

## Coping with COVID

By J. Scott H. Pittman '22

The day was March 11, 2020. A day which I will remember for the rest of my life. I had just arrived in Atlanta, staying with my aunt and uncle, after a five day trip to Fernandina Beach, Florida with my older brother and my parents. As my brother was set to graduate in a few months and I was about to reach the halfway point in my college career, my family decided that we would take a road trip, not dissimilar from the Griswold's famous road trips, down to Florida for one last hurrah for the Pittman family before my brother moved onto bigger and better things. This time together during this week would be the last time for a while that the four of us would be together, or so we thought. In the previous weeks, we had heard about this virus, COVID-19, but like everyone else in America, we didn't think much of it. We went along our merry way and did all the things that dumb tourists do from Virginia: visited sights, ate local food, drank, and walked on the beach. Life was good. But on this day, March 11, we had tuned into the news as the President was set to address the country on the state of the nation and this virus. I still remember the words flashing across the screen in big, bold, black letters: **“Travel to Europe has been suspended for the next 30 days.”** And just like that, my COVID story begins.

My uncle had a close friend who was a very successful doctor in Atlanta and who had dealt with several cases thus far. I vividly remember my uncle, in his thick Mobile, Alabama accent, relaying the information from his friend that this virus, “really isn't all that serious”, and that it should all “blow over soon”. Feeling reassured, we ventured on back to Virginia the following day. On the way back, we received an email from the school notifying us that our spring break would be extended by a week, but the higher ups in the school assured us that we would be back in person to finish the semester. Little did we know about the months that would lie ahead. We would not, in fact, go back to school, and upon our return home that day, we would find that to be our quarantine palace for the next 5 months. Our time together had not ended, it had merely just begun.

When our classes resumed, online of course, it was a new phenomenon. Out of the five classes I was taking, the only teacher that chose to really invest his time in the new video conference feature “zoom” was Dr. Heineman, who was 80 years old at the time. As class went on, we would often look to him for guidance and his words of wisdom about the year and asked for comparisons to years he has lived through. My most vivid memory of this was when I asked him to compare the year to 1968, often regarded as one of the worst years in American history. His answer, much to our surprise, was that 2020 was far worse than 1968 for multiple reasons. Wrapping my mind around this was a troubling truth; that I was living through one of the most troubling years in American history.

My experiences at home turned into a routine that I followed every day. I would wake up, usually 5 minutes before class, put on sweatpants and a t- shirt or some other combination of a bum's outfit, and struggle through classes. Every damn day. The highlight of my day would be right around sundown, when my brother and I would pack a cooler, grab a speaker, and ride down on our farm

to drink ice cold beer, listen to Jim Croce, and watch the sunset. Days blended into weeks and weeks into months and before we knew it, it was May and we were watching my brother's name scroll across a screen for his virtual graduation. Soon after, my brother accepted a job to work on a ranch in Montana, and before I knew it, he had left me alone--with my parents. Don't get me wrong, I love them to death, but there really is no replacing a brother. So there I was, alone, for the months of June, July, and August. Naturally, I had to find a job. My original plan was to get an internship in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. I could get good job experience, have great weather, and be on the beach with my friends. But, as it did with so many other things, COVID ruined this too by cancelling my job. I knew I had to find some use of my time, so I reached out to a family friend who ran a custom woodworking business and asked for a job. He happily extended me an offer and even gave me Fridays off. The tide was beginning to turn in my favor...until he told me the hours. I would have to be at work at 6:30 every morning, and I forgot to mention the warehouse was 45 minutes from my house. Leaving my house every morning at 5:30 would soon become the hardest part of my summer. The work was hard, but the pay was good and I learned a great deal. I even was able to reconnect with old friends from home who had the same work schedule and we took trips to the beach most weekends. I was making the most of a less than ideal situation.

COVID took a lot away from me. It took my sophomore year spring, it took away all of my favorite sports, and, indirectly, it took my brother away and booted him across the country. But the point of this story lies not only in what COVID took away from me, rather about what COVID gave me. It would be hard for me to say that my time during the COVID pandemic has been a positive one, but I would be lying if I said that I didn't take some positives from it. Relationships were a major theme for my COVID-story. I lost some that I thought were meant to last longer, but more importantly, on the other hand, I renewed my friendships with my colleagues at home that I had grown distant from. I also gained an appreciation for being home. I was born and raised in a small town with a population of just over 2,000 people. When I was growing up I couldn't wait to get to boarding school, have friends around all the time, and have a bit more civilization. I left home for boarding school when I was 13, and besides summer breaks, hadn't really spent an extended time at home. During my summer at home, I rediscovered found parts of home that made my childhood. I especially remember a walk I had around the farm in early June. It was late afternoon and the sky had been painted a vibrant orange; straight out of a movie. Going through the woods, I stumbled across a fort that my brother and I built out of old fence posts when we were 8 and 10 years old, respectively. This was one distinct example, and there were a plethora of them, that gave me an appreciation and love for where I grew up.

I also proved a lot to myself in my working habits. As I mentioned, my work schedule in the morning was less than ideal. I am very much not a morning person. Thus, getting up every morning, for 13 weeks, at 5 AM was going to be a challenge. Furthermore, actually working and doing hard, manual labor at 6:30 was also going to test me. However, I persevered and worked hard and learned a great deal in the process. I gained a whole new outlook on work, and heaped knowledge from my coworkers as they said, "stay in school so this isn't your permanent job." My job was very far from working at the beach, but my time working at home allowed me to reconnect with friends, get some

great work experience, and spend some quality time with my parents, things that might not have been afforded to me had COVID not intervened.

My time during this global pandemic was full of ups and downs. A great deal of the beginning of this was full of fear. I feared when my parents would return home from the store or work, when I would go to the beach, or when I even thought about my 90 year old grandparents. I suppose I am not alone with this sentiment as much of the country has lived in fear for just over a year now. As Thomas Paine once said, “these are the times that try men’s souls.” It has been quite the trying year. People have lost loved ones, business, and ways of life. But out of darkness comes light and chances for growth. Modern miracles in medicine have allowed for companies to develop a vaccine for this virus in under a year’s time; an absolute phenomenon. As with everything, there are positives we can take from this. And as we sit here in the early days of March, almost a year after we were sent home, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel and a potential return to normal civilization and hope.