

# *Memorial Along National Mall Offers Stark Reminder of Virus's Toll*

Hundreds of thousands of white flags honor the more than 670,000 people in the United States who have died from the coronavirus.

By Chris Cameron

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WASHINGTON — Peering at a sea of white flags blanketing the National Mall, Dr. Laura A. Valleni recalled the scores of pregnant women who had contracted the coronavirus at her hospital in South Carolina. Babies have been born prematurely, mothers have died and a surge of children has overwhelmed the pediatric unit for the past two months, she said.

“I’ve been grappling with when it became OK for even one person to die of preventable illness,” said Dr. Valleni, a neonatal physician at Prisma Health Children’s Hospital–Midlands in Columbia, S.C. “There’s such tremendous grief.”

She was one of dozens who flocked to the opening on Friday morning of “In America: Remember,” an art installation of hundreds of thousands of flags planted along the mall that honor the more than 670,000 people in the United States who have died from the coronavirus.

“There’s such tremendous grief,” said Dr. Laura A. Valleni, a neonatal physician in South Carolina. Kenny Holston for The New York Times

Names and messages were written on flags dedicated to specific victims. Kenny Holston for The New York Times

The secretary of the interior, Deb Haaland, and the mayor, Muriel E. Bowser, were in attendance as visitors walked among the rows of white flags covering 20 acres of federal park land bordering the White House, the Washington

Monument, the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the World War II Memorial.

Angelica Rivera, 33, a call center agent for a health care facility in New Jersey, dedicated a flag to a colleague, Karla Pope, a nurse who died of the virus in January. “I love you! Thank you for everything you did for all of us. My forever work mom,” she wrote.

“We were one of the first health care centers to get vaccines in New Jersey and she was administering the shots, and then a little while later then she got sick,” Ms. Rivera said. “She got Covid and passed away. Her husband also passed away, and her kids were left without a mom and a dad.”

Other names and messages on flags paid tribute to loved ones: Marshall J. Ciccone, a dedicated husband; Bruce Allen Hutcheson, a health care hero; Betty L. Fox, whose daughter aches for her.

The artist behind the installation, Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg, planted 267,000 flags in Washington last fall to recognize what was then the death toll of the coronavirus in the United States.

Almost a year later, that figure has more than doubled. In the last week alone, more than 13,000 Americans have died — more than four times the number of people who died during the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Watching as a rainstorm swept over her installation minutes before the opening ceremony, Ms. Firstenberg said that the flags offered a stark reminder of the number of people lost to the virus. “If we don’t manifest it physically, people will not understand,” she said.

“It breaks my heart,” she added. “Sometimes I just have to stop. It’s — it gets so hard.”

Visitors to the memorial expressed a similar weariness, drawn from their own experiences with the pandemic. Linda Whittaker, a psychotherapist who has treated many patients grieving the loss of coronavirus victims, said she had had to numb herself to the sorrow as a protective measure.

“It’s crushing,” Ms. Whittaker said, her voice wavering. “There are a number of colleagues in my field that are feeling the same thing. That there’s such an overwhelming sadness and grief and sense of helplessness and despair.”

But, she added, the memorial has given her a space to mourn.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who delivered remarks at the opening ceremony, compared the installation to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, another collaborative art piece displayed on the National Mall multiple times during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

Dr. Valleni, the neonatal physician, recalled contributing a square to the quilt when it was displayed on the mall in the ’90s.

“It took our country a long time to learn about what was going on, and then to really embrace and care for people with H.I.V. and AIDS,” she said. “This is very much resonating with me from that time.”