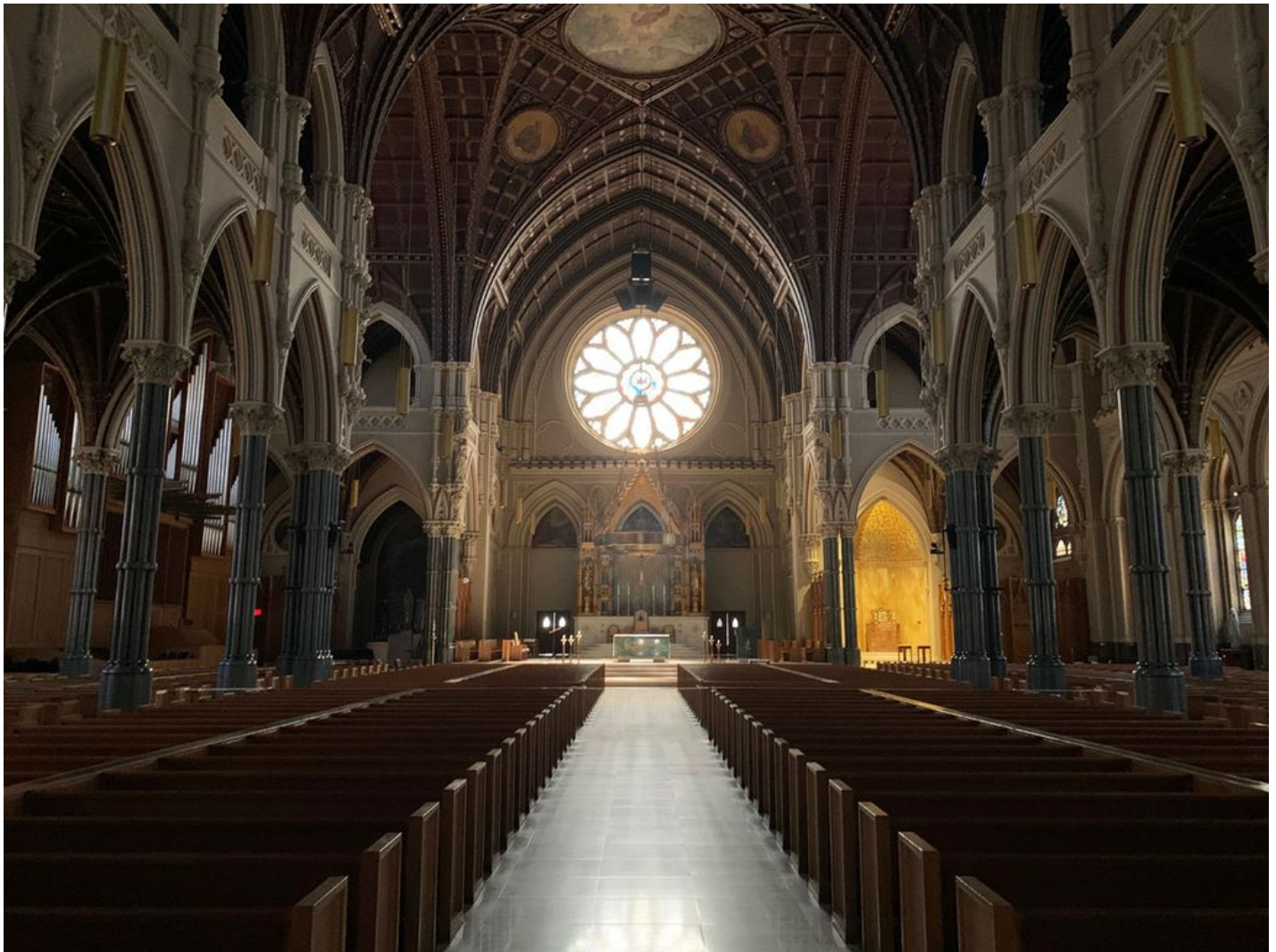


During the coronavirus outbreak, a tale of two Rhode Islands

From the school to the cathedral to the theater, the disease has had a profound impact on the state's iconic institutions

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 26, 2020, 8:40 a.m.



The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Providence stood empty on a recent Sunday. EDWARD FITZPATRICK/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Each weekday, when the school bells rang, students at Saint Raphael Academy in Pawtucket streamed to class, girls in white and purple long-sleeve shirts, boys in white

Oxford shirts and ties. The Catholic high school had a track star ready to compete for a national championship and a school trip planned for Europe.

Each Sunday, when the church bells rang, hundreds of the faithful filed into the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, where waves of Gregorian chant and clouds of incense ascended to the vaulted ceilings. The church was preparing for Holy Week — for the trembling sorrow of Good Friday, for the redeeming joy of Easter morning.

Each night, when the chimes rang, audience members hurried to their seats at the historic Trinity Repertory Company in downtown Providence to watch an adaptation of Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities," a production that was drawing rave reviews.

For each of these Rhode Island institutions, it might be an exaggeration to say it was the best of times. Still, each pulsed with energy and promise, buoyed by the hope and anticipation of an early spring.

But then the coronavirus struck, and for many, it felt like the worst of times.

At Saint Raphael's, where the illness first surfaced, the virus left classrooms shuttered and silent.

At the cathedral, it left Mass canceled, the pews vacant.

At Trinity Rep., it left the stage empty, the seats unfilled.

You could call it a tale of two Rhode Islands.

Saint Raphael Academy in Pawtucket

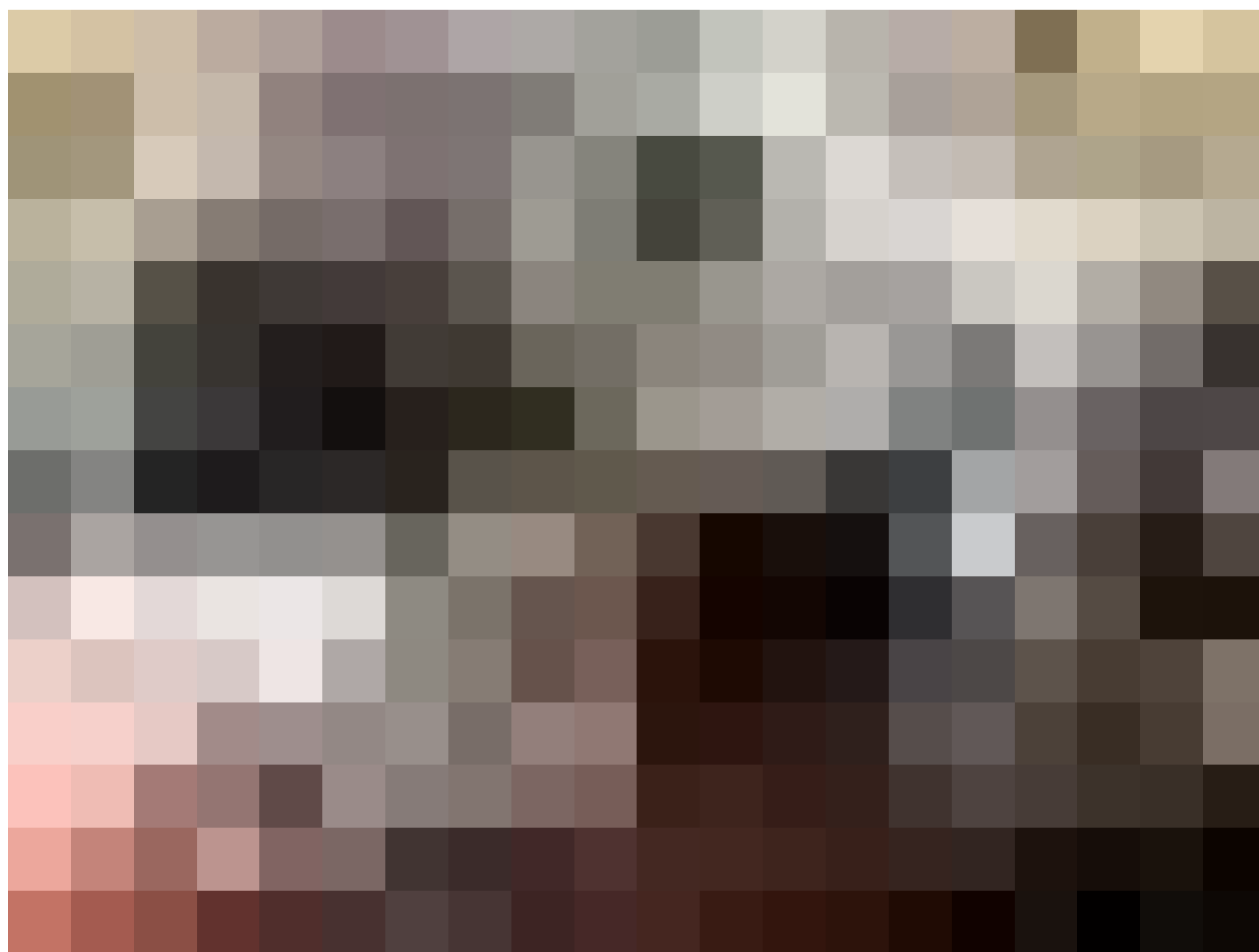
"We were the first to experience it," said Daniel Richard, principal of Saint Raphael Academy. "It came very quickly to our doorstep."

Saint Ray's, as it's known in its home city of Pawtucket, is a 500-student school with active drama and athletic programs. Teams compete as the Saints, proudly wearing

purple and gold. The school is named for the patron saint of healing.

In mid-February, St. Ray's sent a group of 38 students and chaperones on a trip to Italy, Spain, and France. The vice principal for student life, Marc Thibault, led the trip, returning home feeling lousy enough that he decided not to go back to work.

As it turned out, Thibault had COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the new virus — Rhode Island's first case, which state officials announced on March 1. A Saint Ray's student and a teacher also tested positive, and the school shut its doors, finding itself on the national threshold of an emerging global pandemic.



Daniel Richard, principal of Saint Raphael Academy in Pawtucket, R.I. EDWARD FITZPATRICK/THE BOSTON GLOBE

In all, about 150 students ended up in quarantine, Richard said, but the virus never spread to other students or staff. “The kids, being Saints, held tight to what they needed

to do — which was to be good citizens,” he said.

When the 14-day quarantine period was set to expire, Saint Ray’s began making plans to reopen on March 16. Alumni and parents helped buy purple-and-gold “Saints Strong” T-shirts for those returning, and administrators were planning to have “heart-to-heart” chats with each class about what the students had been through.

But on March 13, Governor Gina M. Raimondo closed all public schools, and private schools followed suit. Saint Ray’s remained shuttered.

As a cold rain came down last week, Richard sat in the Saint Ray’s administration building, looking out at Walcott Street and the school’s college-style campus. A school bell sounded. Usually, he said, that would be the signal for hundreds of students to head down the street to their next class, moving among the school’s seven buildings.

“We have six parades a day — that’s what I always tell the kids,” Richard said. “And right now, you hear those bells ringing — there’s no one walking up and down the street. It’s eerie.”



A math classroom sits locked and empty at Saint Raphael Academy, which remains closed because of the coronavirus. EDWARD FITZPATRICK/THE BOSTON GLOBE

And it's sad, he said, because the students "bring so much energy" and they're primed for so many rites of passage.

For example, the virus has forced the cancellation of a statewide drama competition that was to include Saint Ray's rendition of "101 Breakups," and it has prompted officials to call off the national cross-country championship that offered a stage for the school's record-setting track star, Darius Kipyego.

"The kid ran the 800 (meters) in 1:49," Daniel said of Kipyego. "I couldn't fall off a cliff that fast."

Also, this is the time of year when the school holds the "Saints Olympics" — a competition among classes that helps raise money for a sister school in Africa and local

food pantries. That effort was always led by Thibault, who recently sent an e-mail thanking the Saint Ray's community.

"He knew that the community was sending him prayers throughout the whole process," Richard said. "He was very appreciative. It carried him through some difficult moments."

Richard holds out hope that Saint Ray's will reopen in April — in time for prom night in May and graduation day in June. But he acknowledges the virus could return, and he notes that schools, restaurants, and stores remain closed throughout the state.

"Every part of our normal existence has been put on hold," he said.

The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul

Also on hold are public celebrations of Rhode Island's faith life. The virus has forced churches, synagogues, and mosques across the state to cancel in-person worship.

On March 16, Bishop Thomas J. Tobin suspended all public Masses in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence. So on Sunday, March 21, the mother church of the diocese — the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul — canceled its 10 a.m. "Solemn Liturgy with Latin Chant."

"It's been a long time since I've had a Sunday off," the Rev. Monsignor Anthony Mancini, the cathedral rector, said as he sat in the empty Gothic Revival church Sunday morning.

"The last time this happened was in the Blizzard of '78."



Cathedral Square in Providence, R.I. KENNETH C. ZIRKEL (CUSTOM CREDIT)/WIKIMEDIA

Normally, 1,000 to 1,200 people would flock to the cathedral over the course of four weekend Masses, and 350 to 400 would turn out for the solemn chant Mass, he said.

As light filtered through the stained glass of the cathedral's great circular window, row upon row of wooden pews sat empty. And Mancini noted that soon the church calendar would turn to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter — major events in the nation's most Catholic state.

But he said pastors are being creative amid the crisis — opening their churches for private prayer, holding Mass online, even taking drive-up confessions. And he urged Rhode Islanders to keep praying “for those who are ill and for the most vulnerable.”

From the empty cathedral, he offered a message of hope.

“Faith reassures us that God hasn't left, despite all the dire predictions,” Mancini said.

“This will pass. We will be back to some kind of normal.”

Trinity Repertory Company

“A Tale of Two Cities” was supposed to have run through March 22 at Trinity Rep.

But on March 12, Providence Mayor Jorge O. Elorza declared a state of emergency and revoked all entertainment licenses until further notice. That forced Trinity Rep. to cancel the final 12 of its 35 performances of Dickens’ historical novel about the French Revolution. Eventually, the theater canceled the rest of its current season, including runs of “Sweat” and “Sweeney Todd.”

“This is obviously a very scary and uncertain time for everyone,” Trinity Rep. executive director Tom Parrish said. “It is an unprecedented situation.”

Trinity Rep. will produce as much content as it can for social media and its website, such as videos with actors, but the theater finds itself with no revenue coming in and about 100 employees on the payroll.

“Fortunately, we are in position to guarantee they will be paid for at least four weeks and then re-evaluate based on how the situation evolves,” Parrish said. “It is our full intention to produce again and get a show up as soon as we possibly can.”



The marquee outside the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence still advertises "A Tale of Two Cities" but the show has been canceled because of the coronavirus. EDWARD FITZPATRICK/THE BOSTON GLOBE

When the show does go on — and all the restrictions, closings, and social distancing ends — Rhode Islanders might find that they take fewer things for granted, he said.

"When we come through, there may be a sense of *carpe diem* — where people don't put off going out with friends, spending time with family," he said. "It's a reminder to live in the moment with the people and things that are most precious to you."

At Trinity Rep., the marquee still advertises "A Tale of Two Cities." But the doors are locked, and an ominous warning is taped to the door: "You cannot enter this building without your temperature being taken."



A sign on the door of the Trinity Repertory Company. EDWARD FITZPATRICK/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Inside the theater, though, a light still shines.

Caitlin Howle, Trinity Rep.'s digital marketing coordinator, explained that theaters have a tradition of keeping a "ghost light" on at all times, mainly for safety reasons. And recently, Trinity Rep. participated in the national "Ghostlight Project," in which artists and communities "pledge to stand for and protect the values of inclusion, participation, and compassion for everyone."

"The idea is that theater is a space for all — no matter what," Howle said.

Even amid a pandemic.

"The ghost light is on even now — the theater is never dark," she said. "It's our sign of hope."

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