

Editor's Note

We're all on a journey this year though few of us are leaving home. The progress of the novel coronavirus pandemic is frightening, pushing us to sever connections to friends and family and alter traditions around birthdays, weddings, and funerals.

Another tradition being re-arranged is commencement. I was pleasantly surprised to discover graduating students retaining their university uniforms even without a stage to cross or a chancellor to doff one's cap to. Neckties, I predict, won't be so lucky.

Confronting the end of their university experience without the usual rite of passage, students turned to a symbol of achievement: their gowns. Or something close, anyway. Getting together for 'coronamentement', students at Olin College of Engineering, in Need-

ham, Massachusetts, wore garbage bags instead of gowns and origami trenchers, joyfully starting their post-college journeys in makeshift cap and gown.*

Joy is in short supply in this year of the pandemic, with its social distancing and quarantines. Softening the blow of cancelled commencements, a graduate student in Vermont had an idea. Nearing the end of his studies for an MBA, Nathaniel Moore's commencement from the University of Vermont was cancelled too. Moore is also a physician assistant at the University of Vermont Medical Center, and even though the hospital had sufficient supplies of personal protective equipment he was well aware of shortages around the US.

So he started Gowns 4 Good, which collects gowns that graduates won't use again and distributes them to hospitals where the clinical staff has had to wear

the same protective gear for weeks, or even resort to trash bags to prevent the spread of disease. By mid-summer he had distributed 7,000 donated academic gowns. They don't have to be altered, he told me, and unlike trash bags they cover the arms and legs. Medical staffers wear the re-purposed gowns backwards to protect their necks. They have another benefit: 'The ability to don and doff them,' Moore said. After seeing a patient, the clinician can easily pull it off and roll it up to protect everyone.

That helped solve the problem of too little protective equipment. It also helps with another of his goals: taking away the sting of plans that vanished. 'Honoring the graduates makes them feel good about doing something good with their gowns.' There's a lot of good still to be done. Moore has requests for 97,000 academic gowns from health care facilities in the US, Canada, Brazil, the UK, and Ireland.

Doctors in black bachelor's gowns, nurses in red master's gowns—doesn't it seem odd to the person being treated? Those aren't the details that matter in a hospital. 'Patients, when they're sick, will take anyone to help them no matter what they're wearing,' Moore said. 'And just knowing there's a provider to give them care is the most important to them.'

When we spoke, Moore's commencement was a few weeks away. It would be on Zoom. When it concludes, his thirty classmates had already agreed to donate their gowns to Gowns 4 Good. Moore's next journey: starting medical school in the autumn. —*Stephen L. Wolgast*



Gowns 4 Good

Clinicians in standard personal protective gear, left, and a master's gown worn backwards.

* Anemona Hartocollis, 'The Class of Covid-19', *The New York Times*, 17 March 2020.