With many Berkshires arts organizations closed for the season, unemployed workers facing a grim summer

By Katie Johnston

In early March, Amber MacNeil landed a sought-after job at Blantyre, a five-star resort in a Tudor-style mansion in the Berkshires. MacNeil was set to be a full-time server at the Lenox estate’s elegant restaurant, earning roughly $20 an hour, plus employer-provided health insurance and a 401(k) match — a first for the 29-year-old artist who had been working three part-time jobs.

The coronavirus pandemic swept through the state, closing Blantyre’s doors and taking MacNeil’s job with it, along with thousands of others.

The COVID-19 crisis has devastated the Berkshires, where tourists flock for theater, art, music, and dance, as well as yoga, spa treatments, and hiking and biking amid wooded hills. One after another this spring, world-renowned organizations canceled their seasons or shut their doors, some for the entire year — crippling the Berkshires’ tourism industry and the more than 8,000 people working in it.

Many residents had already been struggling in recent years, as lower-wage hospitality jobs proliferated and housing prices were compelling people to take risks at risk of infection while serving the public, either lost their jobs or are compelled to put them selves at risk of infection while serving the public, or are compelled to put them selves at risk of infection while serving the public, or are compelled to put them selves at risk of infection while serving the public, or are compelled to put them selves at risk of infection while serving the public.

“The pandemic is a type of epidemic that is particularly ill suited for the Berkshires,” Butler said. “It is really about how in the Berkshires, how you can have this community to interact, to congregate, to experience things.”

Workers who have been laid off will also have less money to spend at local businesses. Laci Parker, a massage therapist and single mother of three in Pittsfield who specializes in injuries and chronic conditions, is worried that if the construction work in her neighborhood she was able to do when the schools closed to take care of his daughter’s needs, who also works for the shuttered theater company, will be furloughed by the end of June. She can collect unemployment, but he hasn’t worked enough hours to qualify.

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They want space, they want to feel comfortable, they want to feel safe,” he said.

Demand is up throughout the market, but most notably in higher price ranges. In May, sales were pending on 23 houses listed above $700,000, according to the Berkshire County Board of Realtors, more than double the number poised to sell for each of the past five Mays.

Kirk Grippo, owner of Olde Forge Restaurant in Lenox, has been thinking about the great disparity between his customers, many of whom are second home owners, and his employees, who often work multiple jobs to make ends meet — especially as he prepared to reopen and saw staffers’ hands shaking with fear.

It’s not just restaurant workers Grippo worries about. “It’s the people delivering packages and meals and groceries, while others work at home and order everything online.

“If it's like we're creating a different class structure. It's almost a servant class,” he said. “Those people are going into the stores, interacting with [other] people, working to put your stuff together... But that person is taking all the risk for you for a nominal amount of money.

“The pandemic is shining a glaring spotlight on economic inequality in America, and perhaps nowhere is it more evident than in tourist destinations such as the Berkshires. Low-wage workers have either lost their jobs or are compelled to put them selves at risk of infection while serving the public, while higher-income earners, safe at home on their laptops, can still afford vacation homes.

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The nine-room Chambery Inn in Lee relies on reservations from Tanglewood ticket holders, and when the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra called off its season, “it put a nail in the coffin for the summer,” said owner Bob Healey. The inn recently re-opened, but Healey doesn’t expect many guests and anticipates only bringing back a handful of staff, at most.

Everybody is very scared out here,” said Healey, who runs the local chamber of commerce. “The demand just isn’t going to be there [for businesses] to bring these employees back.”

Bob and Olia Healey recently reopened their Chambery Inn in Lee but the couple do not expect many guests because nearby arts, dance, and music centers have closed.

Tourists will still come for outdoor recreation, noted Jonathan Butler, president of Berkshire Museum, as well as to visit museums, which can potentially reopen in July. But half of the area’s tourism spending comes from out-of-state, many of whom may stay away as quarantine advisories linger and worries about travel remain in full effect.

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Immigrants have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. In early April, workers who run the local chamber of commerce. “The disconnect between the way these 20 percent service fee to be divided among all employees in lieu of tips, which previously went only to wait staff.

If we’re going to be making less money,” he said, “we’re going to share that differently because everyone has to live.”

If anything good has come of the pandemic, it’s this kind of attention being paid to the divide between the haves and have-nots, said Alisa Costa, initiative director of Berkshire Bridges Working Cities, which assists low-income residents.

“We’re behind one step when it comes to offering a scholarship,” she said. “It’s made those cracks more visible.”