

First Draft Essay: My Pandemic: What I've Learned So Far

Before the coronavirus pandemic, I had been a busy student in Chicago. I would have classes every day and then after that, I would do my part-time job as a student worker at the fashion study collection. On the weekends, I would spend time catching up on my assignments and exploring the hidden gems of Chicago. You could say I was a very independent and confident person. I made new friends along the way and it was a fun experience mixing with different people that had different creative talents. But in March 2020, all of that stopped. There were no more classes and everyone was told to go back and stay at home. I was sad because I had to say goodbye to all of my friends. While my friends all went back to their respective hometowns, I made a last minute decision of leaving the country which turned out to be the best decision I made at that time. I took a risk of flying in the middle of a pandemic which only gave me a weekend to pack all of my bags and return home safely. It was terrifying to fly back alone during the pandemic but I couldn't complain, I had the best plane ride home ever with all three seats to myself since it was an empty flight. The airplane had only about 30 passengers flying back but it was still scary knowing that I could easily catch the infectious disease

The Covid-19 pandemic changed my life the minute I got back home from Chicago. In the middle of my semester, I was basically transported from a physical classroom teaching to Zoom video calls with my teacher and classmates at 2am. My sleep schedule was upside down given the time differences. I did not want to miss a live online lecture at the time so that's why I stayed up. My parents would wake up in the middle of the night to see me in the living room discussing topics related to the final assignment with my friends from Chicago. I learned how to use the Zoom application on my laptop. I instantly got the hang of it but my Wifi wasn't that fast. I learned how to mute, share my screen and add creative backgrounds behind me. I think mastering Zoom was a skill that we as a society learned together during this time. Everyone had to figure out how to log in and turn on their cameras, from grandparents to teenagers. From online classes to birthday parties, we used video conferencing. I even used it to host a Halloween Zoom party with my friends. We basically decorated our own room with spooky DIY art decors and got dressed as the Power Puff girls. When we were ready, we switched on our Zoom, chatted for a bit and had some light snacks together in front of our laptop screens. We then ended the night watching a horror film called 'The Purge' on Netflix. It was fun night.

Meanwhile, the news stations kept on broadcasting the latest information on the Covid-19 cases that were reported on a daily basis. It was honestly very depressing. Every day, the death or bad news of friends, neighbors, or acquaintances shocked my family and I from within. The days passed with a sense of anxiety and sadness about the future. We developed strength to persevere. I started meditating, reflecting and implementing preventative measures on my own. I have learned to live on the basic necessities with what we had. Lockdown has taught me the difference between what is actually valuable in life and what is only a facade. It allowed me to calm down in this fast-paced world and appreciate what matters the most, and that is being safe together with my family. I learned how to cook a few basic south Asian dishes from my mother. The other day, I cooked a Malaysian egg curry dish for the first time and it tasted really good on my first attempt. It was a proud moment for me. I will definitely be bringing back my new cooking skill to Chicago.

Apart from my new positive attitude on life during the pandemic, I also developed negative thoughts along the way. I was in a dark place for a few months and nobody knew what I was dealing with, but only myself. I was feeling a bunch of negative feelings like sadness, stress and a big amount of anxiety on a daily basis. I could not talk to my family members about it because it was mostly about them and the fact that they don't take time to understand their own children. My parents are the kind of parents who don't believe in therapy. They would question, "What's the point of it?" or "Therapy? Why? You're not a crazy person" The sad thing was, we were always taught from young to be silent, not talk back and respect our elders. It hits me every day in the evening that I wasn't able to express my own thoughts and opinions to my family. I would go into my bedroom, lock myself up and cry under my pillow. It became worse. I started losing a dear friend who I once thought would always be there for me. He just shut me out of his life like it was just nothing. I asked him what his reason was and he did not reply back. It took a toll on me physically, mentally and emotionally. I would stay up late at night just thinking about what happened and where I went wrong in the friendship. Then, it dawned on me to reach out to the person whom I trusted the most in the entire world, my cousin. She was my best friend. I poured out my heart to her. After listening, she gave me good advices and I started to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I did not want to harm myself but to love myself for being strong throughout. I started by taking care of myself more, changing my sleeping habits, and getting into a better skin care routine. I felt good about myself after a while so I started journaling about my day in the and I kept it all in a private diary that I have right by my nightstand. So whenever I feel stressed or sad, I would start writing down my feelings. I still do that up till this very day. It is my way of self-care. I learned a lot of things about friendships too and having self-respect. If a person wants to be in your life, he/she/they would make the similar effort to have you as a friend even on the good and bad days because friendship is a two-way street not a one-way road.

In a year, not much has changed in terms of coming back to "2019 normal". Many of us are still residing in our homes. While immunisations are being given out now, many individuals have not been to work here in Malaysia in over a year, many students like myself are still learning from home, and we're all still wearing masks and now we have to be extra careful with the Delta variant going around. However, I believe we've all evolved individually. We've learned a lot in the past year about human connection and resilience, as well as practising good health, safety, working online and education. This pandemic has definitely shaped me into becoming mentally stronger and physically ready to take on the future challenges.