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HONORING COVID COURAGE

Monument to pandemic front-line workers and victims takes shape on Near West Side

BY JOANNA MARSZALEK, PAGE 6



A rendering of the COVID-19 Memorial Monument of Honor, Remembrance & Resilience that will be built on the Near West Side to honor those impacted by the pandemic.

COVID MONUMENT COMMISSION BASED ON CONCEPT BY CASEY SCHACHNER

SUPER BOWL LIX



Quarterback Jalen Hurts

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SPORTS



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Tape covers an agency name at the USAID headquarters building in Washington. MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP



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BY JOANNA MARSZALEK
For the Sun-Times

A monument honoring those impacted by COVID-19 and those who worked to limit its spread is coming to the Illinois Medical District on Chicago's Near West Side this year, five years after the pandemic outbreak.

The 25-foot, stainless steel monument, titled "COVID-19 Memorial Monument of Honor, Remembrance & Resilience," will be built at 2023 W. Ogden Ave., on the one-acre triangle at West Polk Street, South Damen Avenue and West Ogden Avenue and nestled between Stroger Hospital and Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. Its unveiling is planned for this fall.

"Now Chicago will be the physical place where the world honors front-line workers. If that's not a source of pride, I don't know what is," said Sally Metzler, who chairs the COVID-19 Monument Commission.

The monument is actually five illuminated multi-colored sculptures designed to resemble a hybrid of a dandelion puff and the COVID-19 virus. The dandelion, which grows worldwide, is meant to represent the universality of pandemic suffering.

A green community space with benches for reflection, meditation and healing is also planned, Metzler said.

"It is not a monument of despair but very much of hope," she said. "It is based on three pillars: Honor is for the front-line workers, remembrance is for those who perished and the resilience is for those left standing and carrying the load and the science."

According to the World Health Organization, more than 7 million people have died since WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The monument design idea was also selected through a 2023 competition. Casey Schachner, a sculptor and art professor at Georgia Southern University, won \$20,000 for her dandelion concept.

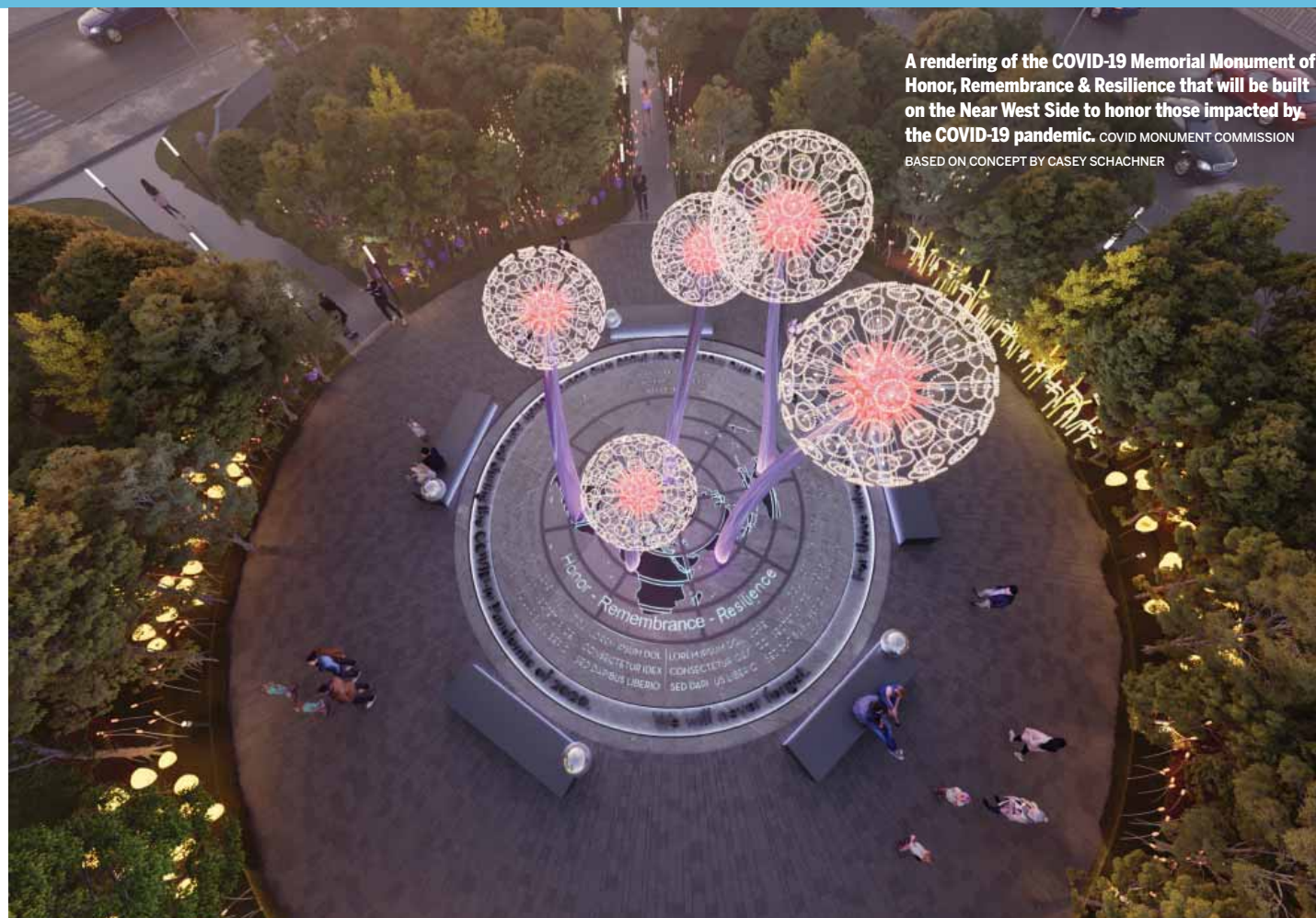
She said her goal was to create a representation of COVID-19 that wasn't upsetting and could be unifying, even uplifting. She noticed the medical illustration of coronavirus resembles a dandelion.

"It felt significant both in its visual representation but also what it means. It is technically still a weed, very resilient, but you can have a positive spin on it, too. It was fascinating to discover how many healing properties there are of dandelions globally," Schachner said.

'Not a monument of despair, but very much of hope'

Metzler, an art historian with a background in curating exhibits, formed a volunteer COVID-19 Monument Commission in 2021.

"I woke up one morning thinking, 'Do people realize we are living history right now?' I



A rendering of the COVID-19 Memorial Monument of Honor, Remembrance & Resilience that will be built on the Near West Side to honor those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID MONUMENT COMMISSION
BASED ON CONCEPT BY CASEY SCHACHNER

MARKING COVID'S TOLL ON THE GLOBE

Illuminated, 25-foot, stainless steel monument in the Illinois Medical District to honor pandemic victims, front-line workers around the world

knew this was momentous, and we need to really remember this," she said.

The commission now consists of more than a dozen professors, doctors, authors and public health experts, including Chicago Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Olusimbo "Simbo" Ige.

Metzler leads the project under the nonprofit Hektoen Institute of Medicine. The commission is collaborating with the Illinois Medical District, a 560-acre special zoning area housing the largest concentration of health care facilities in the country.

The Commission is leading a grassroots fundraising campaign.

As part of the grassroots initiative, an international pandemic-themed poetry competition will be launched Saturday on the project's website. The winning poet will receive \$4,000 and have their poem read at the monument dedication, Metzler said. The contest will run until May 15.

In addition to the physical monument, a virtual Memory Garden on covidmemorialmonument.org allows donors to "plant a dandelion" — a yellow flower for a front-line worker and a white fluffy head for loved ones who've died. Donors can upload an image and text in honor of recipients. Submissions start at \$20.

Last summer, the old Easter Seals building was demolished, and fencing with banners announcing the monument went up. But construction may not start until this summer or when all details are worked through, said Allyson Hansen, CEO and executive director of the Illinois Medical District Commission.

She said the IMD always wanted to have a community park with green space at this site.

"It is the heartbeat in the center of the medical district. When we were approached by Hektoen to consider having a memorial in the district, we thought that might be a wonderful way to bring something that honors the resiliency and the dedication of our health care workers in the park we're designing," Hansen said.

She said the medical district is taking community feedback on concepts for the park, sharing it with hospital leaders and university presidents, and working on the final park design.

"To house it at the oldest medical district in the nation, I can't think of a better place where our institutions will look down on this monument and on this park and see how grateful we are for the support that they provided us," Hansen said.