Meet the Heroes of the Plague

An intimate account of the pandemic's first days, as told by the politicians, doctors, cops, and supermarket clerks on the front lines

JASON MCGAHAN, JON REGARDIE AND MERLE GINSBERG • APR 21, 2020

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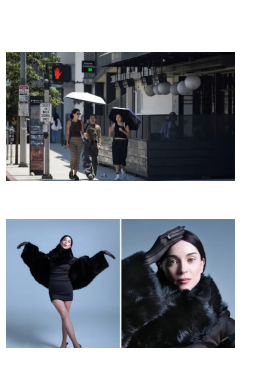
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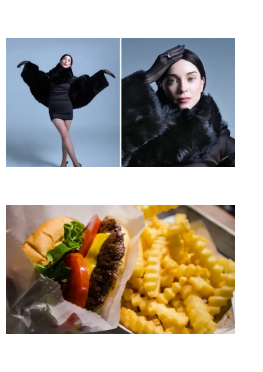
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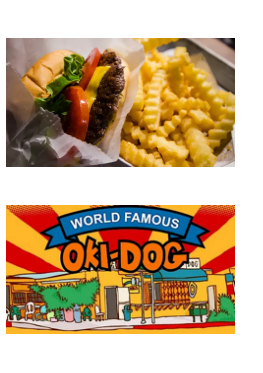

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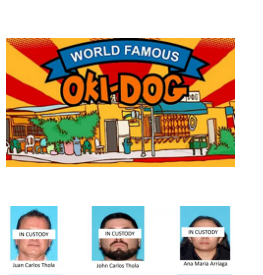

Major "Crime Tourism" Bust Unveiled in Southern California

The Eastside Bikers established a drive-up food bank in Compton. From left: Michelle Catalan, Lily Lomeli, John Jones III, John Jones Jr., Tatiana Rogers, and Jose Ibanez | PHOTOS BY SHAYAN ASGHARNIA

Last March, as the novel coronavirus outbreak widened into a global pandemic, city and state leaders in California shuttered schools, businesses, trails, and beaches, and ordered millions of Angelenos to shelter at home. Mayor Eric Garcetti was so concerned about the pandemic performing a decapitation strike on the city's administration that he barred everyone save his closest aides from being in the same room with him. But a small group of Angelenos, out of duty or necessity, continued to report to work. In the weeks following the first Los Angeles death from COVID-19, *Los Angeles* interviewed dozens of Angelenos—from a Trader Joe's manager to a registered ER nurse—who manned the front lines. Here are their recollections about those first critical weeks of the crisis in their own words.

Barbara Ferrer

Director, Los Angeles County Departmentof Public Health

We started tracking cases of this way back when the epidemic was concentrated in Wuhan. As soon as we had confirmation that it was a new virus, and we saw how quickly deaths had multiplied in Wuhan, we became alarmed. We knew that it was only a matter of time before it escaped China. We knew what was coming, and it scared the hell out of us.

Marcia Santini

Registered ER Nurse, UCLA Westwood

The week that the epidemic hit the hospital I had just turned 58. I forgot I had a birthday coming up. My husband and I were planning to go to Italy and Croatia this summer to celebrate my son's college graduation. But life can change on a dime.

Kathryn Barger

Chair, L.A. County Board of Supervisors

The week before the Lunar New Year, Supervisor Hilda Solis and I started to ask for weekly updates from the county health department regarding the coronavirus. Hilda and I represent the largest Asian communities in L.A. County, and as news reports about the virus began to spread, people started to attack Asian Americans. We became concerned about Asians being scapegoated. And we knew that many people in L.A. County with family in China may have come in contact with travelers returning from Wuhan, which worried us even more.

MARCIA SANTINI, Registered ER Nurse, UCLA Westwood | KATHRYN BARGER, Chair, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

Eric Garcetti

Mayor, Los Angeles

At the end of January as the epidemic was spiraling in Asia, we started worrying about the impact it could have on L.A. By that point the virus was killing thousands in China and other countries. We didn't know at the time if it would ever make it to America, but we knew that we had to start planning in case it did. We had to figure out how to manage an emergency that was very different from the earthquakes and fires that we're more accustomed to here.

Otto Yang

Infectious Disease Specialist,UCLA Health

As we received more data about this pandemic, my colleagues and I became more alarmed. But it took some time to convince everyone else. Most of my Facebook friends are very progressive, educated people. But friends of friends are a different story. When I posted my fears about the coming pandemic, I was accused of being a liberal conspiracy monger. A doctor I knew commented how rapidly the virus was starting to spread outside of Asia. Thenone of his friends responded, "How many deaths are there in the U.S. so far? Zero. Cry me a river." I responded to his post saying if you think that we're immune here, then you are clueless. He came back at me with a bunch of f-words and accused me of spreading fear as part of the liberal agenda. This was near the end of February literally two or three days before the first person in the U.S. had died from this pandemic. I wonder what he's thinking now.

> **"When I posted my fears about the coming pandemic, I was accused of being a liberal conspiracy monger." —Otto Yang**

Michael Ritchie

Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group

When the first reports of the virus came in, we had three sold-out shows up and running at the Ahmanson Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and the Kirk Douglas Theatre. We were on top of the world. But the next thing you know all of our shows were shut down, and hundreds of actors and production people were suddenly unemployed.

Freddy Escobar

Captain II, Los Angeles City Fire Department; President, United Firefighters of Los Angeles City, IAFF Local 112

In early March someone called 911 after a traveler at Union Station complained of shortness of breath. A bunch of our guys were dispatched on a medical run. They took the guy's vitals and asked all the pertinent questions, but the patient refused to go to the hospital. Nine days later we were notified that he had tested positive for COVID-19. Our guys were put on a 14-day quarantine. Right away it dawned on me that for nine days after those members were exposed to a highly contagious virus they were going out on calls without the proper [protections], helping other people, including sick people, and then going home to their families after work. It made me furious.

> **"We knew what was coming, and it scared the hell out of us." —Barbara Ferrer**

Clare Buckingham

Assistant Medical Director, LAC/USC Emergency Department

When people are sick with this, specifically the viral pneumonia that it causes in your lungs, it's pretty impressive. It's nothing like the flu. Your average influenza makes people feel like they got hit by a bus. But this illness is more insidious. People don't feel as sick at first, and all the while they can be thinking they're just having a cold or sore throat and then become quite ill later. The other mysterious thing about it is that for like 90 percent of the population those mild cold symptoms are all they'll feel. It's a disease pattern that we're less familiar with, and that makes people feel more uneasy. We wash our hands nonstop all the time, and I still am scared to death.

Eric Garcetti

Mayor, Los Angeles

Psychologically we were beginning to wonder if we weren't somehow minimizing how serious this was. We were headed to the meeting of the California Big City Mayors group on March 9 in Sacramento, and the planes in and out of LAX were already pretty empty. You know that big bear that's in front of the governor's office, which is already known as "Bacteria Bear"? People were like, "Don't touch." By that point it was clear that we weren't the only ones to be concerned. By the time we got back to L.A. the writing was on the wall. I talked to my team and told them that we had to start banning mass events to lock down the spaces where the virus could spread.

STUDENT ENTRANCE
BEFORE 8 A.M.

AUSTIN BEUTNER, LAUSD Superintendent | FREDDY ESCOBAR, LAFD Captain II

Austin Beutner

Superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District

When it became clear that coronavirus could disrupt the education system, I reached out to Paula Kerger, who is the CEO of PBS in Washington, and Andy Russell, who is the CEO of PBS SoCal. I told them we need your help. It had become clear by then that we would have to imminently close our schools. So we'd have to be able to provide standards-based learning to students while they are at home. We gathered a bunch of PBS people in a room—this was back when people could be in the same room together—and we asked them where can we find the best geometry class. So we got together, created a team effort with our instructional folks, and launched three channels. Not one—three.

Lisa Dabby

Emergency Medicine Physician, UCLA Santa Monica

I had been seeing people in the community fall ill for two to three weeks at this point, but none of them looked very sick. So I thought OK, maybe this is a little worse than the flu, but ultimately it's no big deal. But then everything changed. It was a Monday morning, March 16, the first shift in my day. I saw multiple sick people all coming in at once with the classic constellation of symptoms, the classic presentation on x-ray. And I went home and cried that night because I realized that everything that I had been reading about in China and Italy had arrived here, and people were still not taking it seriously. They didn't understand the gravity of the situation. They heard about it on the news, but they didn't realize how many people would actually be dying.

DRIVE-
Emergency Center Drop-Off

DR. LISA DABBY, Emergency Medicine Physician, UCLA Santa Monica

Omai Garner

Associate Director of Clinical Microbiology, UCLA Health

UCLA first started testing for the novel coronavirus on March 10. But soon after the outbreak hit so quickly that the lab couldn't keep up with all the specimens that were coming in. In the beginning FDA regulations slowed down the testing process. The only test we were allowed to use was the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] test, which takes up to six hours to perform. We've since moved on to a simpler test that just got FDA approval. But manufacturers aren't producing enough of them, so labs across America are competing for limited resources. It's just not efficient. Testing is key. When this pandemic started South Korea gathered together all the diagnostic manufacturers in their country and ordered them to start working on a test right away. They made sure all these companies had plenty of materials available and worked with them to get their tests approved quickly. That's the opposite of what we did here. We kept falling further behind, and the federal government just kept putting up roadblocks.

Willy O'Sullivan

Owner, O'Brien's Irish Pub, Santa Monica

All the talk about this really started to really pick up in mid-March, which was not a great time for me. My bar was getting really crowded that week. People started getting nervous, and the news was out that the coronavirus was coming and shutdowns may be happening. I think places like mine are community hubs, and a lot of people wanted to come out and talk about what was happening. The strangest thing is that a lot of our older customers were the ones that wanted most to come out—the ones who do not have families and are living alone. And, of course, they were the ones most at risk

LOS ANGELES
FIRE DEPARTMENT

Barbara Ferrer

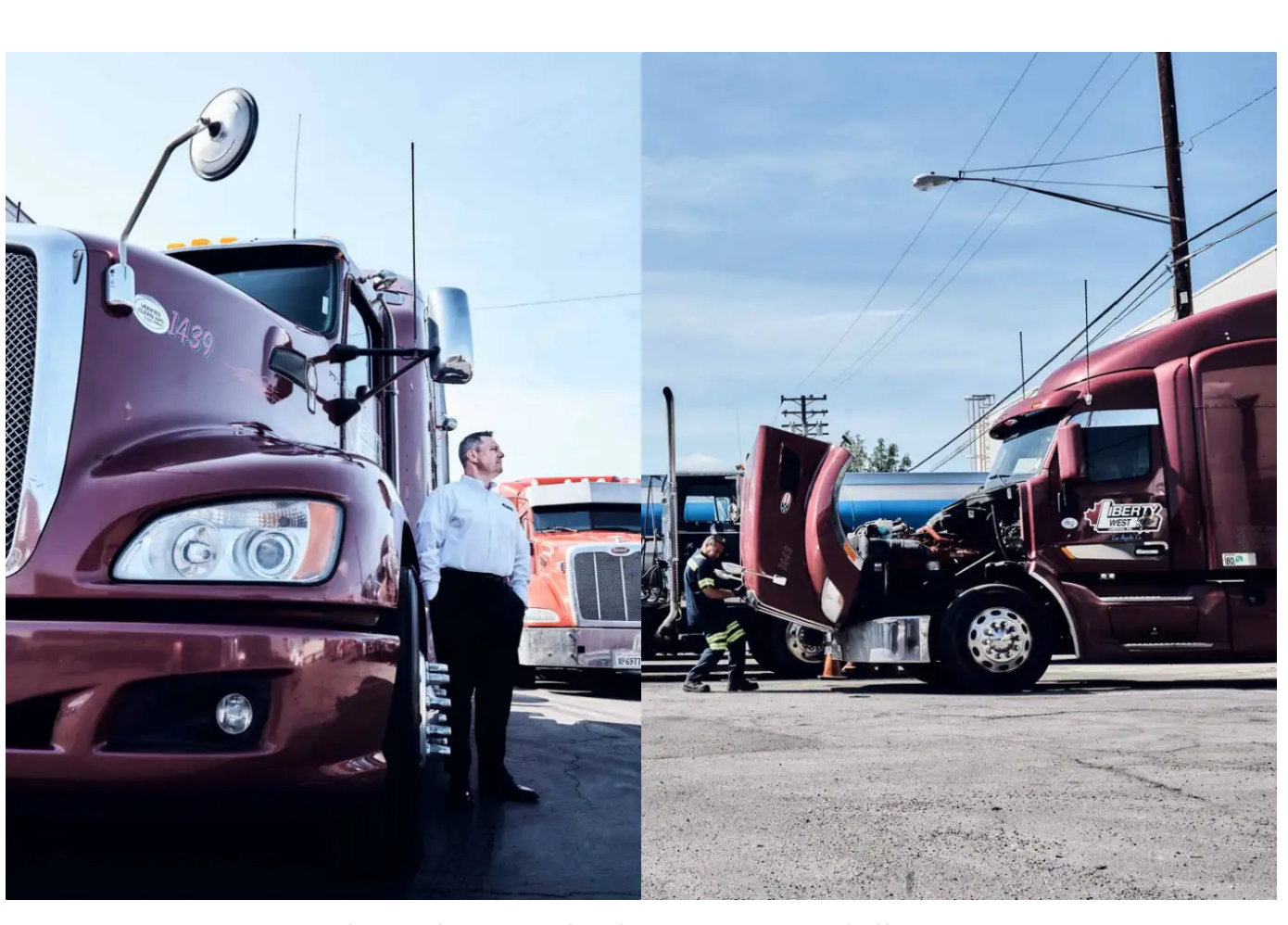
Director, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

As it became clearer what a huge health problem we were dealing with, none of the main decision makers in L.A. County argued with me about the need to shut businesses and schools in their neighborhoods. There is lots of politics involved in this job, but I feel blessed to work with officials who are very focused on the public health. They understood all of the investigations and the research we had been seeing, and they used that information to guide decisions and to be thoughtful, articulate, and decisive leaders. They knew that this new virus from China was an existential American threat.

Eric Garcetti

Mayor, Los Angeles

On Saturday March 14, the Centers for Disease Control compiled all the studies in the world that had been done on this outbreak, including the Imperial College study. That study predicted that up to 2.2 million could die in the U.S. if no actions were taken to control the spread of the virus. Needless to say I did not sleep more than a couple of hours that night. I studied the history of the influenza pandemic of 1918. I looked at the cities that had and hadn't done social distancing. I looked at how the stock market overestimates the economic devastation, so don't be scared. I realized that the order [to close bars, theaters, gyms, etc., and restrict restaurants to takeout or delivery service] was something we just had to do, and we had to do it across the city. I reached out to [Supervisor] Kathryn Barger and Robert Garcia, the mayor of Long Beach, and let them know we were going to do this and to make sure we could have a Los Angeles unified front. I spoke to the 87 other mayors in the county who I've been convening every quarter for seven years. I told other big-city mayors I was doing this, and I encouraged them to do the same. A lot of them didn't have the emergency powers I did.



GREG DUBUQUE, President, Liberty Linehaul West Inc., Montebello

Greg Dubuque

President, Liberty Linehaul West Inc., Montebello

When the shelter-in-place order came down for California we had three trucks en route to deliver office furniture to work sites in a big bank building in downtown San Francisco. And all of a sudden it was stop, turn them around, bring them back, because [the client] can't receive this. That's when it started to really hit home.

Austin Beutner

Superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District

Each day we had phone calls at 5 a.m. and 5 p.m. with health experts from the county and asked them how many cases of the virus were there in the L.A. area and was it appropriate for Los Angeles Unified schools to stay on a normal schedule? Up until the night of March 13 the answer to the last question remained yes. Then the appropriate path was to close all Los Angeles Unified public schools. We wanted to offer care for children, but the state and county couldn't tell us how to do it safely so we concentrated on providing food to those in need. We are taught that those in the health fields are first responders. But the men and women of Los Angeles Unified have been answering the call to serve the best we can. We served more people in that first week than any other food bank in the county.

Michael Ritchie

Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group

Up till now we'd been having a great year as far as all our theaters were concerned. And then this news shut everything down. What does this mean to the staff, to the artists, to our partners? How do we get to the patrons who have tickets for shows that are two months from now?

Rick Caruso

Real Estate Developer and President, USC Board of Trustees

The shelter-in-place order caused a rolling cascade of retail closures for us. In the beginning we were hoping we could keep more businesses open. It soon became apparent retailers would have to close down. Everyone at Caruso Management is staying on payroll for the duration. I think it's the right thing to do—and I think the return on that investment will come back ten times. I've left the properties themselves open so communities can use them for walks and to sit outside. The music's still on, so are the lights. The other day at Palisades Village I saw an older couple eating on a park bench sitting six feet apart. The nature of first responders has changed: They're pharmacists, janitors; they work in homeless outreach. The executive chef of our Rosewood Miramar Beach resort is riding around in the back of a food truck preparing free breakfast burritos for first responders. As for my role at USC, we've had time to prepare at the Keck Medical Center, and if we need to turn dorm rooms into hospital rooms we're ready. There's no road map for this. The guiding light we've been trying to follow with everything is: What is the best thing for our community?

Willy O'Sullivan

Owner, O'Brien's Irish Pub, Santa Monica

Before Saint Patrick's Day we pretty much emptied our bank accounts, filled ourselves full of stock, food, and everything preparing for the big day. It's the most important day of the year for us—a quarter of our revenue. But this year turned out to be the worst-case scenario. I have never been so busy losing money than in the last week trying to mitigate those losses by calling up every beer company and liquor company and trying to send this stuff back and get credit for it. Right now I am trying to save myself so that I am alive when this economy opens up in the future. But frankly it's too soon to tell.

B-Real

Lead Singer, Cypress Hill and Owner,CBD Dispensary Dr. Greenthumb's

When the shelter-in-place order was first issued suddenly there was a surge in cannabis dispensaries similar to what was going on with grocery stores. People were really frightened that legal dispensaries would be shut down. They started to stockpile as much cannabis as they could get. Luckily dispensaries were named as essential businesses—cannabis is one of the best things for this kind of anxiety. Our business went up about 20 percent.

Eric Garcetti

Mayor, Los Angeles

I remember on the Monday after we had issued the Safer at Home emergency order, people called me and they were like, "Well, the gym is open in Beverly Hills and West Hollywood, and they're all working out." So I called and texted my friends who are council members in West Hollywood and Beverly Hills and I'm like, you guys have to shut down, too.

Lisa Dabby

Emergency Medicine Physician, UCLA Santa Monica

What's been really humbling for me is that when people are coming in critically sick and have fluid in their lungs, there is not much we can do at that point aside from offering them oxygen support and ventilatory support. We don't have any treatments to make the illness course less severe and to decrease the rate of death. As a physician it's really hard to watch that and not be able to do more. It makes you feel very helpless.

STAY BACK 6 FT

STAR FOREMAN, Grocery Delivery Driver

Star Foreman

Grocery Delivery Driver

As the quarantine took effect, I thought people would realize that they had to be less picky, but that wasn't always the case. I had people who were texting me as I went from supermarket to supermarket asking what kind of hamburger buns do they have? And I'm like they have this one hamburger bun, I picked it up for you! This is it. This is all they had on the shelf. I am taking a lot longer on my shops than I used to because I am waiting for corridors to be empty before I enter them, I'm going down the back corridors to avoid people. If they start to approach me, I walk backward. I almost fell down the stairs two days ago because a guy would not stop approaching me. I worry that someone is just going to physically attack me because they see that I've got toilet paper on the bottom of my cart.

Marcia Santini

Registered ER Nurse, UCLA Westwood

I kiddingly told the other ER nurses on our group chat two weeks ago that we should start brainstorming and get creative and figure out how we're going to design equipment and protect ourselves. We were joking. But nobody was laughing when the CDC guidelines told us that if we ran out of supplies we needed to get creative, use bandannas. I'm thinking of bringing out a full-face scuba mask. The institution can only run tests on 60 people a day at this time so they have to be judicious in whom they test. Frankly, because our country was so late in testing, it really doesn't matter anymore. You just have to assume everybody has it now.

Freddy Escobar

Captain II, Los Angeles City Fire Department; Union President

I was in the first high-level meeting of the Fire Department after the stay-at-home order went out. The fire chief and his entire command staff said they were going to activate the Emergency Operations Center and the Department Operations Center. They said we needed to be prepared when this hits the city of Los Angeles, where they were predicting 20,000 people would be sick with coronavirus by April 1. I said to the fire chief, "What's the worst-case scenario look like to you?" He said, "The worst-case scenario is half of our members are exposed and can't get to work.

CHRISTINE GHALY, Director, Los Angeles County Departmentof Public Health Services

Christine Ghaly

Director, Los Angeles County Departmentof Public Health Services

We oversee four hospitals and around 25 clinics, plus correctional health services for juveniles and adults in the jails and the halls and the camps, the Office of Diversion & Reentry, the EMS Agency, and Housing for Health. We are spending the vast majority of our time making sure we have the medicines, the equipment—whether it's ventilators or personal protective equipment—that are needed to protect our workforce and the patients. My husband, Mark, is the state's secretary of health and human services. I can't say I've seen him much recently. What's keeping both of us up at night is the speed with which this virus continues to spread.

Mark Morocco

Clinical Professor of Emergency Medicine, UCLA

I was running down Pico Boulevard yesterday, and what struck me was how empty the streets were. The shops were all closed and dark with signs in the windows like photographs I had seen of French villages in World War II. As I was coming back around my loop over by the Rancho Park Golf Course I saw a kid with one of these little scooters and his mom. They were standing two or three feet away from each other and maybe ten feet away from them, on the sidewalk, was a young guy who they clearly knew. And I heard the woman say, "Well it's good to see you." And I heard the guy say, "Well I really wish I could give you a hug, but maybe the next time I see you because I've missed you. They looked concerned but they looked optimistic; they were doing the right thing.

Omai Garner

Associate Director of Clinical Microbiology, UCLA Health

Before the pandemic the testing lab at UCLA didn't get many phone calls from frontline providers in the health system. Today I have to have a person whose only job is to answer the phone and talk to clinicians and nurses about when the test results for patients will be ready. So I met with my entire virology group, all the supervisors and specialists, and we just put together on the fly a plan to basically quadruple the number of tests that we were going to be able to offer in a single day. It was one of those moments where the tidal wave is at your door and you all just take on the challenge and move forward.

LAPD detectives Randall Kutscher, Eldin Stupar, Ryan Lee, Theodore Carreras, and Brian Thayer
(Photo by Getty Images)

Josh Rubenstein

Public Information Director, LAPD

I'm quite certain this social experiment of ours will be studied for some time because this is unlike anything we have ever seen. We have asked 10 million people to stay at home. People were up in arms, but Los Angeles is not locked down. The vast majority of Angelenos are following those orders, I am very happy to say.

Kathryn Barger

Chair, L.A. County Board of Supervisors

There were a few pockets of resistance. I got a little frustrated when I read about the restaurant in South Pasadena that had a party on Saint Patrick's Day. Early on I encouraged people to get out and walk the trails. And then what happens? You have thousands of people crowding a trail and not doing social distancing—so we had to shut the trails down. I pray that people recognize we are doing all of this to protect their lives.

Eric Garcetti

Mayor, Los Angeles

I think most people in L.A. are adhering to our rules. The day after we shut everything down there was a restaurant in Canoga Park that was openly violating our order. As soon as we heard that we sent out a few cops to take them down. I'm prepared to do whatever we need to protect this city. The cops and first responders know they can tell them to get in line.

OMAI GARNER, Associate Director of Clinical Microbiology, UCLA Health, and OTTO YANG, Infectious Disease Specialist, UCLA Health

Otto Yang

Infectious Disease Specialist, UCLA Health

I am the scientist overseeing the operations of the remdesivir drug study at the UCLA hospitals. There is very promising data about how effective this drug is against a virus. It's like you're building a chain of Legos, stacking one on top of the other. The genetic information on the virus is encoded in RNA, made of building blocks called nucleotides. When you put on a Lego that doesn't have the right shape then the chain gets stopped. The hope is that this drug will make the virus stop making genetic copies of itself.

Lisa Dabby

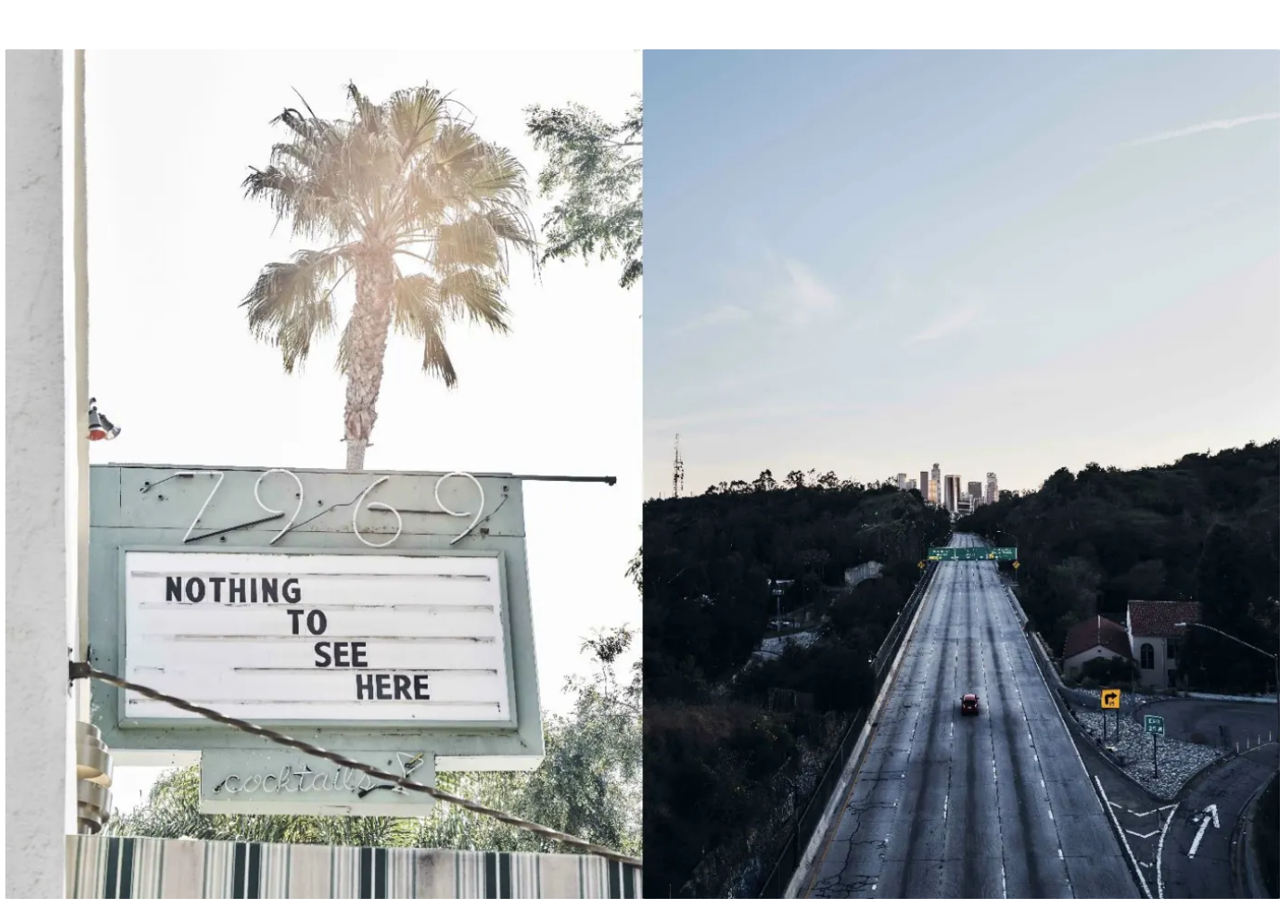
Emergency Medicine Physician, UCLA Santa Monica

A number of physicians have decided to stay in hotels because they don't want to come anywhere near their families. I am trying hard not to kiss my kids or my husband because I'm afraid of passing this on. But how long are you supposed to stay away from the people you love?

Star Foreman

Grocery Delivery Driver

The other day I went out on order and I could not find many of the items my customer had asked me for. I could tell she was ordering for her children so I did something I've done a few times now since this began. I took her aisle by aisle with me to pick out the things she wanted and could afford. I later learned she had a newborn and another child and was a single mom. I delivered what she asked me. After I was done she Venmoed me a $100 tip.



Streets and freeways are barren as most Angelenos heed the order to stay home

Austin Beutner

Superintendent, Los Angeles UnifiedSchool District

I gave a televised update about the crisis. And afterwards my kids were teasing me: "Dad, it looks like you read it more than you gave it." I told them, "The alternative was actually just putting my head down on the desk."

Marcia Santini

Registered ER Nurse, UCLA Westwood

Now you're starting to see patients who are known positive and are getting sicker. So like you tested positive, say you were symptomatic, you went in and they did a test on you and they sent you home. Go home, isolate for two weeks. If you get worse, come back. Well they're getting worse and they're coming back.

Christine Ghaly

Director, Los Angeles County Departmentof Public Health Services

In mid-March L.A. County opened up a homeless housing site at Dockweiler State Park. They had RVs with a bunch of beds, supplies that would last for over seven days. The whole project was produced in record time. It was a fast turnaround for anyone, but it was miraculous for a government entity.

Workers at Third Street and Fairfax Avenue store

Manjusha Kulkarni

Executive Director, Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council

Asian Americans are being spit upon, punched, getting bottles thrown at them — being given menacing messages at Costco. We've had about 600 incidents around the country, and 50 percent have happened in SoCal. Almost every single person I've talked to is frightened about leaving their homes to get supplies. Neighbors are saying things like, "Go back!" We're extremely concerned about what policies Trump could enact in an executive order. People are wondering: "Tomorrow, could my family and I be in a concentration camp?"

Ray Familathe

President, Longshoremen's Union, Ports of L.A. and Long Beach

I'm 61 years old, a native San Pedroan, and I have never seen anything like this. There're critical goods that need to get not only to Southern California and statewide but the larger nation as a whole. Right now the factories that supply us with these things are just slowly ramping up in China, and ship arrivals should begin increasing over the next few weeks. And that's going to be critical to everything going on related to the coronavirus right now.

Marcia Santini

Registered ER Nurse, UCLA Westwood

UCLA sent me a generic email a few days ago informing me that I was exposed to a patient who had a positive COVID test so now I have to be quarantined for two weeks. I need to report in to them twice a day, get my temperature taken, and answer a series of questions. It doesn't mean that I cannot work. If you become symptomatic, you cannot work. But there are also asymptomatic carriers. So that is the scary part.

DAVID SAMPERIO, Longshoreman | The Port of Long Beach

Michael Ritchie

Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group

I'm sure there are pieces being written right now about what's going on that have almost a journalistic view. But I think it will also infect something much deeper. I think it will affect people's souls.

Mark Morocco

Clinical Professor of Emergency Medicine, UCLA

Every time I see a patient now, I've got to stay in the moment. And it's tremendously draining to be thinking about what I'm doing with my personal protective equipment at every step as I talk to the patient, as I examine the patient, as I move about the room, as I leave the room and head back into the hall. Every one of those steps is a potential for me to contaminate myself or the ER environment because we are assuming that all these patients are shedding virus. You feel tired after a ten-hour shift in a level one trauma center, but what I'm talking about now is a quantum leap. Tempers are short. But people are working hard to be kind to each other and at the same time reach out to the patients who really need us. And then you combine that with social media and Fox News and the potential for misinformation and panic is like pouring gasoline on a lit match. We've had three years to get primed with anxiety-producing information unharnessed during the Trump presidency where foreign policy and health care policy goes out by a tweet. And then, boom, out of nowhere from Mother Nature comes this. Pull it all together and you have an event truly unprecedented in our lifetime. It will be very interesting to see what a city like ours in a society like ours—where we are blessed with great weather, tremendous resources, cultural delights, a tremendously diverse population of people—if we are able to really mirror what I think is the best of Los Angeles and to move forward from this just as diverse but stronger, just as different but more unified. Every day I hope that happens.

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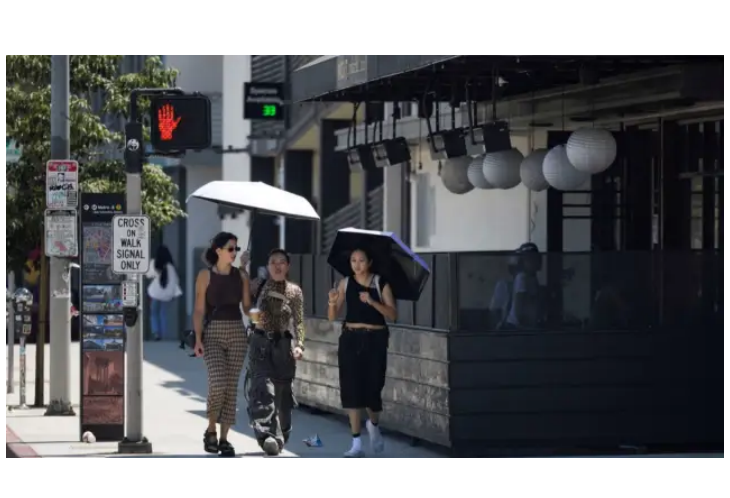
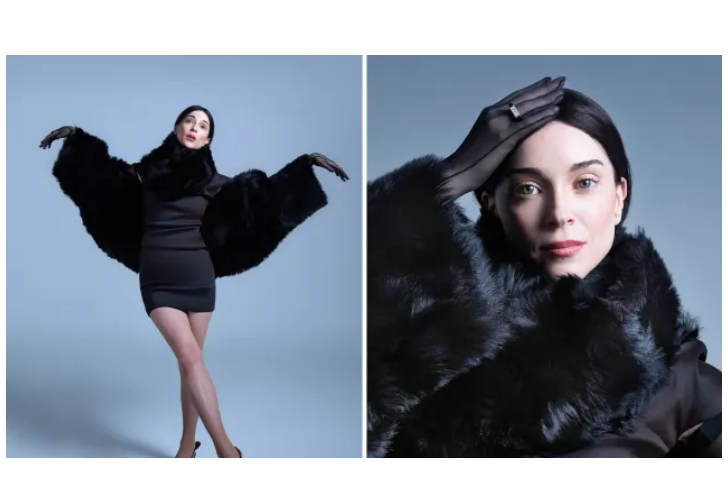


Fashion

Keeping Cool in L.A.: The Future of Fashion

Discover how cooling fabrics could transform summer heat relief with innovative technology.

BY LOS ANGELES MAGAZINE DIGITAL TEAM · 11 HOURS AGO



Arts & Entertainment

St. Vincent: So Haute Right Now

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New Barnes & Noble at Third Street Promenade takes over the space where Midnight Special Bookstore was once a hub for writers and activists

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