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Wear a mask. And hold your horses

A merry-go-round runs toward a seaside summer like no other

By **Thomas Farragher** Globe Columnist, June 17, 2020, 1:27 a.m.



WATCH HILL, R.I. — The horses — nostrils flared, hooves forever suspended in midgallop — have flown around the small wooden ring here for more than a century now.

Through world wars and economic calamities. Through presidential assassinations and boiling political upheaval.

And now, as a masked nation approaches a summer like none other, the Watch Hill Merry-Go-Round — which bills itself as the oldest of its kind in the United States — is carefully preparing itself to transport children collecting memories of a lifetime.

Memories of death counts and social distancing. Of empty streets and fear along the boardwalk. And of five thrilling minutes of flying fun at the edge of a sparkling ocean.

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"I think the masks on the horses are hysterical," Almedia Livingston, a 78-year-old Westerly native, told me on a sun-splashed morning as we stood outside the old flying horse carousel.

"In another 20 years, the next generation is going to say: 'My God! What was that about?'"

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What *that* was about, of course, is a deadly pandemic which has already killed 115,000 of the 2 million people afflicted by it in the United States.

What *that* was about is the new rhythm that will set the pace for summertime fun at a beloved seaside carousel that is so old that it once was powered by actual horses, carrying children at the dawn of electricity.

"You're riding on history right now," Bryn Morgan, an 18-year-old carousel crew leader, said as she gathered with carousel co-workers here the other day. "Kids have come here for years so I think to keep that sense of normalcy during this time, people are going to keep coming to the carousel and the beach."

"You can see it now," said Ashlyn Buffum, whose parents run the place. "People are gathering to see the horses. And it's really cool."

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Yes, it is.

It's a dose of retrograde amusement that may be just the prescription for this summer of 2020 when old-school entertainment is what a kindly old cherry-checked doctor conjured by Norman Rockwell would order.

"The idea is when you come through that gate it's like you're entering a different world — a real step back in time," said Jim Buffum, who with his wife, DeeDee, are entering their second summer operating the carousel and the nearby beach.

"We're creating this wonderful, fun little place. I get kind of weepy thinking about it: How important it is for generations to come and have grandparents bring their kids here where they rode the merry-go-round themselves."

Carnival music. Vintage murals. Leather saddles. Ticket takers. Brass rings.

All of it became part of the Buffums' business world when the previous operators retired and the Watch Hill Fire District, which owns the place, went looking for a new partner.

The Buffums had operated the nearby Weekapaug Inn — founded by Jim Buffum's grandfather in 1899— for a dozen years before the economic hurricane of 2008. Now, suddenly, a new business venture presented itself.

"They asked us if we might know somebody because of our contacts in the hospitality business," Jim Buffum said. "And we thought: Well, maybe we should do it."

And so that's what they did.

"We were really starting with a blank slate," Buffum explained. "I mean we had really never run it before. So I really relied on the staff, the high school kids who wanted to come back to work."

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He also relied on Gary Anderson, a wood carver from nearby Pawcatuck, Conn., who grew up outside New York City, went to the University of Connecticut, and began summertime work at the Mystic Seaport Museum in 1976.

He started working on the carousel horses 27 years ago and, along the way, has become a wooden horse whisperer of sorts.

"The horses were kind of shabby when I started to work on them," Anderson told me here the other day. "Some of them had quarter-inch paint. Others were worn down to the wood."

But he knew diamonds in the rough when he saw them. The horses, he knew, were the missing link between rocking horses and early 20th-century carnival horses. He went to work. He strengthened wobbly legs. He used a chemical remover to loosen all that old paint.

"Often there was a layer of varnish and then a layer of paint," Anderson said. "I was able to tell the colors these horses went through. I did a little touch up to make them look more like the people in Watch Hill are used to. I realized I shouldn't be changing local history."

Local history. That's what Anderson and Buffum have preserved here. And that's what's being written anew in this little town by the sea as a new summer beckons.

Salt water taffy and sugar cones. Suntan lotion and a painfully slow ride toward normalcy.

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"We just had a Zoom call with the National Carousel Association," Buffum told me. "Everyone's brainstorming ideas on the best way to open a carousel and keep it safe. It's a little bit complicated. There are a lot of touch points. And you've got kids spinning around a pole. You're spacing out kids between horses."

"We're going to take it slow and make sure. That last thing you want is to have an outbreak here at the carousel."

That means keeping kids 6 feet apart. That means using just about half of the 20 horses available. It means limiting access to bathing on the nearby beach.

"I think the goal is really to salvage some of the summer," Buffum said. "If any business can do it, we can. You're running a beach. You're outside. We can maintain social distancing. It's a great activity. And I think there's a lot of pent-up desire for people to get out of the house and come to the beach."

"I think it's going to help psychologically for a lot of people to have that normal summer of coming and being with the kids on the beach."

And heading for a cool treat at a downtown ice cream parlor. And then walking up to the old ticket booth to take a ride once powered by real horses and then by water before electricity finally took hold.

There, ageless wooden horses suspended from chains await.

Hop on up. Grab the reins. Reach for that brass ring.

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"There's almost nothing else that you can imagine doing that is identical to what your grandparents did and — in the case of Watch Hill — what your great-grandparents did," said Barbara Fahs Charles of the National Carousel Association.

"You've got action. You've got nostalgia. You've got good plain fun. You're keeping a tradition alive in Watch Hill."

Cue the carnival music.

And hold on to your horses.

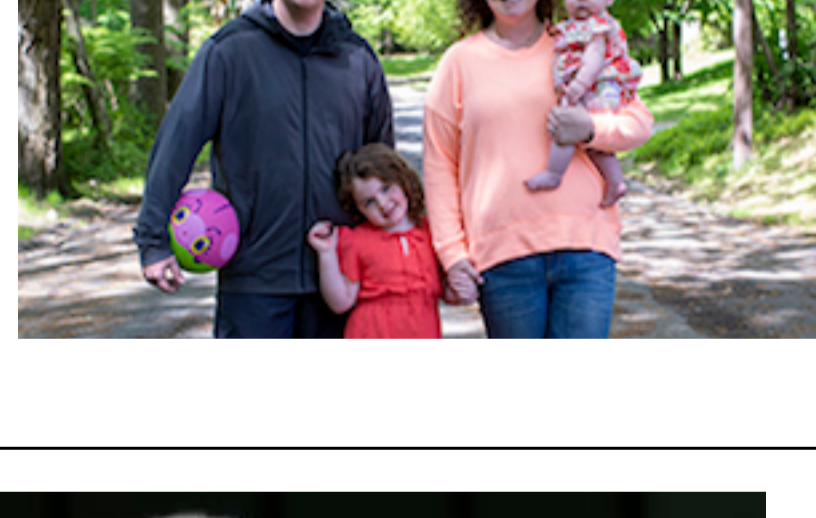
Thomas Farragher is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at thomas.farragher@globe.com.

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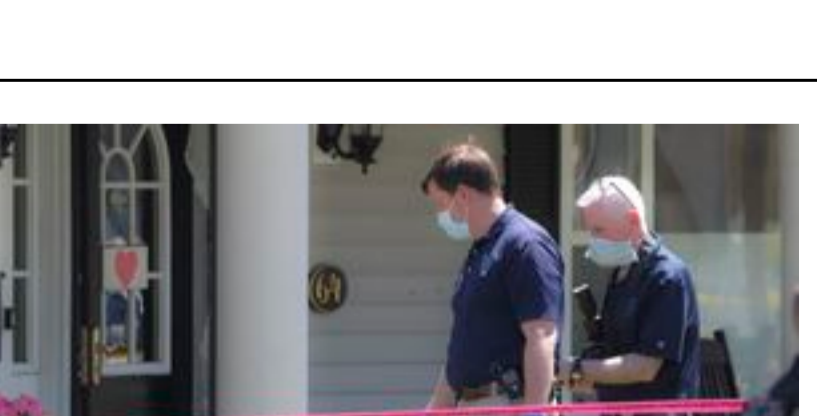
A veteran died 20 yards from his room on the Bedford VA campus. No one noticed for five weeks
 On May 8, 62-year-old Tim White disappeared along with his walker. But no one appears to have looked very hard for him. It turns out White was lying at the bottom of a stairwell just 60 feet from his room for more than five weeks until a fellow resident discovered his body June 12.



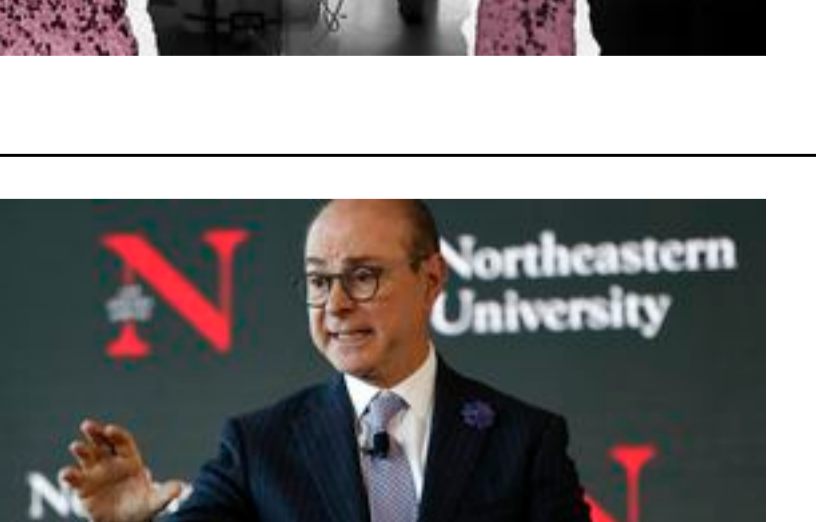
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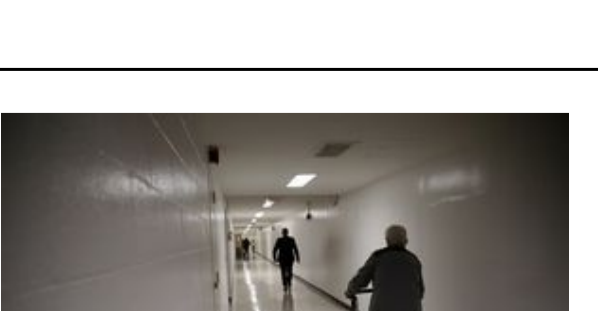
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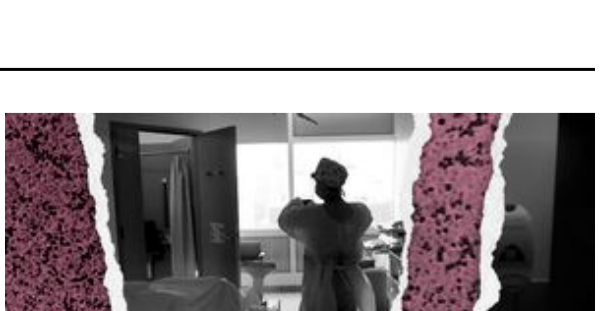
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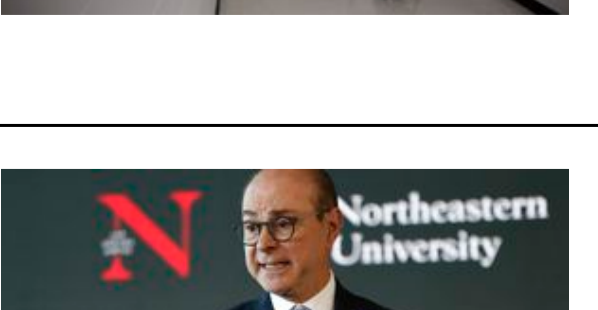
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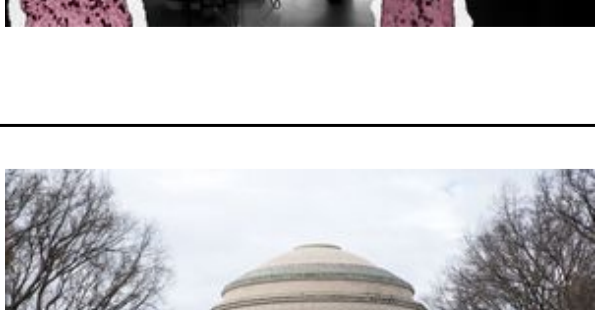
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