

# County's COVID-19 memorial progressing

Artist will include submitted poems about the pandemic

By Maya Lora

Baltimore County will unveil its COVID-19 memorial at Lake Roland Park this summer and is asking the community to submit poems and inscriptions that could be incorporated into the piece.

In March 2021, County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. said he wanted to “commemorate and honor the lives lost and all those affected by COVID-19 by creating a public art memorial,” the county’s first.

Olszewski spokeswoman Erica Palmisano said in an email that the county received 74 proposals from across the country from artists wishing to design and produce the memorial. A panel consisting of local artists and members of the Baltimore County Commission on Arts and Sciences chose James Dinh, a Vietnamese-American artist who works out of Los Angeles, for the project. The County Council approved a \$100,000 contract for the project in January 2022, Palmisano said.

“The main vision is to create a gathering place, a community gathering space, because I felt that the pandemic really separated us,” Dinh said in a phone call Tuesday. “And so the driving force of the design is to create a space where we can be together again.”

The memorial was supposed to be unveiled last fall. Palmisano said there was a delay in receiving materials, but the unveiling is now anticipated for this summer at Lake Roland Park, previously known as Robert E. Lee Park.

Dinh, 54, said he often focuses on commemorative work. He recently designed a memorial for



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— James Dinh, a Vietnamese-American artist who works out of Los Angeles

the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, dedicated to students who died while attending school.

The memorial, which Dinh said will be set as part of the larger landscape of the park, will feature a “mending wall” that forms an open circle. There is a bench set against the wall in design renderings. In the center, there will be a millstone with a ripple pattern on top, which Dinh said represents

sending out “ripples” — or thoughts and prayers — to those affected by the pandemic.

Unlike many popular memorials, the county project will not include a list of names of those who died from COVID-19. For one, Dinh said, it would be hard to pinpoint an exact number or list of victims because not all cases are reported.

Furthermore, the pandemic is ongoing. Baltimore County Health Officer Dr. Gregory Wm. Branch

said there have been over 150,000 documented cases of COVID-19 in the county and more than 2,500 deaths. The elderly, people with preexisting conditions and people of color were the most impacted by the pandemic, Branch said.

As of Thursday, the county’s risk level is considered “medium,” reporting 695 new cases over the past week. Additionally, because of the season, people also are more at risk for contracting respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, and the flu.

Palmisano said the memorial is “intended to be inclusive of anyone touched by the pandemic,” including those who lost loved ones, those who were sick, public health workers and small business owners.

To incorporate their voices and stories, Baltimore County put out a call on social media Monday, seeking contributions in the form of poems and inscriptions that could appear on the mending wall, which the county said will “help

visitors reflect on the impact the pandemic has had on our lives and each other.”

The county is accepting submissions until Feb. 3 at [publicart@baltimorecountymd.gov](mailto:publicart@baltimorecountymd.gov).

“This pandemic — I mean, we’re already forgetting about it as we speak,” Dinh said. “I wanted to capture that moment in time through these poems.”

The open call received some pushback online, with some saying the memorial’s funding should be spent instead on improving recreation facilities or schools.

“Governments can — and do — meet multiple priorities at the same time,” Palmisano said. “COVID-19 has claimed the lives of nearly 16,000 residents across Maryland, and those criticizing a public memorial dedicated to those in Baltimore County who have lost family, friends, and neighbors amid this crisis is truly unfortunate and misguided.”