Before and After COVID: A Shock to the World

By Trenton B. Tiller '22

A year ago, coronavirus sounded to me like something you would get after drinking a Corona Light without the lime. As a college student dealing with a busy social life as well as schoolwork, I did not pay much attention to the world news at that time. When I first heard about the virus, I was on Spring Break, I was traveling with the rest of the HSC baseball team down in Georgia for a few games during that week. We were warming up for one of our games when one of the players for the opposing team approached me and asked if we were still in school. I answered, "No we're all on Spring Break right now, but we go back Monday." He looked confused and replied, "No, I meant are you guys still going to class with this virus going around?" This question left me very confused, so I just nodded my head yes and kind of chuckled when I answered him. As the week ended, our coach relayed the news of this virus formally to us on the bus ride back to campus. We all were extremely shocked, not knowing what to do or what would happen in the upcoming days. That's when it hit us the hardest. Our season, as well as our school year, had ended as we knew it. As a twenty-year-old kid, I had no idea what we were about to go through. After we were sent home, my close friends and I still hung out before we had to leave campus, life was somewhat normal still.

Back home in rural Powhatan county, there was not much talk of the virus at first and no one had been knowingly infected by it as far as we knew. My friends and I enjoyed the time off from school, hanging out with one another, and going fishing, expecting to eventually go back to normal life when this wave of terror and germs blew over. However, as the days went by, the numbers continued to grow, and people started to worry more and more. As a young adult, not experiencing anything like this before, I never expected it to reach my small town in central Virginia. Once my family had heard word that someone contracted COVID within our county, it literally hit close to home as we all were terrified of what would happen next. After this overwhelming sense of fear had set in, my first thought was about my elderly grandma and how it affects older people. Even a year afterward, I still think about my previous life pre-COVID and what I miss before this pandemic occurred. There have not been many moments of normalcy to say the least, although I have felt nostalgic for many. I have realized many small and big changes that I had taken for granted in the past that I now reminisce about. Before these long-lasting impacts had occurred, I seldom gave a second thought to the fact that I could simply do what I wanted and when I wanted to do it. I could walk out of my apartment, sit in a certain spot, walk into a store, or get in an Uber without protocols or mask-mandated consequences. Although not earth-shattering, these simple interactions between places and strangers gave me a sense of belonging and validation I never had thought of before. Now it's hard to recognize and even communicate with people you're familiar with just because of the masks being worn at all times.

Contactless social isolation has been extremely difficult for everyone. Due to these many circumstances, I have found myself to be more frustrated than I ever was before COVID-19. It is hard to find myself calm when there are so many rules and shutdowns to things and places, I used to love. I will admit it has been hard to not have family visit Hampden- Sydney, or go to church on a Sunday, all these things have been hard to comprehend and deal with. These all have led to new emotional experiences that have presented themselves in the past year. Not being able to have family close to me, or travel to see a friend, has greatly affected my mental health, and has brought upon new emotions to my life. Along with online Zoom classes, strict in person classes, and tight schedules amongst the college all adding stress, anxiety, and frustration. Thus, making this pandemic very challenging as it has put many fears and worries within my life. I am hoping as time goes on and hopefully with the status of the pandemic improving, life and worries will subsequently improve themselves. Although, with the help of friends, family, and stress-relievers, I can power through any worries that I might have for as long as this pandemic takes.

Although I would never wish this pandemic to be the case, one thing I have found to appreciate differently throughout this pandemic is the way I have found more peace and solitude. I am somewhat of a homebody and although I like to think of myself as outgoing, I enjoy alone time to gather my thoughts. Throughout this pandemic and with social distancing, I have found the world to be a lot less busy. The constant coming and going of people seriously slowed down. The sounds of people crowding around me almost drown out as they are a six-foot distance from me or continuing to stay in their homes, where they stay safe and healthy. Not only did this time of solitude give me the much needed alone time, but this pandemic has provided me an opportunity to stop and reflect, to think about what truly matters in my life and what I need to make me happy as an individual.

Looking back at life before COVID, it's crazy to think just how careless and carefree people were, with myself included. Hosting giant parties, thousands of people squeezed in tiny areas at concerts, and the many family gatherings going on every day, no one even thought about the germs or the close contact they were having like we do now. Nowadays, seeing a person without a mask or some sort of facial protection is weird or frowned upon by society. Looking down on them or judging them as you think to yourself, "you're the reason this virus is spreading so easily." On top of that, hearing people sneeze or even the slightest individual cough causes immense concern for the people surrounding them. However, the WORST feeling is getting out of your car or leaving your house and saying to yourself, "Ah I forgot my mask." All of these things that never used to cause any worry are now all huge factors of our safety and future as a society.

Life last year was strangely different, as a night out on the town meant showing up to a new restaurant or a movie, now it refers to visiting a friend while sitting on a porch, all while maintaining a six feet social distance. Before COVID-19, it would have almost been startling to see a person wearing a mask into a gas station or restaurant, now it is almost respectful to make sure your mask is on tight when passing another citizen. People have replaced their time-off vacations with walks and

spending time in the home with their families. Bars, gyms, and restaurants are now offering hand sanitizer in their doorways. Our lives have changed tremendously as we know it and may never return to what we knew as 'normal'. Although, as I

have previously expressed, not all is catastrophic. People, including myself, are newly appreciative of quality time spent with others, as well as finding peace and quiet when need-be. I find it extremely important to try and reminisce about these special things to make some light

of this devastating situation. Otherwise, I would not be able to deal with all the protruding emotions that have come with the COVID-19 pandemic.