

## Voice column for April 2020

### Novel Challenges. Clean Hands. Open Hearts.

By John Groh

At least for a while, the novel coronavirus will disrupt the work and leisure pursuits we value and love here in the Rockford region. And it will disrupt business. And our lives and those of our friends and neighbors.

Unfortunately, the many small businesses, cultural organizations, hotels and entertainment venues that give our community its unique Real. Original. character are now at their most vulnerable. There are real concerns, too, for the broader business community.

Our region's businesses are taking careful public health measures to protect their employees and customers while finding new, creative ways to serve their customers and guests. I've also been so pleased with our local government leaders, including our public health officials, who have made clear, decisive decisions to protect the public.

As I and my family go about our lives in these interesting times, it dawns on me that there's nowhere I'd rather face the challenge than in this resilient community.

Examples abound of the unique Real. Original. character of our city. Pausing to reflect on who we are as a community is a hopeful thing to do. We are a creative, compassionate, generous, enthusiastic, fun-loving, culture-appreciating, determined and optimistic people.

Rockfordians are famously welcoming and hospitable, but some of our neighbors may be struggling. In the days to come think about how you can make them feel more at home, more secure, more loved: perhaps an elderly neighbor, someone out of work or home alone. Reach out. Ask if you can help. Offer to make a trip to the grocery store or pick up a prescription. You can do all of this while maintaining social distance as prescribed by health officials.

And, don't forget to take care of yourself. We are blessed here in the Rockford region with a wealth of green spaces. If you are in good health, get out and go for a walk or run – even if it's just around the block. This past week, my family has enjoyed daily walks and the fresh air has been wonderfully relaxing.

Yes, COVID-19 will disrupt business, and it is unfortunate that small businesses and their employees that bring so much flair and flavor to our city likely will suffer the most. Some have been required to close down but others remain open, paying special attention to new health-conscious protocols that protect staff and customers. Please, continue to frequent them, if not in person, then by ordering online or over the phone. Maybe you can order a gift card for future use.

As you practice social distancing, think, too about social connecting. An old-fashioned phone call might make the day of someone who can't venture out. Mail a card or a letter or deliver it to a neighbor by leaving it on their doorstep.

But I don't need to tell you all this. These daily acts of kindness have always been part of our community's DNA. Now, especially, is a time to remember who we are as individuals and as a community.

We are a community that supports our many worthy charities.

We are people who respond to special appeals to help individuals or families in distress.

We are a community that loves and supports our museums, our symphony, our sports teams, our dance company, our local makers, artisans and our beautiful Coronado Theater, which we saved from a wrecking ball only by working together.

We pulled in the same direction to revive our downtown by embracing entrepreneurship and by showing up.

We've survived depressions and recessions and still, we are good to one another.

A brighter future awaits. We will be careful. We will help each other, and we will wash our hands. But we will never throw in the towel.

Stay healthy. Be well.

*John Groh is president/CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau.*