Senses of perspective Maine/New England, B1

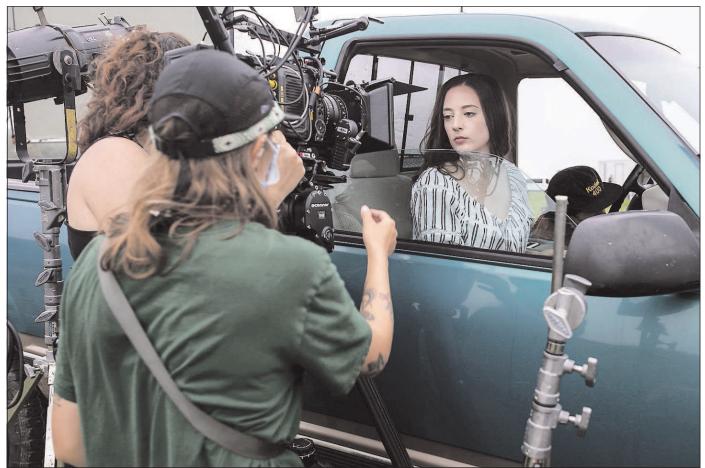
For some Mainers, COVID-19 has distorted smell and taste in unusual ways

 $\star\star\star$ \$3.50

Sunday, September 26, 2021

# Maine Sunday Telegram

# SILVER LINING IN A COVID-19 CLOUD



Writer, director and actress Sara Friedman prepares to film a scene from her movie, "Heightened," on location in Cape Elizabeth this month. The Cape Elizabeth native called her low-budget, Maine-based film project a dream come true.

# TALENTED NATIVI CAME HOME TO CRE

Artistic Mainers who had gone off to careers in metropolitan areas sought refuge from the pandemic by returning to their roots — and found unexpected opportunities.

By BOB KEYES

arvin Merritt IV had big dreams and big ideas when he graduated from . Harvard University last year. They did not involve Deer Isle.

"I was intending to head to New York or L.A. or Germany, and I was going to either do experimental theater in Berlin or vie for Broadway in New York or film work in L.A.," said the 2016 graduate of Deer Isle-Stonington High School.

Instead, Merritt, 23, has spent the pandemic producing theater back home, and last month he and his creative partner, fellow Harvard gradu-

ate Anna Fitzgerald, drew 1,000 people to three performances of their original play "Do Not Move Stones," a retelling of an Aeschylus play, "The Suppliants." They staged it at the Settlement Quarry in Stonington, and considered the effort successful enough that they have formalized their partnership and formed the Isle Theater Company with a goal of producing at least two shows a year.

Berlin will have to wait. Merritt, who called the circumstances "an odd blessing of COVID," is part of a wave of artists who have come home to Maine during the pan-

Please see **ARTISTS**, Page A9



Theater producer Christine Henry, a native of Winthrop who returned during the pandemic, is using her New York connections to create more diverse stage opportunities in Maine.

# Maine just had a tough week. What comes next with virus?

As winter approaches once again, national infectious disease experts say the only thing we can count on is the pandemic's unpredictability.

By JOE LAWLOR and KEVIN MILLER

Maine hospitals are straining to care for record numbers of COVID-19 patients. Schools across the state are reporting outbreaks and sending kids home to quarantine. So many positive cases are being reported to the state that even an expanded public health staff can't keep up.

And it's not even October.

A year ago, when no one was vaccinated, Maine was reporting about 30 new cases a day. Then October arrived and people started moving indoors, where the virus spreads much more easily. Cases surged through November, December and January before falling again.

This September has been far different as the delta variant surged nationwide. Last week was among the darkest of the pandemic in Maine, when the state surpassed

Please see VIRUS, Page A11

# MORE ON COVID-19

# **CORONAVIRUS UPDATE:**

Hospitalizations rise again as Maine CDC reports 603 new infections, four deaths / B1

### **MAINE COVID-19 VACCINE TRACKER**

FULLY VACCINATED. Percent of Maine population... SOURCES: Maine CDC and U.S. Census Bureau

# Climate fight turns to owners of Maine's carbon-sponge forests



Two separate efforts are underway to maximize carbon absorption, one for smaller landowners, the other aimed at woodland industry heavyweights.

# By TUX TURKEL

WHITEFIELD — Dappled sunlight illuminated the forest floor where Tony Marple had thinned a thick stand of aspen, oak, birch and maple two winters ago. The land had been clearcut by a former owner and was emerging after 20 years into a thick tangle.

Marple wanted to open up the woods to the sun and encourage select maple, oak and birch to mature. He wasn't especially interested in the saw logs the trees could become in 30-plus years, but in something even more valuable to him: carbon storage.

### ■ CARBON-STORAGE marketplace is complex and controversial, A14

"I don't claim to be an expert at this," Marple said during a recent tour to explain his efforts to blunt climate change by storing more carbon on his farm's 132 acres of woodland.

Marple may not be an expert in carbon sequestration, the term for capturing and storing carbon dioxide in plants, soils and the ocean. But in many respects, he's already in sync with draft recommendations from a state task force charged with developing incentives to encourage small to midsize forest owners to manage their land in ways that increase carbon storage.

Trees cover nearly 90 percent of Maine.

Please see **CARBON**, Page A14

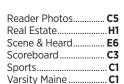
Tony Marple says he thinned forestland on his farm in Whitefield to encourage maple, oak and birch trees to mature, not for use as saw logs but for their carbon-storage potential.

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Bill Nemitz's column	F
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e Gardener <b>F2</b>	Mair
e Millennial <b>D1</b>	Mair





Volume 134 Number 15 Copyright 2021

**WEATHER:** Rain, gradual clearing; high 70 Details, B8



# MORONG.COM



# Maine Sunday Telegram



Crew members prepare to shoot a scene on the Cape Elizabeth set of Maine native Sara Friedman's feature-length debut, "Heightened," this month. Friedman, a Los Angeles resident who's a 2009 graduate of Cape Elizabeth High School, worked with a cast of 18 and a crew of 25 people on a project she called "lowest of low-budget."

Continued from Page A1

demic, their creative lives and routines uprooted and enriched by the unplanned opportunity to reconnect with their original roots and muses. They are actors, filmmakers, comedians and painters. Some, maybe most, will return to their adopted homes when the pandemic eases to resume a semblance of their former lives and careers, but all sought the refuge of Maine and the comforts of home and community when the pandemic disrupted their lives and dreams.

Some may stay, or at least come around a lot more often.

"To have the opportunity to unite the community through storytelling, that is so exciting and meaningful," Merritt said. "It energizes me and has definitely made me realize I can continue to create theater in Maine. I don't have to wait."

When artists come home, they bring with them the knowledge and experiences they have gained to share with their communities through the art they create, said Stuart Kestenbaum, Maine's former poet laureate and a Deer Isle resident, who attended a performance of "Do Not Move Stones" at the quarry with about 250 other people. He called it "a smart, energetic production" that made good use of the space.

"You want people to go away so they can become who they need to be, but then return home and find a way to make art in their own hometown. I find that idea so moving," said Kestenbaum, who watched Merritt develop his acting skills at the Reach Performing Arts Center and Stonington Opera House while growing up on Deer Isle. "Then he goes away, investigates the world and returns home committed to making art in his own town. That is the kind of cycle you want everywhere in Maine not to have your young people never go away, but to return and be informed by all they have

Because of the pandemic, the cycle is repeating itself.

Filmmaker Sara Friedman grew up in Cape Elizabeth and lives in Los Angeles, where firsttime filmmakers are a dime a dozen and where she has done nothing to distinguish herself enough that a production company might gamble its money on her. But that never deterred her from dreaming and working toward making a feature-length film in her hometown. A few years ago, she wrote a script and filmed a short version of her future-dream project, a film called "Heightened" about a woman struggling with mental

When the pandemic brought her home, she raised \$300,000 to make what she calls "the lowest of low-budget" feature films and mark her directorial debut. She stars in the movie with fellow Cape Elizabeth High School classmate Dave Register, who also came home to Maine from Los Angeles during the pandemic and started his own theater company, East Shore Arts.

"I decided I wanted to create more art in Maine, so I went to private investors to raise a budget," Friedman said. "The vast majority of the money came from private Maine investors. Some are interested in the arts, and some are interested in keeping young people here."

### **COMING AND GOING**

Friedman, who celebrated her 30th birthday on the film set at Ram Island Farm, said she was committed to making movies in Maine, though she lamented the Legislature's failure to enact more generous tax incentives for filmmakers. She testified in favor of a bill to expand incentives, which did not advance during the most recent legislative session.

"I want to make movies here. though I have to have part of me in Los Angeles and New York, because that is the way the industry is. But I want to make my

art here," she said. Friedman began acting with the Reindeer Theatre Company in Portland when she was 6, then at Cape Elizabeth High School, where she graduated in 2009. She went on to study at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, graduating in 2013. Over two weeks of shooting in Cape Elizabeth, she worked with a cast of 18 and a crew of 25. She called it a dream

come true "What you get in Maine that you don't have in other places is location," Friedman said. "This is a tiny little movie with the most gorgeous scenery in the country. People will watch that and go, 'Oh, that is stunning,' and they won't think about the

budget.' Theater-maker Christine Henrv also came home during the pandemic. A Winthrop native, she has centered her career in New York, where she co-founded and serves as artistic director of Royal Family Productions, a theater rooted in the ethos and diversity of its Times Square neighborhood. When the pandemic hit, Henry came back to Maine to a house in Readfield. When it became apparent that theater would be on hold in New York, Henry brought Royal Family north, along with its goals of diversity and inclusion.

She collaborated with a farm owner in Fayette for a barn production of "Anne of Green Gables: Part 1" in September 2020, and has mounted several productions across central Maine at the Franco Center in Lewiston and the Community Little Theater in Auburn. On Oct. 3. Royal Family will present "Fireside," a theater- and dance-infused Halloween show at Cumston Hall in Monmouth. For all the shows, Henry has brought actors and dancers from New York to work with performers and presenters from Maine, creating both meaningful collaborations among artists and introducing artists of color to

the state.



Photo by Ben Kramer/Courtesy of Marcus Card Comedian Marcus Cardona came from New York to live in his parents' house in Buxton during the pandemic and created a comedy series at Thompson's Point in Portland.



Photo by Ella Zona/Courtesy of Anne Neely

Artist Anne Neely creates new works at her home in Jonesport. She says being in Maine "slows me down and allows me to really see things that make me a better painter and a better person.



Photo by Jessica Skocik/Courtesy of Marvin Merritt IV

From left, Marvin Merritt IV, Quincy Lincoln and John Skocik perform in "Do Not Move Stones," presented in August at the Settlement Quarry in Stonington. Merritt, who grew up on Deer Isle, hoped to begin his acting career in New York, Los Angeles or Berlin, but the pandemic brought him and his art back home.

Henry wants to leverage the power of her New York theater company to create and encourage diversity in theater in Maine. The star of "Anne of Green Gables" was a person of color, as were two of the dancers in "The Ugly Duckling," presented in August at the Franco Center. Henry described "The Ugly Duckling" as a mash-up of the Hans Christian Andersen tale and "Swan Lake," with the script adjusted for a rainbow swan, who is bullied. It's intended for middle-school kids and older.

One of Henry's local collaborators is Danny Gay, artistic

director of Monmouth Community Players, who has served as a producer, technician and actor. Henry describes him as her "right-hand man." He will be among those on stage in "Fireside" in October, in which Henry adapted Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Robert Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and other literary tales into a Halloween play.

Gay said working with Henry has energized him and emboldened him to seek out more artists of color, like him, to become involved in Maine theater.

"I am so used to seeing productions that do not have much

diversity in them," he said. "In my time doing theater in Maine, I have experienced very few other people of color, partly due to the lack of diversity in Maine and partly because people of color who have come to Maine have not been encouraged to participate in theater. But as we have more immigrants coming to Maine from Africa, South America and other places, perhaps they will feel more encouraged if they see people like themselves in the productions."

## **UNEXPECTED BENEFITS**

Comedian Marcus Cardona, 30, had been doing stand-up in New York nearly a decade and worked his way up to become assistant manager of a comedy club when the pandemic shut everything down. He returned home to Maine to live with his parents in Buxton - a life circumstance that he turns into a laugh in his stand-up routine.

Last summer, he began organizing Cabin Fever Comedy Nights at Thompson's Point in Portland. He's sold out 10 shows in a row, and hopes to again on Oct. 20. Like theater producer Henry, Cardona has found that coming home to Maine to do what he was doing in New York has been both gratifying and eye-opening – and unexpected.

"During last couple of years, Portland has developed a reputation as a foodie city with legal weed, and now people are recognizing Maine as a really good place for comedy, too," he said. "It's definitely made me appreciate Maine and my upbringing, and it helped me get in touch with a lot of other things. A lot of artists, especially in entertainment, they become too big and lose touch with their roots. It's good for me to be back here.'

At some point, Cardona will return to New York, but he anticipates continuing to live and work in Maine, as well - though he likely will move out of his parents' house in Buxton and get his own place.

For the painter Anne Neely, coming home to Maine during the pandemic meant fleeing the small apartment she and her husband share in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston and relocating to their longtime summer home in Jonesport, where they had room to spread out and where they felt safe. Neely is not a Maine native, but has been coming to Maine for more than 30 years, to paint.

In her retirement, she always hoped to spend more time painting in Maine, which offered her vastness, light and color. But the pandemic helped her realize what Maine offered in terms of allowing her to find a sense of calm during tumultuous times.

"We were in Boston in April 2020 and I was watching a show and they were explaining how to shop for and wash your produce and said, 'That's it!' I looked at my husband and said, 'Start cleaning out the pantry, we are going to Maine.' And we did and we didn't return until we had to go back to get our vacci-

Please see **ARTISTS**, Page All



Rose Fadem-Johnston, cinematographer for Sara Friedman's film "Heightened," came to Maine from Los Angeles to work on the project.



Director Sara Friedman talks to a crew member while make-up artist Elexa Cangelosi touches her up before shooting a scene this month in Cape Elizabeth.

Continued from Page A9

nations. We spent more than a calendar year."

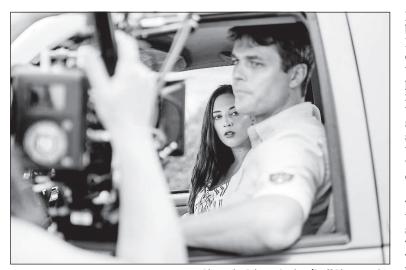
Neely spends much of her time in Maine now, and leaves only for business. "Because of my art, I still have to be in New York and Boston, but it has shifted for me since the pandemic," she said. "It is just as important for me to be in Maine because it slows me down and allows me to really see things that make me a better painter and a better person."

### **CHANGE IN VISION**

Back on Deer Isle, Marvin Merritt is sorting out how the Isle Theater Company will function. He and Fitzgerald raised nearly \$50,000 for their first two productions, collaborating with Island Heritage Trust and the Reach Performing Arts Center to present the performances. He is planning a budget, forming plans, making pitches - the nutsand-bolts work of an arts administrator. He envisions hosting one big production each summer, geared for families, and a winter show that deals with, as he says, 'slightly darker themes.'

Once he dreamed of doing experimental theater in Berlin, and maybe he will do that someday. But for now, Merritt feels grateful to be able to make theater for his friends and family and the people he grew up with on Deer Isle and anyone else who wants to come along for the ride.

When the pandemic pivot is over, Henry said, she intends to continue making theater in Maine. She has always written her plays in Maine, and her experience producing theater in Maine has been encouraging enough that she is contemplating using Maine as a proving ground for New York. Both "The Ugly Ducking" and "Fireside" will be staged in New York, she said. She also is thinking about a summer theater festival next year, and would love to



Photos by Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer With former Cape Elizabeth High classmate Sara Friedman, actor Dave Register appears in a scene from "Heightened." Also from L.A., Register has started his own theater company, East Shore Arts.

find a summer camp she could rent to bring artists together to create communally.

The pandemic has allowed Henry to think about Maine in new ways. She said the availability of large, affordable theaters where she can create new work is an uncommon luxury, making Maine attractive for her short- and longterm plans.

"Can we bring new work to

Maine, try it out here and then bring it back down to New York? I am interested in what that model looks like. And my board is interested in trying to start a new play festival in the summer here in Maine, and create some sort of thing that long-term might look something like Williamstown," she said, referring to the long-established and widely respected theater festival in the Berkshires of Massachusetts.

"It could be stupendous, in a way, where people in Maine get to see the very first incarnation of something that ends up on Broadway. How do you plan a dream where you actually do this and people come? ... It takes a whole lot of work beyond building a field, but that is what we are working

That dream started with the pandemic, when Henry came

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Continued from Page A1

1,000 deaths, broke hospitalization and ICU records and counted more than 70 school outbreaks in the first weeks of classes.

So what will happen this winter?

Will even larger numbers of Maine people become sickened and overflow hospitals when colder weather arrives and we spend more time indoors? Or is there reason to hope that we can avoid another winter like last year, when the virus killed more than 500 Maine people in three months?

Those who know the most about the virus say the one certainty is that it's unpredictable.

"Anybody who projects out more than 30 to 60 days is basing those projections on pixie dust," said Dr. Michael Osterholm, an epidemiologist who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and who served on then President-elect Biden's COVID-19 advisory board. Osterholm said you'd have better chances predicting the weather next September than what COVID-19 will do a few months from now.

"We don't know, and that's been a challenge," he said. "We saw a number of people who were very public about their statements in May or June that we wouldn't see a summer surge, ... and look what happened."

There are reasons for both pessimism and hope.

Maine is entering its indoor season, and the virus transmits to others more readily in indoor settings. And the more contagious delta variant has proven extremely efficient in finding and infecting unvaccinated populations. Also, while mask wearing and social distancing reduced the seasonal flu to near-record low levels last winter, no one knows how the flu season might complicate public health efforts this winter.

But some national experts say they see reasons for optimism, too.

Maine is a highly vaccinated state, and vaccination rates will continue to improve, especially as mandates kick in, such as the Biden administration's directive that employers with more than 100 workers require them to vaccinate or test weekly. Also helping to improve vaccination is a likely approval of the vaccine for ages 5-11 around Halloween.

Anybody who projects out more than 30 to 60 days is basing those projections on pixie dust.
... We saw a number of people who were very public about their statements in May or June that

- DR. MICHAEL OSTERHOLM, epidemiologist who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota

ter winter," said Arthur Caplan, professor of bioethics at New York University's Langone Medical Center who bases the cautious optimism on New England's high vaccination rates and adherence to public health guidelines. Caplan is an expert on vaccination trends and is currently serving on the NCAA COVID-19 Medical Advisory Group.

are smart and willing to take tous decline, so-called expothe three-pronged approach of vaccinate, test and mask," nential decay, or will it be a reduction followed by a high

# **REGIONAL DIFFERENCES**

Also, statistically speaking, the pandemic so far has been a series of peaks and valleys - not sustained surges that last many months.

Rachael Piltch-Loeb, a research associate in biostatistics at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said last week in a conference call with reporters that the pandemic has "waxed and waned" on roughly two-month cycles that scientists don't completely understand. She also said vaccine rates will be an important factor this winter.

"The pandemic is going to look different (later this year) in different states," Piltch-Loeb said. "We do expect differences regionally absolutely related to vaccination status."

Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, when asked during a media briefing last week about what the pandemic could look like in the next few months, said the answers are a combination of "too early to tell" and "can't speculate."

"We have started to see a little bit of easing in some states similar to what we saw in the U.K. 'round about four to five weeks ago," Shah said

While much of the country still has relatively high levels of virus prevalence, some states are starting to experience notable drops, including California, Oregon, South Dakota, Georgia and Texas, among others. Average weekly cases in the United States have declined from 1.1 million in early September to about 960,000 currently, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

hand, the seven-day average - cases are projected to de-

to climb, up from 456 a week ago to 468.6 on Saturday. By comparison, the peak last January saw cases soar to more than 600 per day.

we wouldn't see a summer surge ... and look what happened."

Even if Maine follows other states and sees a decline in daily cases in the coming weeks, that would not necessarily mean going back to 30 or fewer cases a day, however, Shah said.

"If this is the beginning of "People in New England a decline, will it be a precipiplateau, which is what happened in the U.K.?"

In the United Kingdom, cases peaked in July, declined sharply for a few weeks and plateaued until early September, when they started descending again.

The U.K. experience may be especially instructive for Maine because it has high vaccination rates similar to New England with about 67 percent of the total popula-

tion fully immunized. Complicating matters is human behavior, such as what happened in the U.K. when schools reopened this summer with few pandemic restrictions and the Euro Cup soccer tournament brought thousands together for watch parties, Dr. William Hanage, an epidemiology professor at Harvard University, told the Harvard Gazette in an interview in late August. Cases stopped falling, but when schools went on another summer break and the tournament ended, cases went down, Hanage said.

# **SPREADED BY SCHOOLCHILDREN**

Adding to confusion about what the future holds in the United States are forecasting models that paint very different pictures of the next vear.

The COVID-19 Scenario Modeling Hub, which combines forecasts from several models for the U.S. CDC, shows a steady decline in cases across the nation from now through March 2022, when the model projects less than 10,000 cases per day nationally. That's about 15 times less than case counts being reported now. The modeling hub does not currently do long-range projections by state.

But according to another model – the IHME forecasting model produced by the In Maine, on the other University of Washington

"I am looking for a bit bet- of daily new cases continues cline slightly this fall before picking back up again in December and January. The IHME model shows more of a plateau than a huge winter

spike, however. Caplan, the bioethicist, said there could be big regional differences this winter, with high-vaccination states such as Maine clamping down on the virus and states in the South and interior West with lower vaccination rates remaining susceptible to COVID-19 spikes.

Maine and most of New England have the best vaccination rates in the nation, approaching 70 percent of the population fully immunized, while states such as North Dakota, Mississippi, Alabama, Idaho and West Virginia have vaccination rates of less than 45 percent, according to federal data.

In fact, despite the record hospitalizations, Maine's vaccination rate appears to have prevented the state from experiencing the same intensity of the delta variant surge as other states with lower vaccination rates. The state has remained below the national infection rate throughout August and September.

vaccinations are When combined with people who have natural immunity from contracting COVID-19, there are even fewer people that the virus can successfully transmit to. And, Caplan said, the expectation that school-age children – about 100,000 of Maine's 1.3 million population - will become eligible for vaccination later this fall "really helps a lot." Currently, only people 12 and older can get their shots.

"Schoolchildren are a big group of people and they are spreaders. They go to common areas, schools, and go home and bring the virus back home," Caplan said.

The rollout of booster shots this fall could provide some help, too. Boosters have been approved for those who received the Pfizer vaccine and are either 65 and older or younger with high risk factors.

However, Piltch-Loeb said it's unclear how much the booster shots will prevent transmission of the virus, although they will definitely help reduce severe cases of COVID-19.

Another unknown is the potential for the emergence of a new variant that is more contagious and deadly than the delta, Caplan said.

## **OPTIMISM FOR NEW ENGLAND**

It's difficult to determine how likely it is that a new variant will come along and drive a surge of cases, experts say, because delta is so transmissible that it keeps others from taking hold. Another variant would likely have to be more contagious to overtake delta.

For instance, the mu variant is the cause for some concern because of the potential to evade vaccines, but there's no evidence that it is more transmissible than delta and so is unlikely to take off in the United States, several infectious disease experts told The Wall Street Journal.

Caplan said his relative optimism for New England is based partly on a belief that safety protocols are going to increase in the coming weeks.

He envisions more restrictions will be put in place this winter for unvaccinated people, including more indoor venues demanding proof of vaccination to attend entertainment or sporting events, as more people come to accept the measures. Employers will impose the vaccine mandates without waiting for the courts to sort out whether Biden's vaccine rules for workers can be en-

forced, he said. Although the Biden administration has not yet required vaccination proof for domestic air travel, like Canada has done, Caplan said he also expects the federal government will eventually mandate vaccination for air travel.

"I think that (more vaccine mandates) are going to be more popular and more important," he said.

Caplan said overall he does not see a "doom and gloom" scenario playing out this winter, especially in New England.

"I'm optimistic about New England. There's less ideological opposition to vaccines and masks," Caplan said. "There's more respect for science and doctors in New England."

Osterholm, the University of Minnesota epidemiologist, is less optimistic about the national outlook.

Because of the rapid changes and unpredictability of the coronavirus, "there are days that I know less about this virus than I did six months ago," he said. For example, while delta-driven surges were likely predictable in areas with low vaccination rates, places such as the New England states as well as the United Kingdom have experienced large surges despite high vaccina-

tion rates. The author of the best-selling 2017 book "Deadliest Enemy: Our War Against Killer Germs," Osterholm has been involved in infectious disease research for decades and has held numerous positions at the state and federal levels. He has also been a consultant to the World Health Organization, the Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institutes of Health.

And he steered clear of any predictions.

"We could have another surge after this one and it could be sizable or we may not," Osterholm said. "We'll just have to see how these things occur."

And, he said, the low acceptance of vaccines in the United States that is driving the current surge is also making predictions about the fall and winter much more difficult.

"We have the vaccines - we iust have to use them," he said. "This virus is beating us up badly but we're sure helping it."

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