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JOURNAL REPORTS: CORONAVIRUS

You've Got Mail. The Old-Fashioned Kind.

Because of the pandemic, people are putting pen to paper to reach loved ones in a more intimate way than email and other online tools

By *Sarah E. Needleman*

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Since getting furloughed from her audiology job nearly two months ago, Miranda Flanagan of Weymouth, Mass., has had a lot of free time on her hands. Now she's putting those hands to good use, writing letters to friends near and far.

The 28-year-old reflects on her relationships with each one, recalling how they met, her favorite memory of their time together and what their friendship means to her. So far she has typed, signed, decorated and mailed nearly two dozen letters.

"I thought it would be a little more exciting for them to open up a letter than an email," says Ms. Flanagan, adding that she associates email and texting with work. "I wanted to give them something to brighten up their day during this craziness."



Miranda Flanagan of Weymouth, Mass., has been writing letters to her friends—typed, signed and decorated.

PHOTO: MIRANDA FLANAGAN

Old-fashioned letter writing is making a comeback—albeit in some cases with the help of a keyboard and printer—as the coronavirus pandemic is limiting social interaction and creating idle time for many.

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“We are in a situation now where we are artificially taken back in time,” says Eric Lehman, an English professor at the University of Bridgeport, in Bridgeport, Conn. “People wrote a lot of letters during plagues because they were also stuck at home.”

Granted, people didn't have email or phones back then. But Prof. Lehman argues that, today, letters are preferable to digital correspondence because they take more effort, especially when written by hand.

“It forces you to be more thoughtful, and that appeals to a lot of people,” he says.

Their delivery asks more as well—from getting an envelope and stamp, to looking up the recipient's address, to placing the finished product in a letter carrier's care.

Consumer orders of greeting cards from Minted LLC tripled in the week ended April 26 from the same period last year. And demand has risen for designs that reflect sentiments during the health crisis, such as “Sending hugs from far away,” says Mariam Naficy, founder and chief executive of the San Francisco-based company.

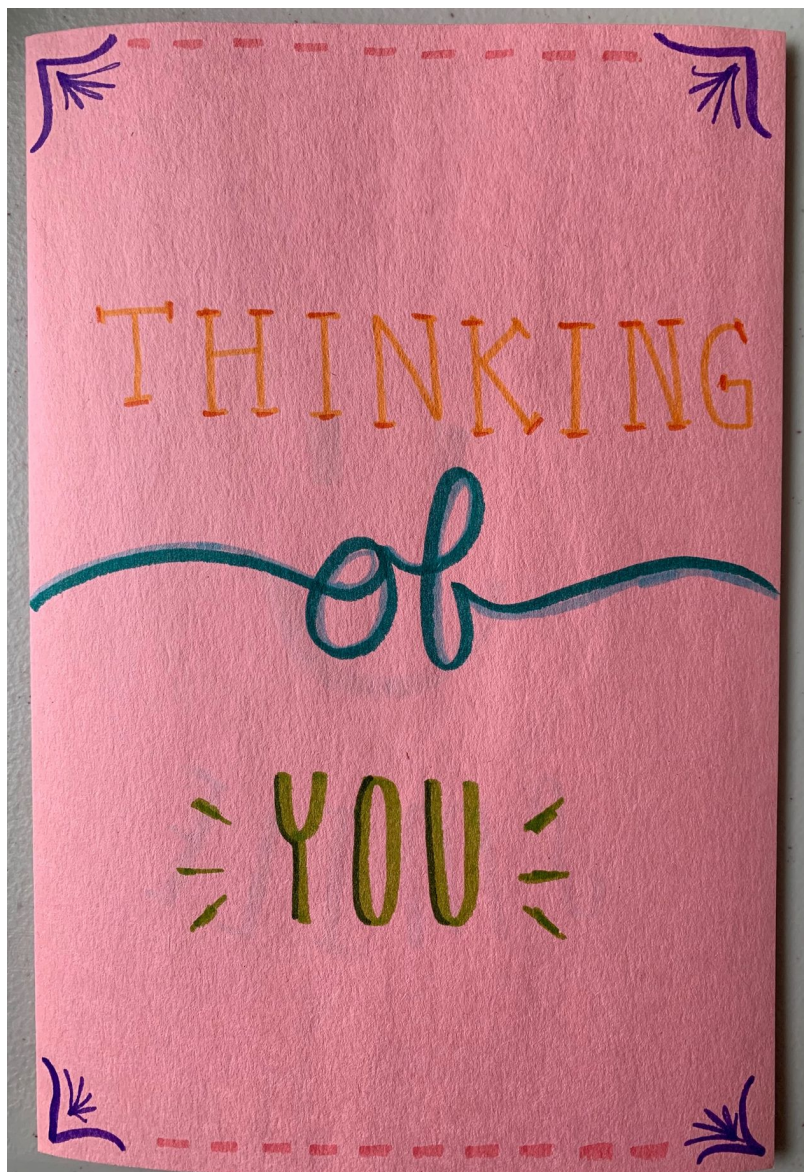
Similarly, sales of writing paper, notecards and greeting cards at London-based Papier Ltd. roughly quadrupled over the past six weeks. The company says its sales of writing paper are at their highest since Papier launched in 2015.

“That's not normal,” says the founder and CEO, Taymoor Atighetchi. “That kind of growth is triggered by a shift in consumer behavior.”

Some people say they are writing letters to connect with loved ones in a slower, more meaningful way than is typically done through email, messaging apps and video calls. Others are looking to reach individuals who don't have access to those tools and may be waiting out the health crisis all alone. Some older people, for example, don't have smartphones or computers, and may have difficulty hearing over the phone.

Bhavya Koya, a high-school freshman in Des Peres, Mo., earlier this year formed a local chapter of the national nonprofit GlamourGals Foundation Inc. Chapter members gave manicures to residents of a nearby nursing home on Sundays until the pandemic started and visitors were no longer allowed. Now the 15-year-old and her fellow members write letters to the seniors.

“I'm writing by hand on printer paper or construction paper, and I use markers to make it colorful and bold so the seniors can easily read them,” says Bhavya, who so far has completed about 20 letters. Her chapter has written about 60 letters, and GlamourGals at large has penned more than 1,800.



Bhavya Koya and other members of a nonprofit called GlamourGals have been writing letters to residents of a nursing home near St. Louis whom they visited before the pandemic.

PHOTO: BHAVYA KOYA

Says Bhavya, “My cards usually say something along the lines of: ‘We miss visiting you guys, we’re thinking of you, keep staying positive and smiling, and we hope to see you soon.’ ”

Charlea Owen, a first-grade teacher in Springfield, Tenn., recently wrote and mailed letters to each of her 23 students, whom she hasn’t seen since early March. “I wanted to send some

comfort their way and something to get excited about,” she says. Though she could have relied on her school’s online messaging system, “there is a better connection with something handwritten,” she says, since the children are familiar with her penmanship. “It’s on the white board, it’s on their nametags, the feedback on their work,” the teacher says.

Ms. Owen, 26 years old, personalized and decorated the letters with stickers. “It was definitely hard on the hand,” she says, but worth the effort. A parent sent a video of one of her students opening her letter with a big smile, which made Ms. Owen cry with joy. “I don’t have kids of my own, so they are my kids,” Ms. Owen says of her students. “I miss them so much.”

Experts say there are mental-health benefits to writing letters. The practice can be therapeutic because it typically involves focusing on one’s internal thoughts and feelings, as well as sharing that perspective with someone else, says Ellen K. Baker, a clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C.

“For some people, that can be personally enriching and gratifying,” she says. Though the same can be said of an email, she adds, for some people choosing stationery and ink can make the experience even more enjoyable.

There are some differences between writing by hand and using a keyboard, Dr. Baker says, but both have their merits. Writing by hand can take longer and make editing more difficult, so people may write less but put more thought into each word. And typing on a computer generally allows for lengthier letters and revising.

“Editing can be a reflection of how much the writer cares about the message, the recipient or both,” she says.

Receiving a letter also has its perks. It has become so uncommon since the rise of email that it’s now like getting a gift, says Kathleen Adams, director of the Center for Journal Therapy in Denver, which offers online classes on keeping journals. A letter is “more personal, more relational, more uplifting” than email, she says. “There’s a lot of intention that goes into it.”

And because letters tend to surprise and delight their recipients, senders often feel a sense of personal satisfaction, Ms. Adams adds. “It makes us feel good. It helps our own mood, our self-esteem.”

Five-year-old Addy Fults of Marengo, Iowa, recently mailed a letter with some artwork to one of her great-grandfathers, who has difficulty hearing. He then wrote her back. “Talking on the phone doesn’t go well,” says her mother, Angela Fults, and the family can’t visit him because of the pandemic.

Addy, who has sent letters to a great-grandmother and grandparent as well, also has been writing to a pen pal—a 5-year-old girl who lives close by but whom she’s never met. Ms. Fults set up that arrangement through a [Facebook](#) connection a few weeks ago.

Ms. Fults says writing letters is one way for Addy to practice writing, keep busy and build relationships while school is closed due to the health crisis. The correspondence has also been helping to lift the kindergartner’s spirits.

“Addy gets so excited when she gets something in the mail,” says Ms. Fults, a family physician. “It breaks up the monotony a little bit.”

Ms. Needleman is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in New York. She can be reached at sarah.needleman@wsj.com.

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