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A pandemic upends life in Northwest Vermont

By **MICHAEL FRETT**
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ST. ALBANS — Few stories could be as disruptive or overwhelming as a pandemic.

As 2020 began, COVID-19 was a distant happening, confined largely to a city quite literally on the other side of the world. It would still be several weeks before the disease would even be named a pandemic.

By March, however, the disease came to Vermont. The first local cases were reported, and schools and businesses were closed. Suddenly, a disease from half a world away had overturned life in the Green Mountain State.

Ten months later, more than 500 locals from Franklin County would test positive for COVID-19. Twenty-five people would die due to complications of the disease.

Schools, closed in March, had to figure out remote teaching virtually overnight, a challenge for some made worse by noticeable gaps in internet access around Franklin County's more rural corners. For some, having kids home exasperated an already deep need for child care.

Businesses, meanwhile, were forced to adapt as Vermont's gover-

nor ordered nonessential businesses to shutter and work remotely.

Some, like the Rail City Market in St. Albans City, revamped their websites to offer online shopping for the first time. Classic sit-down restaurants like Twiggs and Mimmo's began delivering.

The pandemic would deepen an already severe crisis among Vermont's dairy farmers who, after years of struggling with chronically low milk prices, suddenly watched two of their largest markets — schools and restaurants — dry up overnight.

In April, a local corrections facility saw Vermont's first outbreak among its prisons. By May, 45 inmates and 18 staff members at the Northwestern State Correctional Facility tested positive for COVID-19.

As, in Gov. Phil Scott's words, the "spigot turned" and business resumed, Vermonters had to become quasi-public health experts, learning overnight about concepts like "social distancing" and "flattening the curve" to help control COVID-19's spread in Vermont.

Schools resuming in-person lessons in the fall also reflected a "new normal" that left most students in a mixture of in-person lessons and at-home learning. At times, possible exposures to COVID-19 would lead



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Staff at the Rail City Market continued to work from behind face masks at the small St. Albans grocery store during the first months of the pandemic. As a grocery store, Rail City was one of a handful of St. Albans businesses to remain open as "essential" while most other businesses were closed under Gov. Phil Scott's initial shutdown orders.

»See **PANDEMIC**, page 5

Police seek information regarding an apparent drive-by shooting in Highgate

By **MESSENGER STAFF**

HIGHGATE — Vermont State Police are seeking information regarding a shooting incident that took place early Wednesday morning. There were no injuries.

According to police, two unknown men fired guns from their vehicle at the home of Highgate resident Brian Russin, 31, on Route 78 around 12:30 a.m. Wednesday. In his report to police, Russin said the men had

stopped at the house several minutes earlier and asked to speak with a woman whom the resident was unfamiliar with, according to state police.

Russin told police that the men left but returned soon thereafter and opened fire on the house. Police said Russin was unable to provide a specific description of the suspects or vehicle.

Vermont Route 78 was closed for several hours overnight following the

»See **SHOOTING**, page 3

Announcement

Dear readers, To give our staff time to be with their families, we will not be publishing a Friday edition of the St. Albans Messenger this week. Our Thursday edition will act as the weekend edition, and we will resume publication for the Monday edition, Jan. 4. We thank you very much for your continued support, and wish you all a Happy New Year!

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