**COVID-19**

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As 2019 drew to an end many seemed to be excited to view what the new year would hold. The entry into 2020 was very hopeful as most all Americans set their expectations extremely high for the upcoming year. Big plans were made, and a new chapter of life was beginning soon. Little did we all know that year was going to throw unexpected curve balls at our nation. I was seated at a restaurant in New York City when I first heard the name Corona Virus. This was a brief topic of discussion that quickly escalated weeks later into a mass quarantine. All too sudden this virus became very real as schools, businesses, and churches were closing. My peers and I honestly thought this would only last a maximum of two weeks. We considered it an extended spring break. As the virus made its way through my small town, masks were implemented everywhere we went, and a curfew was set in place. The town was dead and seemed to have been abandoned. Despite these trials and tribulations through the last few months, the class of 2020 remained hopeful. We still were being told that there would still be a prom to attend and a stage to walk across for graduation. My class remained optimistic as we truly believed the idea of completing senior activities.

Months went by and still, no school, no business, no restaurants, and no church. The end of my senior year was approaching, and I began to worry if I was going to be able to see my fellow classmates for the last time, wish farewell to my high school teachers, and walk the halls of my high school for the last time. I was coming to the realization that it was not going to happen therefore, I tried to grasp hold of the memories that I made throughout my high school years, rather than dwell on the memories that I will not be able to obtain. This was difficult for me because I never in a million years thought I would have to end my high school career this way. I loved school, it was the place where I grew the most into the person I am. Wallace-Rose Hill High School taught me more than just how to be academically intelligent but how to be a profound leader in my community, how to love others, and how to be a person that is set apart from the rest. I am very grateful to have had the privilege to attend such a school and it will forever have a spot in my heart.

Previously, I mentioned that the community as well as my peers deemed hope over two special senior activities, prom and graduation. These were ways of saying our final goodbyes as my peers for the last four years separated into the world on our own. The excitement began on the first day of my freshman year, looking up to all the seniors roaming the halls and imagining what my dress would look like at my senior prom or what it would be like to walk across the stage at graduation. I could not wait for those precious moments. Never would I imagine in my freshman mind that I would not attend either of those special events. These events were so significant that my parents had already purchased me an expensive prom dress along with the accessories to go with it. They had also purchased graduation announcements that would be sent out despite the location and date of the planned graduation. The arrangements had been made and this unexpected storm stole every ounce of joy I had.

Depression began to sink in deeply throughout the class of 2020. We were robbed of the most important times of our lives, which we will never get back. Coming to terms with the fact our senior year was nonexistent anymore was not easy. I along with my friends and classmates conjured up ideas that were COVID-19 safe that we could possibly do instead of nothing at all. My ideas were taken into consideration but did not pass. Again, hope was destroyed, and I was left feeling sick and depressed at the thought of the ‘last times’ I never got to experience. I was blind-sided by COVID-19 and it took away many special moments that I will never see again.

Once I came to the realization that school in person was not going to be an option anymore, I was given the opportunity to work at a local nursing home as a front-line worker over the summer. All assisted living homes were not allowing visitors such as family members, this became a roaring issue for the residents. They began to fall into states of depression as they were confined to a small room alone. My job there was not only the housekeeping work throughout the building but to provide the residents with a person to confide in. I was their friend through the time of being away from their loved ones. Being in this position sparked my interest in psychology as I have a love for working with and learning about those with mental illnesses. I feel as if it is my calling to assist people through their obstacles and challenges in life. This would help me to determine my major interest for the upcoming school year as a freshman in college at East Carolina University.

College was approaching which led to a new hope towards a new era. East Carolina University had opened its doors to the class of 2024 and allowed us to attend with somewhat normalcy. We were assigned a dorm room and a roommate, all the norms for a university freshman. Masks were still implemented as well as other non-normal restrictions, but none of them mattered as long as I got to move out of my parents’ house into the new world of college. All of my classes were online except for one. I was able to attend an actual college class and that brought me so much joy as it felt normal being in a classroom environment for the first time in what felt like forever. Class in person lasted two weeks before East Carolina University shut its campus down. I woke up in my dorm room one morning to many notifications on my phone stating that I had a short amount of time to pack my entire room up and leave my new home for good. The number of cases of COVID-19 boomed at the school, it had no choice but to evacuate students for their own safety. This was a hard time for me as I had waited so long for this and was only able to experience a taste of what it was like to be an actual college student.

Despite all of the negatives that came about through these difficult times, I have been blessed beyond measures at the amount of knowledge I have obtained within this journey. The saying, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is a valid statement that has stuck with me. I can truly say the pandemic has molded me into a new person, a better version of myself. To have been able to experience the events along this journey is a blessing and I am even thankful for the ones I have missed. So much growing and adapting has been done in this time of pain and agony. I will remain optimistic as I believe in better days ahead. Life will continue to throw curve balls; I just have to continue turning them into home runs.