a promise to herself that she would reach out when she needs help.

“I learned a lot about myself, about what I can handle and what I cannot,” says Loyd. “I learned how fun it is to actually try living for myself and not out of obligation to

those around me. I’ve been making small goals for myself, such as writing a poem a day and taking my dogs for walks every morning — things I can take on even when I feel bad.

“I can handle more now that I’ve found my footing, and I know that even if COVID-19 lasts longer, I can too,” she continues. “My main goal in 2021 is to seek stability in every aspect of my life. I want to pick up whatever ball I dropped during this year and keep my head on straight. I believe 2021 is my new beginning.”

STAFF PHOTO BY TROY STOLT

TAYLOR HIXSON

Taylor Hixson is the director of fundraising and special events at the Humane Educational Society. Both she and her fiancé, Brian, have maintained a busy schedule during quarantine.

Because the animal shelter provides essential services to the community, it never closed during the citywide lockdown, and she never stopped going into the office. But with fundraisers moved online and in-person events halted, Hixson saw an opportunity to finish a number of projects she had set aside, including making a dining room table, painting their deck, replacing light fixtures and finishing small craft projects. And, just for fun, she set a goal to bake a new dessert every weekend.

Brian, meanwhile, started photographing the birds in their yard. Soon they had bought a guide book to bird species and “... the next thing we knew, we were crazy bird people,” she says.

They now have 14 bird feeders, seven bird houses, a bat house and three birdbaths.

They then moved on to landscaping. “I started researching what kind of plants we should add to attract and support native wildlife,” Hixson says.

When they discovered it was possible to have your yard certified as a wildlife habitat, it became their “summer of COVID” project.

“We removed non-native plant species from our yard and added dozens of native plants that offer food, habitat and protection for birds, butterflies and other wildlife,” she says. “To date, we’ve had over 30 species of birds in our yard, and several butterfly species.”

Now, she adds, they often get up very early on Saturdays and go birding at green spaces around town.

Her biggest takeaway from quarantine?

“Obviously I’m beyond sad-



dened for the unnecessary loss of life” says Hixson, who lost her grandfather to COVID-19 in October. “But it’s given me time to do a lot of thinking and re-evaluating of my priorities, and a new appreciation of so many little things. It’s made me realize I don’t always have to

be doing something productive, and I’ve gained so much from spending time sitting and noticing all the minute details around me. For however long this lasts, I want to fully embrace the break.”

Hixson’s goals for 2021 include expanding their wild-

life habitat, growing vegetables and, perhaps most importantly, following through on the wedding she and Brian had to postpone due to the pandemic.

“This year has definitely made us closer,” Hixson says, “and I’m even more excited to marry Brian in 2021.”

STAFF PHOTO BY ROBIN RUDD

DEANA GEBACZ

Deana Gebacz is a microbiology applications specialist who trains hospital microbiology lab techs on an instrument that identifies bacteria. Very early in COVID-19's arrival, she was required to halt all business travel for eight weeks and work from home. She resumed travel and hospital trainings in May.

While most of the goals she set were work related — things like cleaning up emails and organizing computer files — she also thought she would get some long-awaited household chores done.

She did get the work chores done, but not the household ones.

"I'm a procrastinator," she explains. "The more time I have, the less I am motivated to work."

But there was one non-work-related task she did tackle: a cross-stitch piece that her mother-in-law, Sue, had started. Fighting cancer for many years, and eventually homebound, Sue passed the time working on cross-stitch projects with the goal to have one completed for each of her grandchildren by the time she died.

"She had one cross-stitch that was about a third complete when she died, and it ended up in the hands of my sister-in-law Sarah," Gebacz says. "She had it for a few years before she started asking other family members if they would finish it. I said I would."

Gebacz started working on the cross-stitch as soon as she received it, but, realizing she didn't enjoy the process, soon put it away. It stayed in a drawer for seven or eight years, at which time Sarah asked her about it and Gebacz again promised she would finish it. Then COVID-19 hit.

Gebacz finished the cross-stitch in a little over two weeks. "It was really bittersweet,



because Sue was a wonderful seamstress and I discovered a lot of mistakes that she never would have made had she not been so ill at the end," she says. "I decided to leave all the mistakes as a tribute to how hard she fought to live. The proudest moment is when I stitched her initials and the year she worked on it — '07 — followed by my initials, followed by '20."

She had it framed to give it to her sister-in-law for Christmas. As for 2021, Gebacz doesn't yet have a plan.

"I think it's too hard to set goals when there is so much uncertainty about what is going to happen in the next six months," she says.

But she gained some wisdom from the pandemic lockdown that she'll carry with her.

"I think the biggest lessons have been about human nature," Gebacz says. "I've seen the best of people and the worst of people. Fear is a strong emotion, and my goal has been to be respectful of everyone's feelings even if they don't line up with mine. I've also learned that turning off the media can make your life much more stress free!"

STAFF PHOTO BY TROY STOLT

MICHAEL CANEY JR.

Fourteen-year-old Michael Caney Jr. didn't realize the pandemic was going to significantly impact his life when he first heard about it in March.

"I was on tech crew for a production called 'Newsies' at school," he recalls. "I was putting a microphone on someone when I heard an announcement from the teachers saying we would not be able to come to school that coming Friday."

Michael knew there were a few COVID-19 cases in Knoxville and Nashville, and thought that, at worst, the disruption would last a few days.

That Friday, while in the middle of a photo shoot, he got word that a priest in Chattanooga had tested positive. He realized then that this was not just a temporary thing.

"I was shocked that a virus from across the world hit Chattanooga, Tennessee," he says. "This is the day I knew the pandemic was going to affect my life, including relationships, school and just daily things."

Michael decided to spend the time away from school growing his photography business. He set a goal to make enough money to buy a new camera. "I was going to take advantage of this pandemic and succeed," he says.

Aware of many kids his age who spend their time watching TV or playing video games, Michael says he did not want to do that. "Those things are not particularly bad things, I just think you can do better things with the time you have. A belief that anything is possible makes a big difference in how people show up for their work," he says.

Sure enough, Michael was successful. With the money he earned, he bought a new camera and some additional gear.

"It felt very good knowing that I put hard work into my business," he says. "I'm good, but I'm not the best. In order for me to be the best I have to



make room for growth."

In addition to growing his photography business, Michael also discovered an interest in mountain biking. One day, he and a friend set off to explore the neighborhood trails, and

soon they were riding every day. Michael now rides 100-150 miles a week.

He hopes to continue the growth trajectory of his photography business into 2021, and to upgrade his mountain

bike as well.

"Kids and teens have so much potential in this day and age, but they don't use it," he says, sounding wise beyond his years. One gets the feeling he isn't squandering his.

STAFF PHOTO BY MATT HAMILTON

NICK DeSHA

Nick DeSha, owner of Solid Ground Construction, builds and remodels houses from the ground up. Most of the homes he and his crew were working on when the lockdown hit were unoccupied, but the owners were anxious to move back in.

"We had no choice but to finish the jobs we'd started," DeSha says.

They were lucky in that the work required very little contact with the public during this time.

"I think my only goal was being frugal with spending," the business owner says. "I wanted to set my [crew] up to survive. Also, I obviously want to be able to float my family through the rough seas."

DeSha started to think about how much he would need to survive year by year and how much work he would need to take on to meet that goal.

Far from seeing their work decline, his crew has taken on several new jobs. Still, the pandemic has led to supply shortages that have had serious repercussions, including extreme price hikes on materials and the shutting down of specialty factories. DeSha has also had to navigate outbreaks of illness in his crew, his customers and his own family, and has had to juggle, along with his wife, the challenges of working and home schooling their children.

So far, he says, he feels good about managing to keep his life and his workers on track through the COVID-19 crisis, and hopes 2021 will bring continued growth.

"Time will tell," DeSha says, but for now, "It's full steam ahead."



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT HAMILTON

PEARL PANGKEY

Pearl Pangkey is a physical therapist assistant who works with elderly patients. Like many in health care at the start of the pandemic, her work situation was a bit of a roller coaster.

She continued to make home visits until she was instructed not to, after which she switched to sending her patients home exercise programs and calling them weekly to check in on them. Then, after a few months, she was told to resume home visits, but was again told to work from home when the virus cases began to climb.

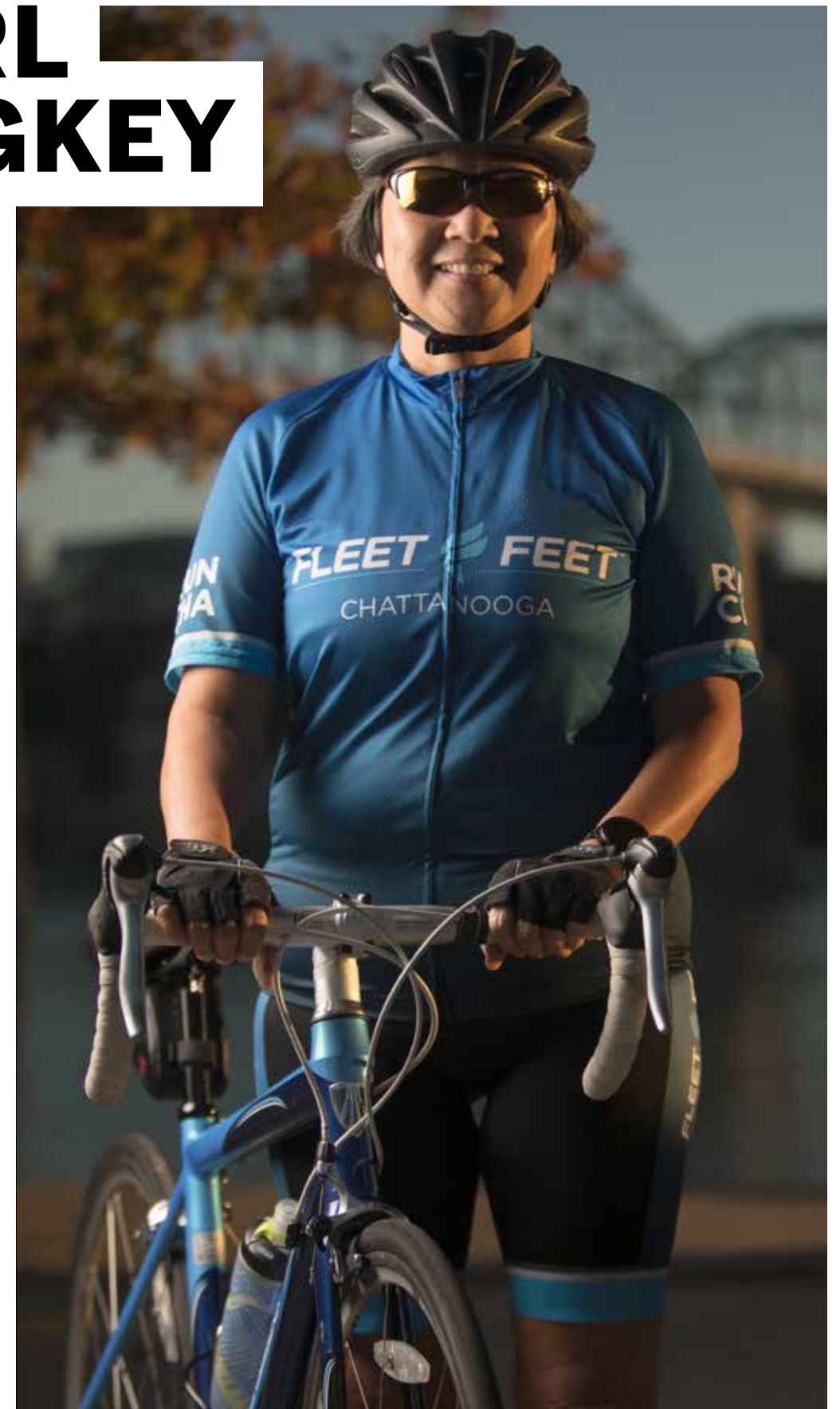
An athlete at heart, Pangkey was sad to have to stop swimming with her master's swimming group (a group of competitive swimmers 25 years old and older), and to see her gym close down. She still hoped to make good on her pre-pandemic goals: to participate in the Chattanooga Waterfront Triathlon (sprint distance) in May, and the Sunbelt Bakery Ironman (a 70.3-mile relay race), also in Chattanooga, in June. But due to the pandemic, both events were eventually canceled.

With no gym to keep her motivated, Pangkey struggled to keep up her workout regimen, and as a result felt herself losing strength and gaining weight.

In October, however, there was light in the tunnel. The Cohutta Springs Triathlon went on as scheduled, and she was able to complete it. She also completed the Hawaii From Home Ironman virtually.

It wasn't how Pangkey expected things to turn out, but, she says, you have to live in the moment, whatever that moment brings you.

Her 2021 goals? To complete the races she signed up for that were canceled due to the pandemic. She would also like to add in the Chattanooga Rat Race, a 5k open-water swim.



STAFF PHOTO BY TROY STOLT

And, like many of us, she hopes to be able to hug more. "I've missed hugging my dad, my family and my friends," Pangkey says. A worthy goal indeed. [cm](#)