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Debra Halperin and the #12MonthsIn6Words Project

Dana Vollmer
WGLT, Illinois State University

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Debra Halperin, March 5, 2021

Charlie Schlenker: The Mclean County Museum of History is partnering with Illinois State, Illinois Wesleyan, and Heartland Community College to take a snapshot of life during the pandemic. The “12 months in 6 words” project marks the 1 year anniversary of COVID-19 invading McLean County. Debra Halperin, with Illinois Wesleyan's Action Research Center, is one of the project's organizers. She tells Dana Vollmer it's an opportunity for community members to pause and reflect.

Debra Halperin: Someway that we could invite people to pause for a moment and kinda capture, you know, just a little something about what this past year has been for all of us collectively, what we have been through. We thought, maybe if we invite the community to give us these 6 words, it would invite people to stop, think, and reflect. It might spark some interesting conversations as well and it would contribute to a time capsule of sort that down the road some researchers somewhere would say “well what’s happening in Mclean County 2020 or 2021 during the COVID-19 and that quarantine time?” So um we are hoping with the museum’s help we would be able to capture this and make it available for future youth.

Dana Vollmer: Can you give me an example of what one of these might look like? Or if you were to do your own submission for what 6 words you would use to describe the last year?

Halperin: Oh sure! You know, it was interesting, I did it with my kid and it was really great. Some people like to give just 6 individual words. Some of the words we’re gathering at the Instagram account, that’s already activated, and some of the six words were “matter”, “depressed” and “isolated” but some are “family” and “adaptive” and “flexible” so it will be interesting to see what some of those common words are that people are using... and then other people are using 6 word sentences, so like, “Wear your damn mask people!”, “I really miss my grandma” I think was one. So people are, even in just 6 words, creatively using that which I’m really excited to see.

Vollmer: And I’m curious, just kinda anecdotally, how this exercise went. You said you did it with your kids. How hard was it to come up with the words?

Halperin: You know what it’s kinda nice about 6 words is that you really have to get down to it. Maybe the brain goes right to a single experience. You know something that was missed, or a birthday that was celebrated differently or a trip that was cancelled. Maybe it goes to a loved one that was sick with COVID or that died with COVID. But we are all moving so fast and everyday trying to be adaptive to fill this new reality as it unfolds that I think part of the exercise is actually just to stop and look back on all of these experiences and how you would to scale it down to just 6 pretty powerful words.

Vollmer: and you mentioned the Instagram accounts. What happens with these submissions?

Halperin: So the Instagram account it's just one way that we wanna share this information back to people quickly. The Instagram platform is great for that. There is also an opportunity in the survey platform Qualtrix which allows people to upload a photograph. So if people have a picture of, you know, this past year that really captures what their experience has been. They can upload that as well. But so far, we are going to put everything on the Instagram account. But from there, you know, I was talking to someone yesterday who said "let's give all these words to a poet and see if they can create a poem for us" or "let's take all these words and have people read them all aloud in the round about in Uptown" or "let's take chalk and write down all these words on the constitution trail". We are hoping that this inspires another level of processing and reflecting back to the community. This is what you told us so here is a way that we can share it back to you.

Charlie Schlenker: That's Debra Halperin with Illinois Wesleyan University Action Research Center talking with Dana Vollmer. For more information on how to submit go to wglit.org the deadline is March 31st.