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Capturing Quarantine: Student Pandemic Experience Journal

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Megan Olszanski
February 8, 2021

Why Remember?

Documentation of this pandemic that we're all currently experiencing is important for many reasons. First of all, this is a historical event. In the far future, the next generations of people to come after us will want to know what our personal experiences were like and how we dealt with each situation that we were faced with. Also, since we're all personally experiencing and living through this historical moment, we have the power to share our experiences to future generations through documentation, which could be extremely beneficial to them in case something similar to this pandemic rises again in their lifetime. It's especially important for us college students' voices to be heard during these times. We have been abruptly confronted with a college experience that no other generation has ever had to undergo. All or most of our classes are online, we have little to no face-to-face interaction with our teachers, and we're no longer allowed to have physical interaction with our friends and peers on or off campus. For most of us, it's so much more difficult to engage in learning, and on top of that, we're experiencing feelings of loneliness, fear, anxiety, sadness, etc. Due to these circumstances, it's important that we share the ways that we're attempting to cope and handle this situation because it's such a new and unimaginable experience for us that non-college students might not be able to understand, and sharing our experiences could also help fellow college students find new ways for themselves to cope and get through these difficult times.

Megan Olszanski
February 22, 2021

My New Normal

Since the pandemic started, I haven't been leaving the house nearly as often. This alone has affected pretty much every aspect of my daily routine. Last year before this all started, I remember waking up at 6:00AM every weekday to take the East Chicago South Shore train to Chicago, stopping at Dunkin' Donuts to grab a coffee, and then heading to my first dance class at Columbia, which started at 9:00AM. I would be in Chicago for school until around 4:00PM, take the train back home after all of my classes, eat some dinner, take a shower, relax, and then do it all over again the next day. It sounds like a lot of work, and it sounds like quite an exhausting routine. I thought this too when I was actually living it, but now that I have no choice but to do all of this from my own home, I miss it terribly. I used to feel so much more productive, and I was able to spend time with other people face-to-face, but now I feel like I live in the little Zoom box on my computer screen. My new normal consists of me waking up, staring at my laptop all day, whether I'm doing homework or in a Zoom class, eating food, and then going back to sleep. Honestly, this new routine is way more exhausting for me, at least mentally. All I can say is that once things can go back to the "old normal," I will never complain about it again.

Megan Olszanski
March 14, 2021

After One Year: How Has the Pandemic Changed Me?

Reading the question for this prompt alone makes me really emotional. I have so many thoughts running through my head right now as I type this, and it's getting difficult to hold back the tears. I absolutely am not the same person as I was before the pandemic started, and to be honest, I don't think it's a good thing. I wish I could tell you something positive. I wish I could tell you that I grew so much as a person over the last year and that this experience has taught me so many great life lessons, but I would be making it all up if I did. This past year has taken a massive toll on my mental health. I've struggled with anxiety for many years now, social and generalized, and it's only getting worse for many reasons. Firstly, all of my motivation to continue with school is slowly disappearing. Having to be isolated at home and having nothing to do or look forward to besides eating, sleeping, and school work has been unexplainably mentally draining. It's even worse having anxiety the way I do because I'm constantly caught between stressing about keeping my grades up but also not having the motivation or energy to stay on track and get everything done that I need to get done. I'm also terrified of the people I love getting sick. My dad recently got diagnosed with the virus, and that has been another huge thing that has been weighing on me. As of right now, he's doing okay, but the thought of something bad happening to him or anyone close to me is terrifying, especially knowing how many lives that this virus has already taken. I guess the one positive thing that life during this pandemic has done for me is given me a huge reality check by forcing me to realize how precious life is and how we as a nation have to stick together if we want to fix this. I'm just really tired and emotionally exhausted at this point, and all I can do is wait for better days to come.

Megan Olszanski

April 12, 2021

What Do I Miss the Most, and What am I Looking Forward to?

There are so many things that I miss, so it's sort of difficult narrowing it down to the one thing that I miss the most. All of the things that I miss the most involve going out in public and having physical and social interactions with others. It truly shocks me that activities involving those aspects are what I miss so much because I am so socially anxious and awkward, but spending every day at home and not having the chance to really get outside much over the last year has made me realize how essential human interaction is to our mental health. I miss being able to go to the movies, have sleepovers and bonfires with my girl friends, go to fun events like music festivals, take my school classes on campus instead of online, and even the small things like go to the grocery store without a mask on.

With all of that being said, my simple answer for what I am looking forward to the most is when our old normal replaces what is now considered our new normal. At this point, we now have a vaccine that is becoming more widely available, so hopefully everything will slowly but surely go back to the way it was. No more masks, no more constant stress and worry, and no more isolation from family and friends. If that sounds like too much to ask, then I at least hope that this summer is better than last year. After this semester, I think everyone wants, needs, and deserves a nice, long break. I know I do!

Megan Olszanski
May 4, 2021

My Personal Timeline

-February 8, 2020 (My dog, Scotty, passes away)

I hate to start this timeline off with such an upsetting and negative event, but this really was one of the most significant events to happen to me in the past year. This of course happened about a month before the pandemic hit, but I had to include it because he deserves to be on this timeline. I miss him every day, but I'm sure he's in a better place now.

-March 6, 2020 (My good friend J.J.'s birthday party)

This was a very significant event for me because it was the last social gathering I attended before quarantine started. This event occurred right before COVID-19 reached pandemic status, and no one knew the severity of what was yet to come. I look back on this day all the time because it reminds me of what life was like before the pandemic, and I miss it dearly.

-March 11, 2020 (COVID-19 is declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization)

This was around the time when Columbia, and all other schools, stopped having classes for about three weeks. I remember being almost excited at first because I had no idea how serious this virus actually was, so I was just happy to have an extended spring break. Little did I know what was to come...

-April 3, 2020 (We are advised to wear masks in public)

This was around the time when the virus started becoming very serious. I saw this particular date on the Washington Post's timeline, and it noted that former President Trump stated that wearing masks was voluntary and that he would most likely not be taking part in it. That statement alone is a very significant event in this timeline because it shows how not taking the pandemic as seriously as we should have in the beginning backfired and led to countless cases and lives lost over time. Hopefully our country can look back on this and not make these same mistakes in the future.

-April 6, 2020 (My first day on Zoom for the remainder of the Spring 2020 Columbia semester)

I vividly remember this day because it was extremely anxiety inducing. All of my dance classes were on Zoom for the first time, and I could tell everyone was struggling and confused. We've finally made it work after all this time, but because of the vaccine finally being made available to us, hopefully things go mostly back to normal, and we can have our classes fully in person next semester.

-April 27, 2020 (U.S. COVID-19 cases surpass the 1 million mark)

I remember hearing about this when it happened. I was in complete shock, as I'm sure all of us were. I never thought it could get this bad, especially in the beginning.

-May 8, 2020 (The U.S. unemployment reaches 14.7%, with more than 33 million jobless claims filed since mid-March)

This event is significant because during the pandemic, my dad was laid off, and I remember being really worried. I lived with my mom at the time, but every day I would feel stressed out, hoping that my dad was doing alright. However, he's currently doing very well and has been back to work for long while now.

-May 25, 2020 (Minneapolis police officer is filmed pressing his knee on the neck of George Floyd, killing him, while three other officers watch.)

I remember sobbing watching this video when it went viral. I also remember scrolling through Twitter seeing all of the outrage. This is what caused the many riots and protests that occurred for the next month. Everyone was absolutely finished putting up with the racial injustice and police brutality after this video reached the internet.

-July 4, 2020 (My first fourth of July spent entirely at home)

The fourth of July is a holiday that most people spend with large groups of people such as family and friends, but that didn't happen for me in 2020 due to the pandemic. It was such a strange feeling having to stay at home and not being able to see any of my friends.

-July 27, 2020 (The two COVID-19 vaccines, from Pfizer and Moderna, enter the final phase of testing with the beginning of 30,000 person trials)

This is a very significant event. These vaccines are now available to most people in the United States, so we've come an extremely long way since then.

-August 9, 2020 (The 2020-2021 school year starts for many schools across the country: some start online and some start in person)

I was concerned about this because the COVID-19 cases continued to increase, but many schools, including Columbia, intended on having at least some in-person learning. I remember being very nervous about that around this time.

-September 8, 2020 (My first day of the Fall 2020 Columbia semester)

My first day was on Zoom, but after the first two weeks, the remainder of the semester was said to include hybrid learning, meaning some weeks would be on Zoom and some would be in person. The thought of hybrid learning seemed really scary and stressful, and I was still really anxious about the virus.

-September 23, 2020 (President Trump refuses to commit to a peaceful transfer of power if he loses the November election.)

This announcement added another item to the list of things I was stressing about. I was already nervous about the election in general, but this made it so much worse for me.

-October 6, 2020 (I start developing COVID-19 symptoms after my step dad is diagnosed with the virus a couple days prior.)

This is obviously one of the most significant memories I have from this past year. Getting COVID was the one thing I tried to avoid, but unfortunately, my step dad passed it to both my mom and me. I basically had to miss two whole weeks of classes because I couldn't be on campus, but thankfully my symptoms only lasted about one week.

-October 11, 2020 (Spending my birthday quarantined with COVID-19)

This was definitely not how I wanted to spend my birthday. On the bright side, I will remember this forever, and it will be a story that I can share with my future children.

-October 28, 2020 (My first in-person class of the Fall semester)

I remember this day clearly. I only had one in-person class that day, which was my ballet class. The Dance Center was so quiet and felt so empty, and I wasn't used to that at all. Also, dancing in a mask for an hour and a half was one of the most difficult and tiring things I think I've ever done.

-November 3, 2020 (Election Day)

This day was obviously nerve racking for so many people. I voted on election day right after my final Zoom class of the day, and I specifically remember feeling very anxious.

-November 24, 2020 (I move in with my boyfriend into his own new apartment)

This was one of my more fond memories of this past year. I remember being so excited to finally gain some independence and to be able to spend these isolated times with my favorite person. This was a great day.

-November 26, 2020 (Spending Thanksgiving with my dad and my boyfriend in the new apartment)

This was also a great memory that I have. I know a lot of people who spent their Thanksgivings on Zoom with their families, but I was lucky enough to be able to spend it with two of the best people in my life in person. We watched movies all day and ate a small dinner together, and I was so grateful to be able to do that.

-December 14, 2020 (The Electoral College makes it official that Biden wins the Presidential Election)

This event was important for so many people across the country. However, a lot of people were scared about what the former President was planning to do about his loss, considering he was not planning on peacefully transferring his power.

-January 6, 2021 (Supporters of Donald Trump storm the U.S. Capitol)

This was a terrifying incident. An act like this, however, was sort of expected due to President Trump's loss of the election, but no one knew it was going to be this severe. When this news broke, everyone was in utter shock.

-January 8, 2021 (Twitter bans President Trump permanently from the platform "due to the risk of further incitement of violence")

This happened because of the storming of the Capitol that occurred, and I remember being so relieved when hearing the news about his banning. Social media is a powerful tool that can be used for both good and bad, and I was very pleased that Twitter, my favorite social media platform, had stepped up and put a stop to the madness and despicable behavior.

-January 25, 2021 (The first day of the Spring 2021 Columbia semester)

I remember having a really hard day on the first day of this semester. I kept thinking about how I'm taking seven classes that are either Zoom based or online and asynchronous, and it was really overwhelming. I really didn't believe that I could make it through the entire semester.

-February 7, 2021 (Watching the Super Bowl with my boyfriend in our apartment)

This event might not sound significant, but I remember it so fondly because it was such a fun and peaceful night that took my mind off of all the stress I was under during that time period. We ordered pizza and watched the game and the amazing halftime show together, and I loved every minute of it.

-February 22, 2021 (The dance music duo Daft Punk announces their split after 28 years of making music)

This announcement for me personally was so upsetting. Music is one of my favorite things in the world, and I've always admired Daft Punk and their music. Hearing that they would no longer be making music together was such a let down.

-March 2, 2021 (President Joe Biden states that the country will have enough vaccine doses for every American adult by the end of May)

-This was very exciting news to hear, and it really proves how far we've come in one year's time. My one hope is that we'll be able to have a much better and less isolated summer this year.

-March 3, 2021 (My dad is diagnosed with COVID-19)

When my dad called to tell me the news, I was terrified. He let me know that his test was positive and he had multiple symptoms, so all I could do was hope and pray that he would get better. Luckily, his experience with the virus was similar to mine, and his symptoms only lasted about a week. I was so incredibly thankful.

-March 11, 2021 (One year anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic)

This is probably one of the most significant events. We have been experiencing a global pandemic for over a year now, however, we're slowly but surely making progress in getting things somewhat back to normal, and I think that's worthy of acknowledging and celebrating.

-March 22, 2021 (My dog, Max, passes away)

This event is another that will stick with me forever. I've had Max since he was only a few weeks old, so he lived a long and amazing life. This was, and still is, really hard to deal with, but as I said with my other dog Scotty, I'm sure he's in a better place now.

-April 20, 2021 (Derek Chauvin, the former police officer who murdered George Floyd, is found guilty)

This was a relief for so many people, but many people also expressed how upset they were that it took this long to receive justice. However, this outcome was what everyone was expecting and hoping for.

Megan Olszanski
May 6, 2021

My Self-Portrait: Who Am I Today?

I have experienced quite a few challenges over the course of these past 14 months. My mom, my step dad, my biological dad, and I contracted the COVID-19 virus, both of my dogs that I've had since elementary school passed away, and I've struggled immensely with my mental health, specifically with my anxiety. Living through this pandemic has resulted in many feelings of isolation, stress, worry, anger, and sadness for me, but it has also allowed me the time to really learn about who I am and how to care for myself. Although I do still struggle, I have found ways to cope with my negative feelings and emotions. Whenever I feel too overwhelmed with stress, specifically with school at the moment, I have learned that the best way for me to deal with it is to take deep breaths, either grab a snack or some water, and repeat to myself that everything will eventually get done. Whenever I feel too overwhelmed with feelings of sadness or loneliness, I try to surround myself with loved ones who I have the ability to contact or be around. I either call my mom or dad and have a conversation with whoever is available to talk, or I play some video games with my boyfriend since we are currently living together. Overall, two of the biggest and most important lessons I've learned living through this pandemic are to appreciate the little things in life, such as being able to stay connected with family and friends and to spend more time taking care of myself, physically and mentally, because we only get one life to live and one body to live it in. Today, I still may not be the most confident or mentally stable version of myself, but today I am much more aware of what it takes to eventually get there, and I'm doing my best to work on that every day.



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