**COVID-19**

As college students, many of us have faced similar challenges in this past year. These include new rules and regulations, missing major events, online classes, etc. However, I believe I have had a slightly unique pandemic experience compared to a majority of my peers, due to my recent move to America from South Africa. This, of course, comes with its own challenges, pandemic or not. But, COVID-19 added many unexpected obstacles to the transition, and continues to create a barrier of uncertainty, through which it is hard to see what the future holds.

Long before the pandemic began, my plan was to attend East Carolina University and permanently move to America. Of course, everything shut down in March, all over the world, and things became increasingly more difficult to maneuver. The first and foremost problem was flying to America in time for the Fall semester, and with the airlines being extremely limited on flights and tight with regulations, it was a difficult problem to solve. I have to say it was easier for me, as I was born in America and possess an American passport, but my family members had a difficult time coordinating their Visa’s and getting here as quick as possible. I ended up spending two weeks alone in a virtually empty hotel, waiting for move-in day at the dorms. It was a surreal feeling, being in an entirely new country alone, in a hotel with an unusual level of vacancy. My mother and brother only arrived a month later.

I know for a fact that the pandemic will cause additional problems in relation to my family moving here in the future. We are already struggling to have my sister come and stay when my father’s visa runs out and he has to return home. She may have to fly to another country, like Mexico, and quarantine there for two weeks before she is allowed to enter America. Even though my family’s papers will most likely be processed soon, and they will receive Green Cards, South Africa has once again began shutting down airlines because of a new strand of Corona from the U.K. But, the world cannot stay shut down forever, and I know we will all be here eventually.

After I settled in to the dorms, I realized how hard it was to meet people. During the first few weeks, we had hybrid classes, but it still felt as though no one was around. This is the time when I also began to realize how much I missed my family. Because of the pandemic extending through the months leading up to my move, I was not able to bid a proper farewell to a lot of my older family members. On top of that, because of the six-hour time difference, it was difficult to get in touch with them while also attending classes during the day, and finishing homework at night. So, these first couple of weeks at University felt slightly uneasy- until I started making friends with several people living in my building.

However, as I stated previously, the pandemic has been, and still is, a time of uncertainty. The UNC school system began sending students home due to clusters of COVID-19 breakouts in the dorm buildings. My time in America started to feel like a lot of moving around, but I was thankfully able to stay on campus at College Hill. My experience staying on College Hill proved to be very interesting to look back on. The group of students that were able to stay all became very close, and I got to know a lot of people in very little time. I recognized everyone who lived in my building, and because it was such a small group who stayed, we all quickly became friends. It was fascinating to see how I went from knowing only a few people, to knowing almost everyone in my building. We became a tight-knit community. Even more intriguing, was how these once close groups of friends seemed to disperse after winter break, when more students were allowed to return to campus. People you once spent every single day hanging out with, became people you say a quick “hello” to while passing by.

Looking back, I believe that once things returned to a certain level of normalcy, we all went our separate ways and finally figured out how we wanted to experience college life- therefore moving onto other groups. For me, I began focusing more on my schoolwork. After the winter break, we went back to regular full-semester classes, and things seemed to become much busier. Though I was on campus, everyone was still participating in distance-education rather than in-person, and I think it taught us a lot of important skills. I did not have a lot of structure- some classes had meeting times, and some just had posted lectures to finish on my own time- and I needed to learn how to manage my time correctly. I had to fix my sleep schedule, keep up with work, have a normal eating routine, and remember to get out of my room every once in a while.

This being my freshman year, I am not familiar with any other college experience, and I find myself wondering what a regular freshman year would look like. I have learned a lot during the pandemic about navigating ECU’s online system, but I feel as though there are things I will have to learn about campus life when everything returns to normal- things that students usually learn in their freshman year. Because of the pandemic, I have never met any professors in person, I have not had a face-to-face meeting with my counselor, and I have not experienced attending class in a lecture hall. In the fall 2021 semester, I predict I will feel like a freshman all over again. I will be getting lost trying to find buildings and classrooms.

Overall, it was still a fun first year in college, and first year in America. In my view of the pandemic, I hope that we can move forward with life as usual and roll with the punches. There is a vaccine now, and I think this will kick start us into normal life again. Because I am so ready to move on from all this chaos, I would rather look back on freshman year and be grateful for all the things I was still able to do to have a normal college experience, and not think that everything was terrible because of COVID-19. I do not wish that the pandemic never happened, it is just one of those things that you learn from. There were a lot of negatives, but there were also positives, and while the negatives are temporary, I think the positives that came out of it will stick around for a long time.