

# Capturing your family's slice of history in a box: how to make a coronavirus time capsule

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The writer's son, Isaac Butterfield, works on a time capsule. (Courtesy of Elisa Murray)

By

[Elisa Murray](#)

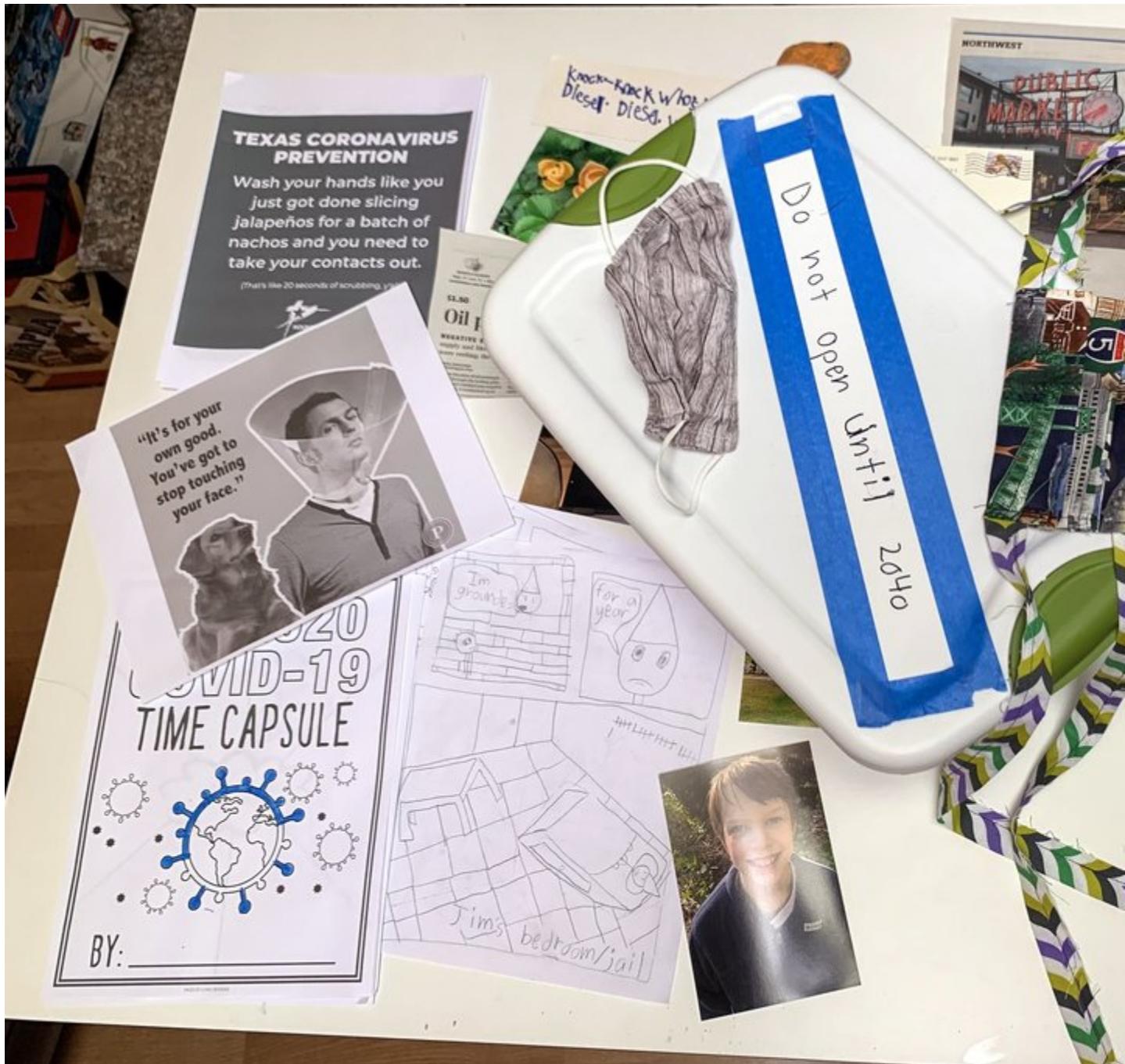
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A colorful mask made by a friend. A neighborhood sign offering to deliver groceries for seniors. A lock of hair from our poodle terrier's quarantine haircut. A daily home-school schedule, checkboxes unchecked.

These are just a few of the items currently crowding my kitchen table, vying for placement in my family's first-ever time capsule.

It's rare to know you're living through historic times. "We've never experienced ANYTHING like this before," I tell my 10-year-old son at least once a week. But he doesn't get it. How can he? It's all personal for him — school and sports canceled, no playdates possibly forever, more video-game time than he could have imagined in his wildest dreams.

My son doesn't understand the magnitude now, but in 20 years, he will. And my hope is that at that point, he will send his personal robot to fish out a shoebox-sized plastic container wrapped in duct tape and marked "do not open until 2040." He'll scissor it open, spread out the contents, and — hopefully with parents at his side — remember what it was like during that time in 2020 when it was just the three of us and the dog, together day after day, reeling from tsunami-like changes to the way we lived, worked, schooled and connected.



Articles and artifacts will go into a time capsule, not to be opened to 2040, that Isaac Butterfield is working on. (Courtesy of Elisa Murray)

The idea of a capsule as a capturing tool came easily. Deciding which items to include did not. For capsule counsel, I called up Knute Berger, Seattle author, editor-at-large at Crosscut, KCTS host and time-capsule expert (full disclosure, he was my boss at the Seattle Weekly more than two decades ago).

“I’m one of the world’s experts on a subject that almost nobody cares about,” Berger likes to tell people. His credentials include, in 1989, leading the creation of a [400-year Washington state time capsule](#), complete with scheduled updates at 25-year intervals.

According to Berger, the concept of saving artifacts and texts for a future civilization has been around for millennia. But the specific idea of a time capsule — sealed for opening at some future date — was popularized (and the term coined) in the late 1930s.

Though Berger doesn’t often do personal capsules, he sees the value in the exercise, especially for families who want to keep a record for their children.

The most important things you can put in a time capsule are things that are one of a kind, says Berger, and the record of personal experience is at the top of that list.

“Those are the voices you don’t hear from. You hear from the epidemiologist and the historians. It’s harder to get at the personal stories.”

## **Helping kids tell their stories**

If you’re lucky enough to have that kid who’s been keeping a journal since she was 7, congrats: They are ready to be in charge of the whole project. Otherwise, you will have to help them collect and record, and tell the bigger stories that will help them remember, years or decades later.

I’m as overwhelmed as any parent right now, so in my family, we set out a plastic box and have used it as a repository for notes, letters and other mementos. Culling will happen later.

Similarly, though my son has filled out time-capsule questionnaires as a home-school exercise, a more powerful testament to his experience is a comic he’s been penning. It’s about a boy who is grounded for a year, surrounded by stacks of books and tally marks on the wall.

You can help children develop a practice of observing what’s around them through photo-taking or a daily prompt. One friend has been making a list, with her kids, of all the changes they’ve noticed around them.

As for me, I had plans to keep a coronavirus journal, but found that the best documentation of how this time feels is a months-long text string with several friends. Day after day, we’ve texted about every twist and turn of our experiences, and the region as a whole. Though it’s already hard to remember what those early, shocking days were like, a scroll backward to early March brings it back.

I’m slowly saving and printing off the best of these — knowing that my future self will thank me.

## **Analog is best**

This brings up another point. Though much of our storytelling about this pandemic is in digital form, to preserve it, analog is best. “Electronic materials might not be easily retrievable,” says Berger. Even if you plan to open your capsule soon, technology changes so quickly that there’s no guarantee it will be accessible.

Objects that serve as artifacts, typical elements of a time capsule, can help tell your family’s story. A friend of mine suggested a cellphone charger, a true totem of this time. I’ve heard of families doing a “class photo” of parents, pets and kids.

Another tip from Berger: Though most objects and paper will preserve well for a short-term time capsule, avoid rubber bands, which can deteriorate.

## **Do not bury at home**

For a family time capsule that will likely be opened within a decade or two, no special container is needed, says Berger. Make sure it’s shaped so that materials can lie flat and seal it so that as little air as possible enters. Clearly mark with the target date for opening.

As for setting an opening date, it’s all up to your family. We’re settling on a longer horizon of about 20 years, but can see the appeal of reflecting back in even just a year or two.

Finally, put it somewhere you can find it. (This is a frequent time capsule problem; many are never recovered.) And do not — contrary to popular opinion, and a time-capsule episode in “Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw” — bury it in the ground.

“The ground is a hostile environment to preservation,” says Berger.

Our time capsule, like everything right now, is a work in progress, but I’ve noticed it’s making us better observers. We talk about whether something should make the capsule cut. I muse about how to capture certain things: The way spring is happening in slow motion. Silly jokes on family calls. The constant tug of worry about the high-risk people in my life.

Berger, who has been researching and writing about the 1918 flu pandemic, says that surprisingly, there are few records of how ordinary people suffered and lived. Overshadowed by World War I, it’s been called “The Forgotten Pandemic.”

Documenting the passage of time — in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances — can “provide data for our future lives,” he says.

Leonard Garfield, executive director of the Museum of History & Industry, says it another way: “We will never forget this, but we will forget the details.” Intentionally documenting and saving those details are what bring an experience back to life.

“Find the authentic stories about you and your family and your neighborhood,” Garfield says. “What are the responses that we’ve taken? How has it changed our lives? How can we memorialize that?”

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## Tools to help; contribute your stories

- **Work sheets and other printables:** A quick Google search turns up many free time-capsule work sheets for kids; find an especially extensive set at [letsembark.ca/time-capsule](https://letsembark.ca/time-capsule). Older kids can look for “Quaranzine” projects that are popping up; MOHAI offers step-by-step instructions at [mohai.org/quaranzine](https://mohai.org/quaranzine).
- **How-to video:** The web show “GoNoodle” has a three-minute episode about how to do a time capsule that is a great primer for kids. [family.gonoodle.com/activities/how-to-make-a-time-capsule](https://family.gonoodle.com/activities/how-to-make-a-time-capsule)
- **Help make history:** Contribute your pandemic story to the Washington State Historical Society’s collection project; you can also contribute physical artifacts at a later date. For info: [washingtonhistory.org/research/collections/yourCOVIDstory/](https://washingtonhistory.org/research/collections/yourCOVIDstory/). Seattle’s Wing Luke Museum is also starting to develop an exhibit for the spring of 2021 on the experiences of Asian Pacific American communities during the pandemic, and welcomes stories and contributions. Contact senior exhibit developer Mikala Woodward at [mwoodward@wingluke.org](mailto:mwoodward@wingluke.org).

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