



How We Live Now

CONTACT TRACING AGAIN?

One student's journey through multiple COVID-19 scares

**and other stories about coming to terms
with pandemic life**

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Cover: Photography by Isabella Chan

Nov. 4, 2020. This was taken a week before I learned about a potential exposure in the house, meaning I would be apart from Carmelo for six days.

Editor's Note

This spring, Journalism students at Central Connecticut State University went out to find stories about the challenges of daily life as we continue to adjust to the pandemic. The result is this special publication, *How We Live Now*. Students in JRN416 Magazine Writing, taught by Dr. Vivian B. Martin, the project editor, completed articles as part of their course-work. Other journalism students also contributed and a few alumni.

Our students lead lives that take them many places—jobs at malls, in restaurants and at the post office—where they witness and negotiate the challenges and disruptions of everyday life. Some of those stories are in the pages here. Other stories are a result of persistent emails and calls to find people willing to talk about what they and their families are going through right now. One theme that comes across in several stories are the mental health difficulties people are experiencing. Feelings of frustration and anxiety are to be expected during these times even as vaccinations and the lifting of mask mandates bring a sense of new possibilities. Please remember to check in on friends and family and share one's own feelings of anxiety if they increase. CCSU's Student Wellness Services, first floor of the Willard-Diloreto Complex, offers professional help for students. Call 860-832-1926 for an appointment. Anyone in the country having a mental health crisis can seek help by texting "HELLO" to 741741 24 hours a day. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours a day at 800-273-TALK (8255).

Thank you to all who made this project possible under the constraints of a semester. Dr. Theodora Ruhs, a professor in our department, designed the publication. Journalism professors Kate Farrish and Darren Sweeney helped coach and review some of the work. Special thanks to photojournalist Patrick Raycraft, who shared ideas and some work by his students in the Communication Department. Journalist Pem McNerney, who has taught in our department, was our copy editor. We were fortunate to be able to work with a local printer, Hitchcock Printing. We are grateful for financial support from the Robert C. Vance Endowed Chair in Journalism that made the project possible.

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Contents

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| 3 | Contact Tracing | 21 | Teaching in a Pandemic |
| 7 | Face Mask Fashion | 24 | Photo Essay: Remote Learning |
| 9 | He Says No to Face Masks | 25 | Elementary Education Gaps |
| 11 | Grieving Alone | 27 | Covid Crafting |
| 13 | College Athletes Face Racism | 29 | Struggling Arts Organizations |
| 15 | Graduating in a Pandemic | 31 | Retail Workers |
| 17 | Perspective: Starting a Career | 33 | Online Dating |
| 18 | Perspective: Choosing Unity | 35 | View From Florida |
| 19 | First Year of College | 37 | Post Office |



Mask wearing being implemented at home and in the workplace, I would be using PPE for up to 14 hours a day. Despite working in high risk environments, I remained positive during the pandemic. (Isabella Chan)

Damn, I Have To Get Tested Again

How Contact Tracing Became My Normal

By Isabella Chan

Mon, Mar 1, 10:37 PM

Omfg my bf texted me and his boss tested positive. I'm getting a test tm morning. I wanted to tell u bc I saw u earlier even tho u had a mask on

Okay thanks

Good luck dude

"I was with someone that tested positive for COVID-19 so I have to get tested too. I feel fine but you should probably get tested since we hung out the other day. You know, just to be safe."

No matter how many times I heard those words, whether it was delivered as a grim text message from a classmate or a depressing FaceTime call from a family member, the panic that unfolded within me felt all the same. There was a chance I contracted the novel coronavirus and I couldn't do anything about it.

Many of us have had a COVID-19 scare that left us pondering what steps we had to take next. As someone who has experienced this feeling multiple times due to contact tracing, I have become quite familiar with what to expect.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, contact tracing helps reduce the spread of the coronavirus by advising those who may have been exposed to self-isolate for 14 days while monitoring their health and getting tested, thereby preventing further spread.

Contact tracing has become a part of the Covid normal. If anything, it is almost like an initiation as people slowly transi-

tion back to society. But no matter how many times it happens, people never get accustomed to the unsettling paranoia that lingers until their test results are ready.

Each day in quarantine only leaves the mind open to the "what ifs."

What if I didn't get scheduled with that person at work? What if I didn't carpool with her that morning? What if I had stayed home like I was supposed to do?

My First Scare

I managed to go through 2020 with little to no COVID-19 scares. While I heard a few stories of friends and associates contracting the disease, my close relatives and I managed to escape it, or so we thought.

It was less than 14 days before Thanksgiving — my favorite holiday — and my family was discussing dinner plans. Any other year, we would be traveling to visit our out-of-state relatives for a large spread around the dinner table.

With the travel restrictions and safety

concerns limiting our options, staying home was expected. But it would still be a traditional, wholesome Thanksgiving dinner with everyone in the house, including myself, my parents, my twin brother and his girlfriend with their two-month-old son. Our French mastiff and Saint Bernard were invited, too.

But the coronavirus had other plans.

Our Covid-free streak came to a dramatic halt when we learned that an asymptomatic family member was in close contact with my grandparents. My grandmother immediately contacted my mother, one of my grandparents' main caretakers, and told her to get tested.

The sense of fear that hit me then was stronger than I could have imagined. My home, which normally felt like a formidable fortress from the stresses of

COVID-19, was transformed into a prison with us quarantining and my mom in solitary confinement.

With a newborn in the house, we took great lengths to be safe and reduce the spread of germs. We would wear masks in front of the baby, sanitize our home on a weekly basis, and no longer allowed people inside. But it wasn't enough, and soon the "what ifs" started drifting through my mind.

What if my mom already spread it to us? How is she supposed to quarantine when we all share the same living spaces? Should I get tested? Will my grandparents be okay? And what are we going to do on Thanksgiving?

Though my family was already taking action to prevent spreading germs, we took further precautions following the news. In the days awaiting my mom's test results, I did some contact tracing of my own—reaching out to my job, my significant other, and my best friend to let them know that I would be reducing social activities and getting tested for COVID-19. I recommended they consider doing the same.

Other members of the house began wearing masks in open areas, in addition to daily deep-cleanings and limited family time. At a time when families are sharing moments together, being thankful for each other, my family was social distancing to remain safe.

COVID-19 swab tests typically take 24 to 48 hours to be processed and delivered. But with the impending holiday, many testing locations were backed-up, so the turnaround time took days.

Is this what a pandemic Thanksgiving looked like? With my family eating dinner in separate rooms on FaceTime together? Or would a miracle allow us to sit together at the dinner table?

Six days, nearly a week after our family's announcement and three days before Thanksgiving, my mom and I received our results: they were negative. Saying we were relieved would be an understatement. It was reassuring to know that our household was safe, but it was even better knowing we would get to be together on Thanksgiving.

Sitting around the dinner table enjoying our holiday favorites felt almost too good to be true after the week we had. All

I could hope for was that I wouldn't be caught in the crossfire of a contact tracing incident again.

In the weeks following our test results, things felt awkward. Sending emails and text messages of my test results to everyone I contacted was almost embarrassing. Like, "Oops, I actually don't have Covid. Hope I didn't scare you too much," and "Can I please go back to work now?"

Even behavior in my house felt off—though the intense cleanings were reduced, we somehow continued to social distance and remained in our masks when close together for long periods of time. The safety net that we once believed wrapped our home had been tested and it left us on edge.

Would our peace of mind ever return?



September 7, 2020. After he spent five days quarantining in the hospital and house, I finally got to meet my nephew, Carmelo, for the first time.

How Far Is Too Far?

The Thanksgiving COVID-19 scare was a wake-up call for my household. We were naive to believe that just because we were being safe, we are immune. Covid is too brutal to escape so easily.

We all work in high risk environments that make us susceptible to diseases: schools, construction sites, grocery stores, and the mall. To go as long as my family has without a scare in our home is almost impossible.

Just a few weeks into 2021, when I

was looking forward to a fresh start, the COVID-19 scares began coming at us from every angle: a babysitter, a coworker, a classmate, even a significant other's parent. Contact tracing became a regular occurrence at my home, the constant stress of "oh no, what if I contracted coronavirus?" dwindled to "damn, I have to get tested again."

The intense quarantine methods my family once followed became scarce. We abandoned the mask-wearing at home, scratched excessive sanitizing from our daily routines, and stopped social distancing from each other. Our "better safe than sorry" approach transformed into "innocent until proven guilty," or in our case, safe until proven it's COVID-19.

The CDC is right in stating contact tracing is an efficient way to limit the spread of coronavirus. But the logic behind the process becomes tedious further down the dwindling list of people who need to be contacted.

How far are we supposed to go down the contact-tracing line?

Do I really have to quarantine if a classmate, whom I talked to for 15 minutes under appropriate safety guidelines, says her significant other's boss tested positive? I didn't think so, but after calling a coronavirus hotline it was recommended, I did get a rapid test.

During my phone call, the hotline operator explained that contact tracing is a challenge because for each person that is notified of potential exposure, another four to five people will be unofficially contacted to get tested, me being one of them, and that those tests aren't always necessary.

The operator said the iconic line, better safe than sorry, but admitted sometimes it's better not to say anything.

How The Vaccine Is Changing Everything And Nothing All At Once

Covid vaccinations are supposed to mark a monumental step toward the new normal, but that does not mean safety protocols implemented during the pandemic are being forgotten.

The need to contact trace remains essential to limiting the spread of the disease, especially with several states, including Connecticut, phasing out most precau-

Your location has additional confirmed cases of COVID-19. Your safety and health is our top priority. We continue to follow the guidance of the CDC and will inform anyone who may have had close contact. We have taken measures to keep you safe, increasing social distancing, crowd control, temperature checks, providing PPE and enhanced cleanings. If you feel sick, please stay home. If have questions, contact TMS. For additional info on our response to COVID-19, log on to Innerview. Thank you.

One of my jobs would send text messages informing employees of any recent Covid cases at our location. Texts would vary between saying "confirmed case" or "confirmed cases."

In order to maintain social distancing guidelines from coworkers, I would often spend my breaks at work outside, even in the winter.



tionary measures and quarantine periods becoming shorter.

According to the CDC, individuals who have been fully vaccinated have the ability to partake in many activities that were altered or limited due to the pandemic. Those who are not vaccinated or are partially vaccinated are encouraged to continue following COVID-19 guidelines as they are still susceptible to the disease.

Although Covid-19 vaccines have been effective at keeping individuals from getting sick, scientists are still researching how successful vaccines are at preventing the spread of the virus from person to person.

Connecticut hotline operators are still recommending that if a fully vaccinated individual is in close contact with someone that is infected, they should quarantine for a period of time, but duration varies based on circumstances, exposure, and health concerns.

"As long as you have had no symptoms of COVID-19 for 10 days then you continue to monitor your symptoms daily for an additional four days," a hotline operator advised when asked on how fully vaccinated individuals should approach potential exposure.

"For individuals who a 10-day quarantine may cause significant economic, physical or emotional hardship, you can discontinue quarantine after seven days as long as you're tested on day five or later after the exposure and the test result is negative. Continue to monitor your symptoms up to 14 days and if you develop symptoms

to immediately self isolate," they stated further.

The hotline operator noted that "as long as you are not positive, you do not have to contact trace," but fully vaccinated individuals should remain cautious when returning to normal activities.

Will normalcy ever truly return? That is something only time will be able to tell based on how effective the vaccines prove to be against Covid and all of its variants.

What Is The New Normal?

A return to normal seems to be all that anyone can talk about since the beginning of the pandemic. But all I can think about is that I don't want that. Several elements of the pandemic have changed what I believe normal should be.

In the old, pre-Covid normal, American society functioned very differently. There was no such thing as social distancing or daily health check-ins or even frequent sanitation routines at stores. Society was designed to get things done quickly and at maximum capacity.

But as the COVID-19 outbreak got worse, we were forced to slow down and make major changes in order to safely return to regular activities. Our Covid normal includes mandatory mask-wearing in public, minimum capacities in heavily populated areas and primarily working from home. And I, personally, love it.

I have become accustomed to the hybrid lifestyle, shifting back and forth from

virtual to in-person with ease, and love social distancing mandates that protect my personal bubble. Pair that with contact tracing, because there's no reason for anyone to not notify others when they are sick, and I'd argue the world is safer under this Covid normal.

The stress of the pandemic still concerns me immensely, but I would be lying if I said I didn't have a better peace of mind knowing that more efficient safety precautions are implemented in public spaces.

While I will be relieved to no longer have to wear a mask outside the comforts of my home, I don't think the sense of paranoia from hearing a nearby cough will subside. Nor will the excessive need to sanitize my hands and other frequently touched items.

Though we are moving toward a world filled with less social distancing, I don't think the Covid normal should be abandoned. When it's safe, we can cast aside our masks but let's keep the social distancing and contact tracing procedures. Establishing a new normal should include a healthy blend of the old normal and Covid normal. ■

Isabella Chan is a 2021 Central Connecticut State University journalism graduate from East Hartford.

From left to right: Sen. Bernie Sanders in a mask photo that went viral; Amelia Soderman of Wethersfield; Tatyana Sanchez of New Britain; Seoyoung Oh of Middlebury; singer-songwriter Billie Eilish in a designer mask at the Grammys. (Illustration by Kristina Vakhman)



Face Masks: Here to Stay?

By Kristina Vakhman

The pandemic will be remembered for many things: the global death toll, the mandated isolation, and the general anxiety of an unknown, invisible threat. But if there is one symbol that encompassed all that made our COVID-19 world, it was the face mask.

Face masks were everywhere. On the front covers of newspapers. In photos of Black Lives Matter protests. It was impossible to enter most public spaces without one covering your nose and mouth, and, until recently, leading health experts recommended that people continue to wear them even after being vaccinated. Forgetting your mask at home was like forgetting to put on a pair of pants.

“I don’t think wearing masks in the future will be as weird as pre-pandemic,” said Raven Ong, an assistant professor of costume design at Central Connecticut State University.

But the face mask went through waves of public perception before it became a norm. At the start of the pandemic, when the country faced a shortage of masks for healthcare workers, wearing one was a representation of selfishness. Then, it became selfish not to wear one.

And whereas masks initially were solely reminders of the constant fight against the Covid, they also became someone’s small business and another’s political statement. People wore them like fashion, in the same way they might wear a jersey of their favorite sports team or like a hat when it’s cold. For some, it became difficult to imagine going back to before, when we didn’t wear masks in cramped spaces like a bus.

“We’ve been wearing masks for a year and somehow a lot of people got used to them,” Ong said. “And part of getting used to it is a fear of being without one outdoors.”

The face mask became a fashion trend out of necessity. But when we fully enter the post-Covid world and have no more need for them, will they stay?

A New Kind of Fun, ‘Ridiculous Fashion’

Laura Stursberg of Suffield began making masks to donate to friends and family out of extra fabric she just had around in her home. At one point, she made 250 masks to give to her mom’s workplace and she helped sew thousands of masks for healthcare workers, working with others in a Facebook group dedicated to alleviating the shortage early in the pandemic.

“I just saw a need for it and it was something that I could do,” Stursberg said.

Now it’s her own small business. Stursberg runs an Etsy page where she sells masks to people in her area. A grad student at Boston University, she uses the money to pay for her tuition.

The masks that Stursberg makes aren’t the basic white or baby blue versions. Her masks have pops of color, “Baby Yoda,” and even the meme of Bernie Sanders sitting by himself, mask on, arms crossed, gloves on, taking in the inauguration.

“People are wanting nice patterns,” she said. “I’m hoping to keep making them as long as people are in need of them and buying them.”

To Stursberg, bright masks are a replacement for the loss of our smiles. In a society that greatly values smiles as a form of expression,



Laura Stursberg shows off one of her mask creations. (Courtesy of Laura Stursberg)

especially during a time that has been so mentally draining for so many, elaborate masks have helped boost spirits.

“If you can at least have some sort of fun fabric that speaks for your personality, that compensates for it a little,” Stursberg said.

Typical of capitalism, designers spotted that need for elaborate masks and jumped on adapting it to modern-day trends. Retailers like the Gap produced them on a mass scale and even luxury brands like Dolce & Gabbana sold them, in that case for \$90 a piece.

Before the pandemic, masks floated through magazines and strutted the runways as accessories. Now celebrities use them as fashion statements: singer-songwriter Billie Eilish wore a sheer Gucci mask to the Grammys last April.

The general public wanted masks that reflected their fashion sense and personalities, too, according to Melissa Bulnes, a healthcare worker who also sells handmade masks on Etsy.

“[My partner and I] ended up with such a wide variety of patterns and prints because our friends and customers requested them,” Bulnes said. “We were constantly surprised by what people wanted and it didn’t always match what we thought would be popular.”

In that sense, Ong said masks might stick around, even when they’re no longer mandatory. They’ve become somewhat of an “avante garde” accessory, he said, and people will wear them if that’s what will make them stand out.

“Sometimes we ask how ridiculous fashion can be, but that’s just the nature of people craving for fashion,” he said.

But he doesn’t think mask wearing will continue for entertainment events like Broadway plays because it can negatively affect the immersive experience. During CCSU’s virtual production of the “Importance of Being Earnest” last year, the actors only wore the masks at the start, and they were embellished to match the Victorian silhouette. This year for “Romeo and Juliet,” there won’t be as much of an emphasis on wearing them, since the play will be performed outside.

That doesn’t mean they can’t remain an important accessory for those working backstage, however, or for those wanting to protect themselves. Ong said he plans to carry a mask around even after the pandemic is over.

“The world has created a whole different meaning for the mask,” he said.

A Symbol of Sickness in a Health-Crazed Society

At the height of the pandemic, countries like Japan and South Korea developed plans to distribute face masks to residents. The local demand for masks was so high in China, Taiwan, and Thailand that they banned exports. And though the virus had not yet hit Hong Kong, the government strongly advised citizens to wear masks as a precaution, to the point that residents lined up overnight to buy them, according to Time Magazine.

Asian countries have worn masks for years for reasons that go beyond preventing the spread of illnesses. When the weather is too cold or pollution is too high, residents wear masks. They wear masks when they don’t want to put on makeup or want to hide from allergies. And they especially wear masks when they’re sick, even if it’s just a cough, as a courtesy to those around them.

But that is not the case here in the United States, where masks have historically been a symbol of sickness, according to Laura Crow, the director of the design program at the University of Connecticut.

Before masks became mandates here, one of Crow’s students from China sent her the equivalent of N95s. However, in a culture that commands that we be healthy, masks do not always fit, Crow said.

Americans tend to force themselves to work or to school even when they’re unwell, and mandatory attendance and sparse sick pay make it even more difficult to allow yourself to be seen as unhealthy by wearing something that’s a “connotation of sickness.”

“The people in the United States are not kind to people with illnesses,” said Crow. “If you go to work and you’re sick, people won’t want to be near you, so if you wear your mask, that’s like a broadcast that you’re sick.”

Unlike in Asian countries, the United States never truly got the chance to incorporate face masks into everyday fashion until the pandemic. The last time the nation wore masks on a mass scale was during the 1918 Spanish flu, according to History.com. Even then, the trend faced some pushback, with some people even cutting holes in them to smoke.

“I think that [people will] still feel that if they’re wearing a mask, people will think they’re still sick and carrying around germs,” Crow said. “You can’t be outwardly happy and healthy [if you’re wearing a mask].”

But Covid has also created a heightened awareness of microbial menaces unlike before, Crow said. She sees people potentially



Top: Screenshot of CCSU’s play last year, “The Importance of Being Earnest.” (Courtesy of Raven Ong)

Bottom: Laura Stursberg’s masks on her Etsy page. (Courtesy of Laura Stursberg)

wearing masks in crowded situations like subways and planes, particularly if they're part of a more accepted accessory like a scarf.

Bulnes thinks masks might hang around for a few years after the pandemic even if it's just for the winter, like during flu season and traveling.

"I do think it will taper off as the years pass though," Bulnes said, adding like Crow that they could live longer as a trend if they're "incorporated into fashion during the winter months like scarves."

Not a Fashion Statement, but a Political One

What might ultimately kill masks, Crow said, is that they've been politicized throughout the pandemic not only in the United States, but in some places across the globe.

"I think they're more of a political statement than a fashion statement," she said.

Former President Donald Trump refused to wear a mask in front of cameras for the longest time, saying he "didn't want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it." He and other conservatives mocked President Joe Biden for always wearing a mask during public appearances.

The face mask very much became a left or right issue. Conservative politicians like U.S. Senators Ted Cruz and Rand Paul have painted mask-wearing as an inherently liberal ploy to muzzle people's freedoms.

Additionally, masks became a way to perpetuate racist stereotypes. A former Virginian delegate faced backlash for selling "COVID-19, Made in China" masks last year, and news outlets were criticized for continuously using photos of Chinatown and mask-wearing Asian people in coronavirus stories, even when the articles contained no mention of either.

There has also been no shortage of videos on social media showing right-wingers entering stores without masks while coughing on patrons and demanding to be served, or listings of mesh masks that only appear to do the job.

With the proliferation of masks at protests, which can conceal participants' faces from police, some say that has given mask a criminal connotation. Crow likened it to people's fears of Muslim masking and veiling: the French Senate just recently voted to ban the hijab for anyone under 18 under the guise of national security. While the French measure is unlikely to become law, and is considered likely to fail when it comes up in the National Assembly, other European countries have done the same in the past year.

"They're more of a political statement than a fashion statement," Crow said. "They're being used as political statements that people want to make to the outside world." ■



Laura Crow in what she says is currently her favorite mask. Well, it was her favorite in March. (Courtesy of Laura Crow)

Kristina Vakhman is a 2020 Central Connecticut State University graduate, with a major in journalism and political science.

When Masks Are A Matter Of Opinion

By Sasha Mencarini

John Douglas, a 39-year-old truck driver who travels around the country delivering a wide variety of products, has not worn a mask since the virus started.

While health experts and scientific evidence have documented how wearing a mask can help slow the spread of the virus, helping to protect the person wearing it along with others, Douglas instead is relying upon his own opinions.

"I don't believe the virus is real," he insists. "I have not gotten sick, nor have I taken a Covid test for any reason. I don't believe that wearing a mask has anything to do with the virus and is more about submission and control."

Douglas is based outside of Houston, Texas, which has just recently lifted the mandate requiring a mask. He drives all around the country and says reactions to his lack of a mask vary depending on the location.

"I haven't had hardly anybody say anything, like at all. Most of the time in the states I travel to nobody says anything and if somebody does, nothing happens," he says. "For instance, if I go to Walmart, somebody will say 'Sir do you need a mask?' and I tell them simply no and then that's the end of the conversation."

But he knows the rules vary from one state to the next.

"Some states are a bit more strict than others, like, for example, Connecticut," he says. "I was going into a local grocery store and me not wearing a mask got me kicked out of the building. I didn't allow the incident to grow out of hand. I just simply left once they told me to."

Connecticut was ranked among the top three nationally in a survey conducted by OnePoll on mask use. The survey showed that in total, 95% of Connecticut residents had worn their mask.



John Douglas posing mask-free with his truck in April 2021. (Courtesy of John Douglas)

Douglas does not trust the motives of government officials who have encouraged mask wearing.

“To me, it’s a form of submission and mask humiliation kind of thing. I just refuse to wear it, because then I feel like I submitted to them,” he said. “In a country where we are supposed to be free, isn’t it my right to choose to wear a mask or not?”

While it’s true that some people who get infected with Covid have no symptoms, and can spread it to others while asymptomatic, Douglas said his proof that he is right is that he does not know anyone who has gotten Covid and, as far as he knows, he himself has not either.

Despite driving all over the country for his truck-driving job, he said that not wearing a mask has not hindered his activity.

“I went out and did whatever it was I needed to do whenever I needed to do it.”

“I did find myself not going out as much because either places were shut down or I didn’t feel like dealing with the Covid nonsense,” he concedes.

While he has had a few experiences like the time in Connecticut when he was asked to leave a grocery store, Douglas said for the most part no one said anything when he went around with no mask.

“I remember going to an airport in Idaho and texting my friends about how no one said anything to me about not wearing a mask,” he said. “Maybe it’s because it’s just a complicated

situation but I wholeheartedly believe that it’s my right to choose regardless of what anyone says.”

While he does try to keep to himself instead of joining protest front lines, he does believe more people share his views.

“I think there’s a lot of people that probably think the way that I do, but because of their job or whatever reason, they just go with it, so they don’t have to deal with anybody telling them what to do.”

Douglas says he is sticking to his convictions as vaccinations become available. He does not plan to get the vaccine, despite scientific evidence that shows it helps reduce the chances of disease transmission if someone gets it, while also reducing the chances that someone will die from the disease. Like the mask, the vaccine protects both the person who gets it and society at large. Still, Douglas is not interested in that.

“The vaccine is not real,” he claims. “There’s something else behind it. It is completely unnecessary,” he insists, while citing no specific evidence to support his claim. “If you look at the evidence behind it, like the survival rate, it just doesn’t make sense. I find it suspicious that they are pushing so hard for everybody to get it.” ■

Sasha Mencarini is a sophomore criminology major from Manchester.

Grieving Alone

The Struggle to Say Goodbye From a Distance

By Brittney S. Willis

Losing two relatives during the pandemic was a wrenching experience for Lisette Ball and her cousin Crystal Davis. Unable to pay their respects, or be among family, during that difficult time still weighs heavily on them. Although neither death was related to Covid, restrictions mandated by the state due to the pandemic meant that the funeral services were very much affected, in a way that did not allow the family to gather and properly grieve their loss.

Regardless of how one may have died in 2020, services were affected one way or the other. Funerals that otherwise may have drawn large crowds of people mourning together were reduced to meager numbers. Online services, while perhaps better than nothing, left many feeling that they had been robbed of the opportunity to say a final farewell.

“Many people, they need to see, they need to touch, they need to be there. And most of all they need other people.”

Online viewers were forced to watch inconsolable family members and friends from afar, in many cases increasing everyone’s sorrow. Most mourners would have preferred to comfort loved ones in person, side by side with other friends and family, not just to support relatives and confidants, but also for themselves.

Davis, while planning a trip home to Pennsylvania in November 2020 for the Thanksgiving holiday, was excited to finally see her beloved Aunt Dorothy Brooks. Unfortunately, Brooks, 81, died before Davis could make it home. After Brooks died, Ball and Davis learned that a closed funeral was planned. There was neither a virtual service for the Pennsylvania natives to attend, nor the option of going to the cemetery for burial. “No one got to say their final goodbyes. No one got to view the body of Aunt Dorothy,” said Davis.

Three months later, tragedy struck their family once again when their cousin, Curtis Bernard, died unexpectedly. He was 35 years old.

It’s hard for Ball and Davis to talk about Bernard. Brought instantly to tears and refraining from eye contact, the challenges inherent in grieving their youngest cousin from afar is readily apparent. They describe Bernard as the baby of the bunch. He was a caring, good father and husband, and the king of spades.

A funeral service was offered on Zoom after Bernard’s death.

A somber Davis recalls her emotions attending Bernard’s virtual funeral and seeing her family.

“I thought it would be better if I at least got to put my physical eyes on them, but I think that made it worse because you can’t hug them. You can’t console them... All you could see is just eyes, and all of their eyes are just so sad, or swollen, or crying.”

June Williams, a licensed funeral director for nearly 38 years, said in her entire career she has never experienced anything like the events of the past year.

“Many people, they need to see, they need to touch, they need to be there. And most of all they need other people. They need to be together, and they haven’t been able to do that,” she said.

Williams said that in the beginning stages of the pandemic, as restrictions and mandates constantly shifted, fear was a factor in many families’ decisions regarding funeral services. Many people were unsure about being around others. The prospect of catching or spreading Covid to friends and family while already in mourning was unacceptable for most families. Cremations increased. Some were afraid to have open caskets. Others opted to not have a funeral at all.

While the push to stay home and stay safe helped reduce the spread of the virus, and the number of people dying, it unfortunately added an additional layer to the grieving process that has been detrimental.

Shawneil Chamanlal, a licensed therapist, emphasizes the importance of community, togetherness, and support while grieving.

“It just feels so foreign to distance...it’s

really preventing that community at this point. Family members who are not able to attend the services and console loved ones are affected because they feel helpless for not being able to support loved ones during this time.”

COVID-19 restrictions prevented people from fully experiencing the grieving process, something that continues to distress Denise Stone. “My nature is to help...my purpose is to make sure you’re good and I didn’t get that chance because of Covid.”

Stone began grieving in 2019 with the loss of her uncle, Eugene Wright. Shortly before the global lockdown, her Aunt Harriet French died. During the pandemic, her Aunt Patricia Crooks died. A reverend who was a treasured friend, M.R. McKnight, also died. Although none of her loved ones died of COVID-19, it disheartens her that she was not able to support those close to her the way she was able to pre-pandemic.

She said “...watching a funeral online, it did something to me...” Stone pauses as she quickly searches her brain for the correct words to express her emotion. Her eyes dart left and right, then finally the precise words come to mind. “It made me angry for how this whole year kind of has played out.”

Virtual services were not satisfying for Stone. Being able to comfort others is not only part of her purpose, but also part of her grieving process.

“I think it still bothers me because I needed that,” Stone says, while pointing to herself. In a compassionate manner, she said not being able to console her cousin during her Aunt Patricia’s funeral was hard. “I needed to be able to sit with her and cry with her and hold her.”

In addition, Stone missed portions of her Aunt Patricia’s funeral due to difficulties that occurred while the service was taking place online. “I felt cheated that I wasn’t there to hear it for myself.”

Her dear friend, Reverend M.R. McKnight, of Windsor, was part of her immediate circle. Stone considered him family. “Family isn’t necessarily by blood; family is by love, and he loved me.”

With sadness in her eyes, she looks down and counts out a handful of memories in which the reverend took part. Stone shares how even when his memory was

fading, he always remembered her and her husband and would continue to pray for her whenever asked. Not being able to support his wife and family after his passing has pained Stone.

She attended Reverend McKnight’s virtual funeral. Stone says that had she been able to physically attend, she would have spoken at his service.

“I didn’t get to give him his flowers after the fact.”

Williams feels that she is among many who did not get the opportunity to properly grieve in 2020. She said the pandemic denied them the opportunity to celebrate the lives of their loved ones. Stone said that the pandemic has prevented people from grieving and mourning the only way they know how to, by coming together.

Others feel differently.

Yexandra Diaz found that, for all the restrictions, the pandemic also allowed for opportunities to grieve in a healthy manner. Like others, she feels that community is essential in the grieving process, but

“Covid has changed the way people grieve.”

she also feels that time spent alone while grieving can be healthy, too.

A death doula, Diaz is currently mourning ten people including her mother, Nivia Diaz, who was a pillar in the New Haven community. Nivia Diaz passed away last February before the world began shutting down. The remaining nine deaths include relatives, childhood friends, and students. All died during the pandemic, however, none from COVID-19.

When Diaz speaks of her mother’s death, those listening can feel her energy. It’s an aura of peace rather than misery. She mentions how her mother had been preparing her and her sisters for death and what the afterlife looked like since they were young. She says they never looked at death necessarily as a negative aspect. Although sorrowful, it is also a natural part of life, they learned.

At one point after her mother’s death, Diaz said that she was not being emotional because she wanted to remain strong for

everyone else. As hard as she tried, however, things came crashing down on her about three months afterwards. She then decided to shift the way she was handling her grief.

“I told my community: ‘I’ve never really needed for anything. I’ve always been emotionally disciplined; I know that I’m going to fall apart and I’m going to need support to help me put myself together because I’m not going to be able to do it on my own.’”

Diaz says the pandemic prompted her to seek support even more than she would have pre-pandemic. She navigated the bereavement process by identifying her needs, allowing herself permission to address her needs, and recognizing that it’s okay to not be okay.

Diaz knows that limitations created by the pandemic have created both fear and barriers to grieving for many people. She recognizes that even as people crave the support of friends and family during difficult times, that socializing or grieving together in public now sometimes feels like a radical act.

“Sometimes you need people to treat you like normal and not like something major is going on.”

As the number of people vaccinated increases and the number of people hospitalized and dying due to Covid

continues to drop, it’s true that the disease continues to pose some risk, particularly for those who have not yet been vaccinated and for those who have pre-existing health conditions. But, due to the positive trends, Covid restrictions have started to ease and more people are now allowed at funerals.

Ball, thinking back about the death of her Aunt Dorothy Brooks, said it’s not impossible to grieve while remaining apart from friends and family, but she also said being there in person makes it much easier to support others, and to get support.

“It’s difficult to get a connection through a screen. I can call, FaceTime, video chat my loved ones, but it’s not the same.”

“He [God] made us to be connected. He made us to operate together. We need each other.” ■

Brittney S. Willis, a 2021 graduate from Windsor, is a communication major with a minor in journalism.

Under the Lights

College Athletes Aren't Protected From Racism

By Ryan Jones



Allan D. "Dexter" Lawson Jr., a junior journalism major, is a cornerback on the CCSU football team. (Credit: Ryan Jones)

On May 25, 2020, the world stood still for a brief moment.

In actuality, nothing happened that day that hasn't happened hundreds of times before. A Black man was murdered by the police.

I need not go into the specifics of George Floyd's death. The world saw the video when it circulated around social media last summer. I can only describe the video as the longest eight minutes and forty-six seconds of anyone's life.

There were a number of factors that made Floyd's murder stand out from the countless others in the age of social media. For starters, America was more than two months into a global pandemic that we are still in today. Almost everyone was stuck inside. Social media became the morning paper for millions of Americans, and this video was the front page for several weeks straight.

Millions weighed in on the situation from their own accounts. A public outcry swept through cities across the world in the following days. Protests and other demonstrations against police brutality were held in all 50 states and more than 500 countries, according to *The New York Times*.

The world was on pause from the pandemic, but the death of George Floyd hit the fast forward button.

Television, the movies, and just about every other form of entertainment was on pause too. There was no escape from reality, no real sense of normalcy. And then, sports happened.

After a shutdown following the start of the pandemic, the four major American sports decided to pick things back up where they left off. The return of sports in America might have seemed like a distraction at first from the rising racial

tensions in the streets, but they proved to be anything but that. Being on the biggest (and only) stage during the summer, many athletes used their platform to raise awareness about these issues. We saw WNBA players leading protests, NBA players using their voices to advocate for reform, and countless other attempts to bring the issue to the forefront of every American's mind.

They didn't "shut up and dribble," or "stick to sports." Americans often try to separate athletes from the real world with phrases like that, but there was no debating experience this time. When athletes take off their jersey, they are just another person, anybody else. They are not immune to racism and in fact can be targeted more frequently than some of the general population. "How'd you get that car?" Being Black in America puts a target on your back from birth, being successful only makes it bigger.

To better understand the relationship between sports and racism, I spoke with a number of Black athletes from Central Connecticut State University's football team, not about sports, but about their experiences as Black men.

Getting pulled over by the police can be a death sentence depending on the color of your skin. According to a dataset of "nearly 100 million traffic stops across the United States," Black Americans are 20 percent more likely to be stopped by the police than their white peers, based on a 2020 study conducted by the Stanford Open Policing Project.

When I discussed this with CCSU athletes for this story, many of the responses were strikingly similar.

Dexter Lawson is a senior cornerback for CCSU from Bloomfield, Connecticut. He drives a BMW, a pretty nice car for a college student. Lawson said he gets pulled over quite a bit because of it, especially in New Britain. Because he gets stopped so often, Lawson said he always makes sure to have some CCSU football gear in the car.

"I keep a Central hoodie in my back seat. As soon as I see those lights going on, I turn on all my lights, I already am taking out my registration, my insurance,

my driver license and then I have to prop up my phone to start recording and I make sure to put the hoodie somewhere visible. That's just the procedure that I go by," Lawson said.

"I'm just trying not to become another statistic," Lawson said. "Things like that I feel like I shouldn't have to do, but I just do because of the way things are, the way things have been in the past and certain situations that happened to people that I know. All my friends, we always keep some type of school gear [in the car.]"

Lawson and many of his peers were taught at a young age to proceed with extreme caution during any routine traffic stop. Lawson recalls that, when he was a child, he and his father were pulled over together a number of times. Despite his experience with this when he was a child, Lawson still said that "getting pulled over to me is one of the scariest feelings that I can feel."

While Lawson experienced racism first hand early on, his teammate Emanuel Scott did not have the same type of experience until he got to Central Connecticut. Scott, originally from Brooksville, Florida, said his "welcome to college moment" at CCSU was the first time anyone had ever called him the "hard R."

"I'm from Brooksville, Florida. You can look this up, they have a tree where they used to hang African Americans that is still in front of the courthouse. I'm with these type of white people growing up, and I've NEVER been called the hard R. I didn't even know how to respond."

"After that I started to pick up more social cues on how white people looked at the Black people here. When I'm in school in an all-white area, I see more eyes staring at me," Scott said.

Xavier Bass, another one of Lawson's teammates on the football team, is a criminology major at CCSU from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bass and Lawson both exercised their right to protest this past summer in Hartford; however, Bass noted that much of the dialogue he witnessed was not what he was hoping to see.

"It became more of a trend," Bass said. "I was talking to my Caucasian friends and they were like 'oh we can't wait to

go protest.' This is not what it's about. It should enrage you, it shouldn't be a happy moment."

"You should definitely enjoy standing up for something that is bigger than you, but I got trend vibes. Like, 'this is what's cool now, going out and creating a board and putting your fist up,' not really knowing what you're standing behind or who you're trying to protect."

Bass believes this "trendy" approach to civil rights is something that has been reinforced by social media.

"Everyone is trying to stay relevant, trying to stay in the now, I don't think this is any different. You see now that [the movement] has died down a lot. You got the people that were so excited about making a board, they're quiet now."

When the death of George Floyd began to make news across the country, Bass said it was strange to see so many people be vocal about an issue he has experienced his whole life.

"I'm just not trying to become another statistic."

"My mom taught me very early on that 'you are different from the rest,' so it's nothing new to me. I don't turn on the TV now and get shocked. It's the lifestyle that I've been accustomed to for as long as I can remember."

Being a criminology major in today's climate might sound like an odd pairing for Bass, though he said that some of his family and friends from home inspired him to study it.

"My mom is a security guard at the high school I went to, and a lot of the other security guards ended up becoming police officers. Every time that I came back home it was a lot of love. They always tell me 'we need you on the force' or 'we need you to try and make a difference in this city.'"

Bass said that the discussion we often hear regarding the police is something that people only consider at the surface level.

"I think it's easy to be like 'cops are

bad,' but you have to be able to know that every situation is going to be different. I say that as a Black man. I know police officers that are forgiving in every opportunity, I know Black men that respect the force."

In his time in the classroom, Bass said he has found many parallels between the plight of Black Americans and that of athletes and how they are both perceived by white people.

"It's kind of like the same conversation," Bass said. "[In class] we were talking about why student athletes might have it easier. 'All you have to do is wake up, lift and go play games and you've got a free education.' It's the same thing for a Black person: 'if you just shut up and listen to the police officer you'll be good.'"

In the time following Floyd's death, discussions between Black and white Americans sometimes seemed for show. How could the white person be empathetic toward a cause that they can not personally relate to? Lawson said things can be different in a football locker-room, however.

"Out on the field, a lot of those issues disappear. Everyone on the team is brothers. We all were able to talk about [Floyd's death] and share how we were feeling, it's a family," Lawson said.

Lawson also mentioned that head coach Ryan McCarthy, who is white, does not shy away from these topics. The open environment McCarthy strives to create is in part why the team is able to share their thoughts on such complicated issues, he said.

Lawson said he is proud to be an athlete at CCSU, but knows that status does not shield him and others from racism, their status ultimately holds no weight against it.

"Being a Black man is not the same as just being an athlete. As soon as I take my Central gear off, that same fan that was just cheering my name no longer knows who I am. I was just number 10 to them. As soon as I take my jersey off I'm another Black kid in their early twenties and capable of doing the things they probably think a Black man that's in his early twenties would do." ■

Ryan Jones is a 2021 journalism graduate from Waterford.

GRADUATING INTO A PANDEMIC

BY SOPHIA MUCE

The class of 2020 missed out on an in-person graduation ceremony. Now they may be missing out on a future.

James Angelopoulos could see the finish line. When the world shut down in March of 2020, he was a senior in college. During the previous four years, he'd studied hard and mapped out his plans for the future. With only a few more courses left to take, in just a few months he was supposed to be ready to move on to the rest of his life. As the coronavirus spread, schools across the globe shut down and sent everyone home. Seniors like Angelopoulos had no choice but to finish out their highly anticipated college experiences through a computer screen.

Between a postponed graduation ceremony and losing an opportunity to attend graduate school, Angelopoulos feels underprepared. "I am also missing out on a key aspect of my intended future," he said.

Movies and TV shows depict the college experience as the best years of a young person's life. Students enter school expecting to meet lifelong friends and make memories that they can tell their children about for years to come. The pressure of entering a workforce altered by the pandemic has overwhelmed many graduates. Finding a job and launching new lives in the midst of the pandemic can be challenging and mentally draining.

Angelopoulos got his bachelor's degree in History in the fall of 2020 from Central Connecticut State University (CCSU). He hoped to apply for graduate school, but due to limits on at-home testing, he was unable to take a Graduate Record Exam, required by most graduate schools.

Despite searching, Angelopoulos couldn't find a job in his field for a full year. He finally found a job and currently works as a long-term substitute teacher for a seventh grade social studies class. While he is thankful that he has a job and works with "such amazing kids," it is not the position he hoped to have by now.

"The pay is much lower than others who do

my job due to being a mid-year emergency hire," Angelopoulos explained. On top of lower pay, he is unsure of his job security. Because he was an emergency hire, his job is not guaranteed for the next school year, leaving Angelopoulos nervous for the future.

"If I lose my job, where do I go next? I imagine that more than 50% of the country will be vaccinated by July and more jobs will open in that time," he said. "However, I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do."

In addition to worrying about his future, a loss of motivation has caused Angelopoulos' mental state to "take a turn for the worst."

Angelopoulos was happy at the beginning of the pandemic; "I had time to read, write, and do desk work. I'm a pretty boring guy," he joked. He had enough free time to stay motivated and keep up with his work for his last semester at school. Once he finished school, though, Angelopoulos' motivation

dwindled. "I constantly feel slow or unresponsive to the world around me," he said.

On top of increasing symptoms of depression, he is also affected by social isolation due to the pandemic. Being unable to go outside for fear of getting sick, or making someone else sick, made every day harder, he said.

A study by the American College Health Association (ACHA) about the impacts of the pandemic on students' well-being reveals that Angelopoulos' concerns are common. The study, which polled 18,764 college students, concluded that 64% of students are afraid that the people they care about will contract the coronavirus and 86% are concerned for their own personal safety.

Angelopoulos didn't want to tell his family and friends about his increasing lack of drive and fear of the virus until he knew that he "absolutely needed professional help." He recently made the decision to get some help, and will be going to therapy for the first time in May. According to the ACHA study, Angelopoulos is fortunate that he was able to find help. Sixty percent of students surveyed said that the pandemic has made it more difficult to access mental health care.

Angelopoulos is not alone. Michael Russo, the director of Counseling and Student Development at CCSU's Student Wellness Center, explained that the pandemic has created higher levels of anxiety and depression, driven by social isolation, decreased motivation, and fear of getting sick. "The pandemic has uprooted our familiar routines and limited many of our sources of social support," Russo said.

The CCSU Student Wellness Center provides services such as counseling, referrals to community providers, and crisis intervention. But university counseling centers have seen a decrease in students using their services, even though college students



James Angelopoulos. (Credit: Sophia Muce)

have reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and interpersonal difficulties.

Russo said that prior to the pandemic, in the fall of 2019, the Student Wellness Center had a 40% increase in the demand for services compared to 2018. In the spring of 2020 however, when many members of the class of 2020 were still in school, “the demand for counseling services started to decrease due to the impact of the pandemic on student time and student hesitancy to engage in telehealth counseling,” Russo said.

In the fall of 2019, Julia DiVeronica, a 2020 alum from the State University of New York at Albany, had a 3.8 GPA and enjoyed going to class in pursuit of her criminal justice degree. But when her school switched to online learning, she lost interest in her education, and that created mental health issues that have carried out beyond graduation. She had “zero motivation” to complete her work and no longer felt as if she was attending school. As missed assignments piled up, DiVeronica’s grades began to suffer. “I didn’t feel like it was mandatory even though it was, and I didn’t feel like it mattered even though it did.”

Her ambition and self-confidence plummeted along with her grades. “Not feeling like I had any purpose with school or not feeling like I’m understanding or retaining any information is super frustrating,” she said. DiVeronica felt hopeless and lost interest in activities she once loved. Without her passion for school, DiVeronica began to question her purpose.

Her thoughts and doubts have also affected her search to find employment. She has not yet found a career in the criminal justice field and is unsure if she will during the pandemic. She has found that “with hours being shorter at companies and it being less busy everywhere, there isn’t a demand for more employees.”

On top of increasing amounts of anxiety and depression due to major life changes and a lack of social interaction, the class of 2020 also missed out on the most rewarding part of their college experience: an in-person graduation ceremony.

Graduation ceremonies mark the end of a student’s undergraduate experience and the beginning of the rest of their life. Hearing their name called, walking across the stage, and grabbing their well-deserved diploma is an important way to acknowledge their success. Without the ceremony, their college experience may feel incomplete.

While CCSU produced a virtual event to recognize the Class of 2020, some recent CCSU alumni were so upset by the cancellation of their in-person ceremony that they created and signed an online petition. Julia Canova petitioned CCSU President Zulma R. Toro through a change.org appeal requesting an in-person ceremony. “We all worked so hard for years, and to not be able to walk to commemorate this accomplishment was heartbreaking news,”

Canova wrote in the petition.

Alyssa Mercaldi, a member of the class of 2020, was one of 116 signers. An in-person graduation isn’t the only thing she’s missed out on; Mercaldi had to cancel exciting post-graduation plans.

“Initially, I had plans to go to the University of Exeter in England to get my masters in International Education. I decided in April not to go because of the pandemic,” she said. “It was the hardest decision I had to make because my heart wanted to risk it and go to England but, logically, it made sense to get a job in the states.”

Mercaldi graduated from CCSU with a degree



“The pandemic has uprooted our familiar routines and limited many of our sources of social support.”



Top: DiVeronica poses in her home, using the employment website “Indeed” to search for employment in her field in April 2021. (Credit: Sasha Krivosky)

Bottom: Mercaldi’s socially distanced mathematics classroom at Old Lyme High School in the spring of 2021. (Courtesy of Alyssa Mercaldi)

in mathematics and was certified for teaching. She found a career teaching mathematics at Old Lyme High School. She has taught her students in person the entire school year, but it’s not the same as it once was. Students and teachers wear masks, all desks and materials must be wiped down, and the hallways are one-way only. The new regulations for in-person learning have been difficult to get used to, Mercaldi said. “Wearing the mask has been the hardest challenge this year, as it has been a barrier in building relationships with students,” she said.

While teaching may not be what she expected when she was getting her degree, Mercaldi is lucky to have found a job that she wants. DiVeronica is working part-time as a manager at a retail store. She is one of many recent college graduates who are underemployed. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reports that, as of February 2021, 41% of recent college graduates are underemployed. DiVeronica, who hopes to find work at a mental health nonprofit organization, has applied to more than 50 jobs in her field but has not had any response. “Employment opportunities have been so hard,” she said.

According to Laura Dale Pedersen, the president of the staffing agency A.R. Mazzotta, a large majority of the positions available to graduates right now are typically entry-level and may not provide the pay that they expected.

Pedersen said that graduates’ success during the pandemic will depend on their flexibility and willingness to “get their foot in the door.” She said that they may have to take part-time or temporary jobs in order to eventually get hired into the full-time positions they want.

Mercaldi found the position that she wanted, but many other graduates may have trouble finding their dream job right now. Pedersen said that looking for specific careers during a pandemic “really cuts down the number of opportunities out there that fit that description of what they want.” Instead, Pedersen explained, graduates should be curious about other professions, ones that could make use of or develop transferable skills, to start building their resumes.

Angelopoulos is afraid that once the pandemic is over, he will not have learned the skills that he should have in order to succeed in his career. “What makes my resume so strong has been set back by an extremely difficult year,” he said. “What were once major draws to employers to hire me are now considered piecemeal as I try to navigate a morass of logistical issues.” ■

Sophia Muce is a junior journalism major from Clinton.

MOVING FORWARD

Starting My Career During COVID-19

By Angela Fortuna

If you had asked me five years ago how I thought I would start my career, I can guarantee you this wasn't it.

Graduating in the middle of a pandemic was definitely a testament to the class of 2020's ability to adjust and adapt. Some found that landing a job and making a life for themselves was nearly impossible. For those who pushed through and met with success, it definitely didn't come easy.

I was lucky enough to have a job offer waiting for me right in our backyard, at NBC Connecticut. I previously interned with the company doing digital work and accepted a position as an assignment desk and digital editor right at the end of my senior year.

Working from home was never my idea of making a living for myself. I always thought it took away from one's ability to meet people face-to-face and make a good impression in the workplace. I never understood how someone could choose to let their personal and work lives intertwine. After spending nearly a year working from home full-time, I've come to realize it isn't for everyone and it certainly wasn't my idea of a career in broadcast journalism. To me, journalism was always about going out and making connections, finding that story and putting yourself in the shoes of others to tell a unique and compelling story. At the start of the pandemic, the state's residents were asked to stay home unless they needed to go to the store or needed to go to work. The state completely shut down, affecting our ability to do all the things that make us the best journalists we can be.

Training and communicating while working from home is just as difficult as it sounds. Trying to learn the ropes and take on new responsibilities from a Microsoft Teams call with a colleague, one you've never met in person, is rough. In a setting where time and deadlines are a huge aspect of the job, working from home always felt so delayed. Not being in the newsroom and in the midst of conversations made my job that much harder, and sensing a person's tone from a message rather than face-to-face communication was difficult.

At home, it's so easy to get the urge to get up and spend time with a pet, watch a movie, or make dinner. The lines between professional and personal life become blurred and it can be hard to differentiate between the two.

With time, feeling hopeless overtook me just like it did with so many other people. Sitting home wasn't doing me or anyone else any good, so I started working part-time at a Covid testing



Angela Fortuna (Credit: Adara Holecz)

site in addition to my work-from-home job. Being able to go out and make a difference, even in the smallest of ways, kept me from losing my mind; it gave me the ability to talk to people and feel human again.

During a time filled with professional changes, I also had to manage major personal changes. Moving into my own apartment and pretty much starting a new life was definitely a challenge, and with the pandemic, it was even more difficult. Things that should have been enjoyable, like buying new furniture and decor, became a hassle. When making such significant changes, for me, a sense of comfort comes from meeting new people and getting comfortable in my new environment. This was put on hold because of the pandemic, so adjusting was not easy.

When I got the call a couple of months ago saying I could come back into the station, I was absolutely thrilled. Adjusting to the new normal of returning to work was a welcome change. For some, working from home may become the new normal and that's just one of the long-term effects we'll see from the pandemic. But, being adept at adjusting is a part of life and COVID-19 just emphasized that.

Looking back at this past year, there are so many things that could have prevented me from starting my career and becoming an independent, self-sufficient adult. If the pandemic taught me anything, it's that no matter what challenges get thrown your way, it helps to have a good spirit and a positive outlook. They say that if you love what you do, you never work a day in your life. Even in the middle of a global pandemic, that statement rings true. ■

Angela Fortuna, 22, a 2020 journalism and political science graduate, is an assignment and web editor at NBC Connecticut. She lives in Middletown.



Unity, Not Chaos

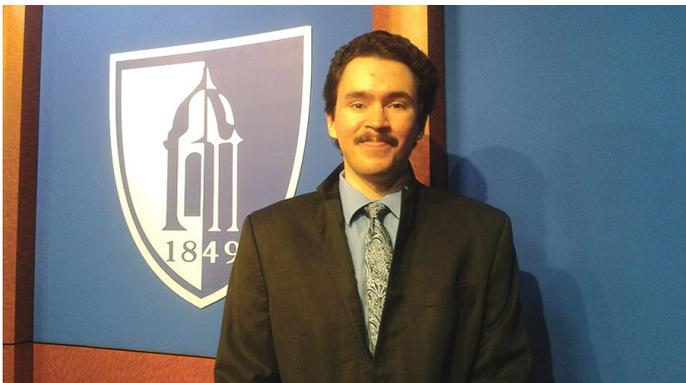
By Joshua Rosario

In my final year of college, Covid made its way to Connecticut. On March 8, 2020, Governor Ned Lamont released a press statement saying that a Wilton resident between the ages of 40 to 50 years old may have been the first positive case of the disease identified in the state. On March 12, Central Connecticut State University went into shutdown, after a student may have been exposed to the virus off-campus by a coworker. Luckily, the student tested negative for the virus, but CCSU decided not to take any risks and all courses were moved online.

Professors scrambled to adjust to the sudden change. Course materials designed for the classroom were changed and assignments were adjusted accordingly. Many of my assignments were put on hold while professors figured out how to adapt them for an online setting. Some courses moved to Zoom, but a majority of my professors opted for an email-only approach. I assume many of them were unwilling or unable to adjust to the fully online environment required by the pandemic. Some assignments were outright removed from the courses and replaced with something easier. I appreciated that at the time, but in hindsight I wish I had been able to tackle the more difficult assignments.

¿Lo llevé a CCSU durante cinco años y no obtuve una graduación de verdad?” This (I drove you to CCSU for five years and I don’t get a real graduation?) was how my mother reacted after I told her the graduation ceremony was entirely online. “The students should go to CCSU and protest for a real one!” she added in a sarcastic tone.

CCSU put in the effort to have every student’s name appear in a slideshow; it just didn’t feel the same. The substitute just couldn’t compare to the sound of parents cheering and taking pictures with their new graduates, who would soon go out into



Joshua Rosario (Credit: Humera Gul)

the world to make a name for themselves. Instead, we spent our time looking at a computer screen rotating names. It was a victory, for sure, but it was somehow accompanied by a sense of defeat. I can only hope that this changes for the class of 2021 graduates.

I had plans to move out, get a driver’s license, and get a job soon after graduation. A few of my friends had similar plans to move out into the world, but the pandemic made it clear that the best course of action for the time being might be to stay inside where it’s safe. One of my friends wished to move away and visit other countries, but his plans have been put on an indefinite hiatus for now, and he has lots of company when it comes to that.

I shifted my focus to improving myself. My Spanish is getting better due to practice and I have been getting back into reading books with some regularity. My hope is that I can apply my Spanish to a future job, if it’s needed.

I have worried about those close to me. A caretaker of one of the neighbors in the apartment complex where my grandmother lives tested positive for COVID-19. Instead of choosing to stay at home and not go to work, she continued to take care of her patient and infected him. He died due to having many pre-existing conditions and, to my knowledge, his apartment still has not been properly sanitized. For her safety and my family’s, we rarely see my grandmother but still try to keep in touch through phone calls.

Since then, it feels as though most things have been turned topsy-turvy. We went through one of the most controversial presidential terms in history. President Trump was responsible for encouraging insurrectionists to try to intimidate elected officials into overturning the results of an election, one that was not only fair but that was marked by the highest level of turnout in over a century. The insurrectionists believed the election was stolen from them. This belief was largely fueled by Trump and his unwillingness to accept his loss.

The 1918 flu pandemic took place long ago, but history will continue to repeat itself if we do not learn how to combat future viruses. We will have to face this situation again if we choose to turn issues such as the Covid pandemic into politicized arguments.

Personally, I choose to keep moving forward. I’m now aiming to get that driver’s license and have begun using job websites such as Indeed, while I build my résumé to appeal to future employers. Along with the Spanish lessons, I want to build myself up as a person and continue to work toward self-improvement despite limited resources and these challenging times.

These days, the idea of national unity feels like a pipe dream and it can be difficult to remain optimistic. The cracks in the community relationships have revealed problems that we need to work toward fixing now more than ever.

Still, in spite of this chaos, many have chosen to be optimistic and build toward change. While the pandemic caused many restaurants to close, some of them permanently, generous owners donated baked goods to frontline healthcare workers. Others have gathered donations to help those in need, such as the homeless and the impoverished.

With all the chaos surrounding us, these small gestures of kindness can go a long way toward building unity. Optimism is scarce nowadays, but we need to act as a model for future generations. ■

Joshua Rosario is a 2020 journalism graduate who lives in Hartford.

Freshmen Frustration

Starting college during a pandemic is stressful to say the least...

By Lucas Pauluk

The first year of college is never easy, but this year it was even worse for Bria Stanley and other freshmen at CCSU.

With the Covid pandemic restricting the normal functioning of universities, new freshmen experienced a completely different college experience than the one they expected. Instead of meeting new people on campus, students instead went to school online, giving them little chance to meet new people and build a new social network like the people who started a semester before. If their classes met in person, they did not meet for long, and everyone had to leave quickly so that classrooms could be cleaned.

The freshmen who do live on campus have been trying to make the best of the situation. Stanley, a CCSU student from West Haven, has been living on campus since the fall semester. She said the only reason she leaves her dorm is to go get food (except for breakfast). Other than that, she stays put. She has also made very few friends besides her roommate and has had few chances to go find new ones.

"I definitely expected to be meeting more people."

Stanley knew that meeting new people during the Covid era would be hard, but now that the pandemic has collided with her first year at a new school, she has found the experience to be more stressful than she thought it would be. She has been attending many of the events that ResLife has put on, so she has been having fun. However, she said it took her until her second semester of living on campus before she finally felt used to it. Like her colleagues, she says her motivation and work ethic have been negatively affected with the freedom and lack of traditional structure that online schooling has provided.

"[It's been] stressful, it's an entirely different change of speed."

Meanwhile, freshmen living off-campus, like Oliwia Rozio are not getting the experience they had hoped for, and they also feel

their work ethic and social skills suffering as a result.

"I've made three new friends... I've never met them in person" Rozio said.

Rozio wakes up at 8:00 in the morning, has breakfast, then prepares for her classes. All her classes are held online, which makes meeting new people very hard. She has joined the psychology club at school, but she has not attended any meetings recently, and all the friends she has been able to make have been online through Facebook and study groups.

After her classes end, she takes time to do her homework, but it often takes her longer than she expected. Not only is the workload more than she expected, but she also feels her productivity and work ethic have declined since switching to an online learning model, especially since the teachers who normally push her and help motivate her are nowhere to be seen outside of class.

"No one is pushing me to work harder."

This issue is not solely faced by freshmen, but she was not expecting the issue to be this bad in her first year. Rozio hopes most of the issues she has faced will change by the time the fall semester begins. She does not plan to live on campus since she lives so close already, in Newington, but she would like to spend more time on campus meeting new people. The only places she has been so far are the student center, the bookstore, and the Bursar's office. Other places on campus--including classrooms, dining halls, and dorms--she has never stepped foot in

during her first two semesters.

Rozio is not the only freshman who feels this way. Zaindeen Huseini, another student who has started at CCSU during the pandemic, has had similar challenges making new friends and keeping his work ethic and productivity up. With few in-person

"I go to class, then most of the time I just go home. To be honest, I barely meet anyone."

classes, he sometimes feels he barely has a reason to meet new people or join clubs. He goes to campus for one class each week and has no reason to stay on campus otherwise.

“I go to class, then most of the time I just go home. To be honest, I barely meet anyone.”

He has joined a club, the exercise science club, but meetings have become less frequent since last semester, and now they have not met in two months.

He still talks to his friends in Hartford, where he lives, but no one from his hometown that he knows attends CCSU, so he has no familiar and friendly faces on campus, much like Rozio.

“It’s a learning experience, and I’m open to it.”

While he knows few other people on campus, he does not feel his social skills are declining. However, like Rozio, he feels his work ethic has decreased over the past semesters. He would like to have one-on-one meetings with his professors, but that is something online learning has not provided. With this distance between him and his teachers, he feels his drive to get his work done decreasing over time, but he thinks it should climb back up once in-person learning returns in full. Even with these challenges, he is still doing his best in his classes.

“[This year has been] different from that of an average college student for sure,” Huseini said.

Many freshmen feel the same way, and this can be seen on campus. The number of students living on campus this semester is around 700, which is much less than previous semesters. Huseini said he had considered living on campus himself, but due to the restrictions, the lower number of events, and the reduced number of people on campus, he decided against it. Rozio also considered living on campus but decided against it for much of the same reasons, in addition to already living so close to the college.

Still, ResLife has been pushing to get more students to live on campus. Jean Alicandro, the director of ResLife, has been working hard with the rest of her organization to make the college experience as normal as possible for the students living on campus. Events have switched to movie nights and other events that can be done distantly. Some arts events have given out packets so that students can go back to

their dorm and do them there.

“Staying involved... and not feeling isolated is important.”

For freshmen specifically, there are plans to start a new freshmen-only dorm in Sheridan Hall next semester, for up to 74 freshmen, to give them the sense of community they otherwise might miss. The main impetus for this, Alicandro says, is research that shows how freshmen perform better in school if they live on

campus thanks to the sense of belonging and community.

“It’s a really significant thing for students to start their career on campus.”

However, Alicandro believes the number of students living on campus will not return to what it was before the pandemic for three or four years. Without the overnight campus tours that are used to give most freshmen the experience of living on campus, most have no idea what living on campus is like. Plus, since freshmen are the best way to get more students on campus, that really

hurts the numbers of students on campus.

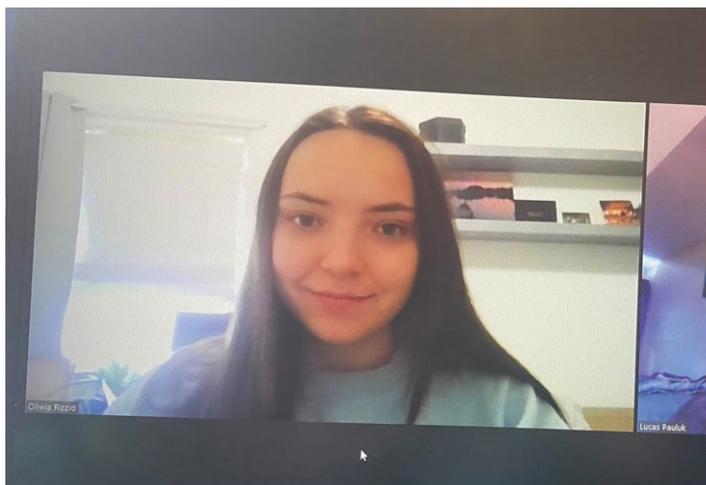
“Once they leave housing... the only way to get more students is through new students.”

The long-term effects of this year are something that many students have not fully considered, as they work to keep up with the day-to-day challenges. They feel that once schooling returns to normal, their social lives, work ethic, and productivity will return to what they once were.

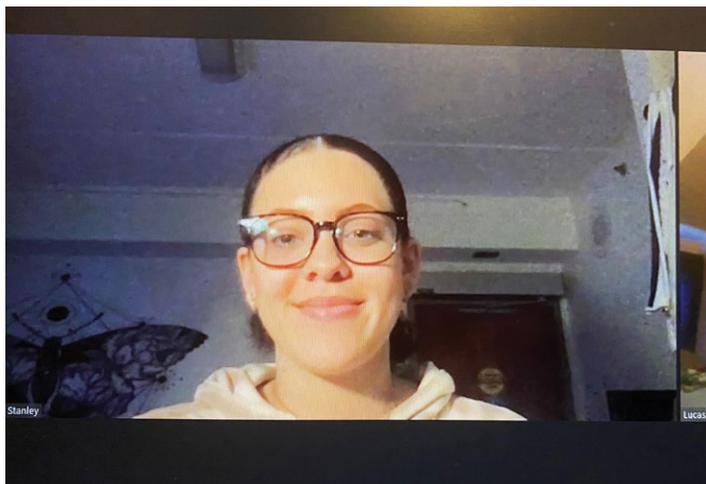
They do appreciate the university’s efforts to keep them safe during their time on campus, but it has resulted in a different student life for them to see and experience. They have no idea what the normal experience is like, and if it will return this fall, but they want to experience this normal campus life for themselves.

“I would want the experience, but I don’t want to waste money.” Rozio said.

Freshmen have come to CCSU to get the full college experience, but Covid has robbed them of one of their most important years. They will continue to make the most out of the situation but hope for it to change by the time their freshman year ends. ■



Oliwia Rozio talks about her life as a freshman over Zoom. (Credit: Lucas Pauluk)



Bria Stanley talks about living on campus over Zoom from her dorm room. (Credit: Lucas Pauluk)

Lucas Pauluk is a junior journalism major from West Hartford.

Overcoming Fear and Obstacles to Teach During The Pandemic

By Molly Ingram

Megan Sherry had spent the beginning of March 2020 worried about catching the COVID-19 virus. Sherry, an English teacher at Naugatuck High School, feared she would spread the virus to her young children or become deathly ill herself.

“Initially my biggest fear was the disease itself,” Sherry said.

These fears, however, quickly shifted from her own health to the mental health of her students.

“As I’ve gotten to know that I have taken the proper safety precautions, I am most concerned about the social emotional well-being of children being kept at home, some of them not at safe homes, this whole time,” Sherry said.

Teachers have always shouldered far more responsibility than their job description suggests. Their roles as mental health experts, mentors, and advocates intensified during the pandemic. Committed to providing their students quality education through video chat and emotional support through email, teachers added another title to their resume in Spring 2020: essential worker.

Full distance learning

Teachers at the beginning of the pandemic, like the rest of the world, were not prepared for what the quarantine would require of them.

“In the spring, it was basically creating lessons, grading, and emailing,” Shelton High School History teacher Catherine Burgholzer said. “Lots of emailing. It was not until November of 2020 that we

had received training and the tools to live stream. So much of my work in the Spring was creating online content.”

As restrictions began to ease, schools were slowly allowed to reopen for in-person learning in September 2020. However, while teachers were working with smaller



Burgholzer spends most of her time on Google Classroom answering messages from students, a website that she became proficient in during quarantine. (Credit: Molly Ingram)

in-person classes, they at the same time were responsible for their at-home learners.

“It took a lot of practice to get used to teaching students virtually at the same time as teaching students in the room,” Sherry said. “I have to make all lessons fully virtual and then interact with kids in the room and at home at the same time, which keeps me tied to my desk, which I don’t like. It’s not a great teaching practice, but it’s the only way to do it.”

In addition to the uncertainties about

shifting to online learning, teachers were also dealing with their own fears about Covid, since they were asked to return to the classroom before vaccines were available.

In the school district that Sherry teaches in, 50% of families are low income. The entire school receives free lunch, and parents of students often work long hours to make ends meet.

“Many students are left either unattended all day while their parents work, or in situations that are overcrowded,” Sherry said. “There are often no quiet places for them to work, and sometimes the adult supervision is not the most responsible.”

Teachers understood that many of their students were now responsible for helping their younger siblings with distance learning or taking care of older family members.

“[My biggest fear was] students’ mental health,” Burgholzer said, and “not adding to kids’ existing stress.”

In a profession that relies on human connection and interaction, distance learning was far from ideal. Conversations with students between classes, informal discussions during class, and schoolwide events were no longer available to strengthen the relationship between students and their teachers.

Karen Giordano, a Spanish teacher at Shelton High School and the head of the language department, worried that her students were struggling to understand the material offered online and, at the same time, often unwilling to ask for help.

“[I worried] that my students were not asking for help when they needed it, whether it be for class work or mental health issues, and they were struggling behind a computer screen without speaking up,” Giordano said. “In class in the past, I have been able to tell when students needed more help, but now it is harder to tell the difference between when they are understanding the material and when they are clicking the right keys to just get by.”

In addition to coping with a new normal, students were also facing a changing America. Many teachers attempted to create safe spaces for their students to process the horrific displays of police brutality that the nation grappled with in June 2020 and during the entire year.

“After the Black Lives Matter events in June, I found my students really needed a venue to ask questions and express concerns,” Burgholzer said. “In so many ways, their world was turned upside down and they did not know how to process it all.”

Coping with a rapidly changing environment was difficult for students and teachers.

“As a teacher, we have so much responsibility for so many aspects of students’ lives, whether we want it or not,” Sherry said. “Not only was it important to get all students to adapt to online learning, it was important to check in with them and ensure that they were doing well, as well as maintain a sense of optimism and enthusiasm despite any of our personal worries. I ended up revamping my entire curriculum to make it a lot more reflective and relevant for that time.”

Changing the curriculum included new material, mainly shorter texts that students had an easier time reading on their own.

“We got rid of a lot of classic texts this year because we knew students would not read them on their own,” Sherry said. “For example, I usually teach ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘Of Mice and Men,’ but a low-level ninth grade student is not going to read that on their own at home, and it is too hard to hold those discussions when half the class is in the room and half the



Burgholzer has a daughter in kindergarten who often likes to say hello to her mom’s students on video chat. It was difficult for Burgholzer to keep her daughter entertained while also teaching her own classes. (Credit: Molly Ingram)

class is online. So I ended up revamping my lessons to have a lot more short stories, and the novels were choices and independent reading. This gives students a lot more engagement.”

In the early weeks of isolation due to the pandemic, some students lost their motivation to complete assignments. There was only so much that teachers could do to keep their students engaged through a screen.

“Many kids went MIA in April,” Burgholzer said. “Didn’t complete assignments, attend meets, or complete attendance forms. I often worried about these kids.”

Hybrid learning

Burgholzer said that getting to know her students without being in the classroom was difficult. Not seeing students in person consistently, paired with restrictions on how many kids could be in the classroom at once, made bonding more difficult.

Sherry had an easier time building virtual connections with her students.

“I don’t think [connection was an issue]

because I work really hard to make sure that I get to know my students, but I am an English teacher so I think that helps,” Sherry said. “Our entire year is about empathy and identity, so we focus a lot on who we are. However, I will say that in order to get to know students, it took a lot longer than it normally does, and the sense of class community is definitely different when no one is in the room at the same time.”

Giordano said that she is used to having classes that grow into families, and this was difficult to achieve through a screen.

“I am used to having close-knit classes, and having some students completely virtual while others were in person was definitely difficult,” Giordano said. “We were still able to have fun classes, but it just wasn’t the same as when we could all be in the classroom together.”

The difficulties of distance learning were vast.

“[The most difficult aspects of distance learning are] the inconsistency in schedules and who is in person, hybrid, or full distance learning, the lack of engagement



Burgholzer teaches from home on her computer. Without access to her classroom and students, she realized her job was much harder. (Credit: Molly Ingram)

with at-home learners, creating meaningful relationships with students and not being able to do the fun things in school,” Burgholzer said.

Another difficult aspect of working from home is providing childcare for their own children while teachers were live-teaching through video chat.

“The most difficult part is that I am also a mom,” Sherry said. “I have two boys, in kindergarten and third grade, and a lot of times, they were doing virtual learning while I was teaching at the same time. Not only is it very difficult to get a kindergartner to do online work, it’s near impossible to do that while also running my own live classes the same time. I feel like working parents, especially working teachers, were very neglected during this pandemic and it has really taken a toll on me.”

Sherry says that the little time she used

to have to herself has now been replaced with preparing material for two lessons instead of one or helping her own children with their work. Long nights and early mornings have caused her to get fewer hours of sleep than she thought she could function on.

The road to normalcy

A good day of distance learning looks far different from what constituted a good day of school pre-pandemic. While a successful day in 2019 may have included a field trip, guest speaker, or hands-on activity, it can now be defined by something as simple as full class attendance.

“The best day of distance/hybrid teaching is when all of my students are engaged, talking, and involved just like they normally would be if we were all in the room together,” Sherry said.

Many teachers received a crash course in online instruction at the start of the

“I teach because I love kids.”

pandemic. In addition to providing a quality learning experience for their students, they provided emotional support and guidance throughout a particularly hard year.

With the end in sight, teachers can now reflect on what they have learned during distance learning.

“I teach because I love kids,” Burgholzer said. “When I don’t have access to them, my job is so much harder.”

Giordano said she has developed a newfound appreciation for in-person teaching.

“I have learned that my job is so much harder when I can’t interact with my students on a daily basis,” Giordano said. “As a language teacher, it is important to bring a lot of culture into the classroom, and that is so much harder to do virtually. Holidays like Cinco De Mayo and Day of the Dead are usually exciting learning opportunities and celebrations in Spanish class, but we haven’t been able to celebrate them like we used to. The fun parts of school that make kids excited to learn have been removed, and it made me realize that I took in-person learning for granted.”

For Sherry, learning about virtual instruction has been a benefit of distance learning.

“I have learned that I am very good at teaching virtually, and I am also really good at making my lessons relevant to my students,” Sherry said. “I have had a lot of great feedback from the new curriculum I’ve been doing this year. I feel like it’s very engaging, relevant, and timely. I also have learned that I am going to persevere no matter what, and that I still want to be a teacher even after all this.” ■

Molly Ingram, a senior political science major with minors in psychological sciences and journalism, is from Shelton.

A Day in the Life of Elementary School Remote Learning

Photo Essay by Amber Martinez



Cynthia Montalvo, Middletown, Connecticut, homeschools her daughter Ava Martinez during a pandemic.



PANDEMIC LEAVES GAPS IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

By Samantha Bender

In March 2020, when sixth grader Ashley and fourth grader Samantha Stark had to make the abrupt switch to remote learning due to the pandemic, it was hard for them to adapt quickly.

“When I first heard about the coronavirus and I had to do all-online school I was actually enjoying myself. I thought ‘oh yeah I can go in my room, I can relax and just go on Zoom calls and I’d be fine’ and it wasn’t that at all,” Ashley said. “It was actually hard, intense, and it was challenging for me.”

Learning from home made it difficult for Samantha to even ask a classmate for a highlighter, a simple favor that she had the luxury of doing just days before her school shutdown.

“In third grade, [before the pandemic], we would do a lot of group work, we would be sharing materials,” Samantha said. “We would be in groups instead of all spaced out with our desks.”

Ashley also struggled with not being in direct contact with her teacher and classmates. While in-person learning makes it easier to accommodate extra

“Having the ability to work through peer conflicts, understanding how different people think, feel, operate, it’s just not the same being home.”

personalized instruction, she particularly struggles with math and found it difficult to receive the help she needed.

“When I had to be online, I couldn’t get the extra help with my math work, so my mom had to help me,” Ashley said. “So she had to do an extra load on top of [all that she already does].”

When Governor Ned Lamont ordered



Mother Dawn Stark assists her daughter Samantha with math homework. (Credit: Samantha Bender)

all Connecticut schools closed for the remainder of the month in mid-March of 2020, in response to the growing number of confirmed Covid cases in the state, many school districts were left ill-prepared to teach students remotely. The Stark family, along with many others across the country and around the world, thought it

might be a short break. But it turned into distance learning for the remainder of the academic year for many districts. This has educators wondering what learning, if any, students have lost in the midst of the pandemic.

Many schools districts across the state are finding that while most schools responded swiftly and efficiently when

switching to virtual learning, remote learning itself is a burden on families, especially families with working parents or parents who are essential workers.

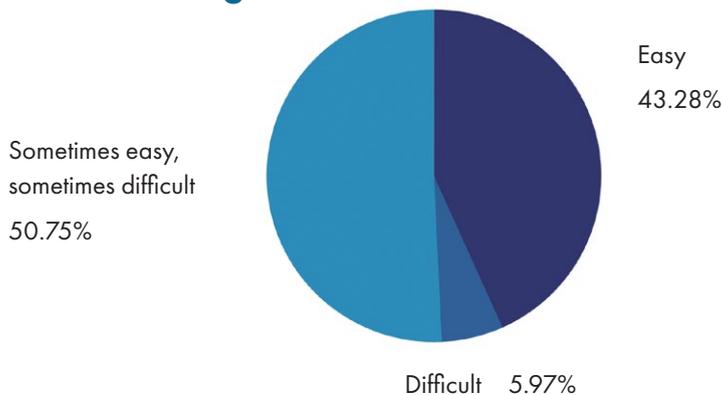
Student distance learning surveys conducted in May of 2020 by Bethany Community School show that 47.76% of its students sometimes needed help with their assignments from an adult at home; 16.42% frequently needed help. Of those students, 50.75% felt that work during distance learning was sometimes easy and sometimes difficult.

“My house became school central so forget about my dining room and kitchen table being able to be used for anything else but school. But you do what you’ve got to do,” Dawn Stark, the mother of Ashley and Samantha, recalls.

Bethany Community School’s ongoing surveys of students, family, and staff found that 55% of students felt lonely while distance learning, with 9% of those students feeling lonely almost all of the time.

Emily Banach, a social worker at Rock Hill Elementary School in Wallingford, has

How manageable has the work been during distance learning?



Source: Bethany Community School Distance Learning Survey Student Results, May 2020

found that the social and academic effects of remote learning on elementary school students have been quite significant.

Banach said that elementary school years are crucial for both academic rigor and becoming socially connected. While working throughout the pandemic, Banach has found that, academically, it has been difficult to offer the curriculum in a way that allows elementary school students to easily absorb the knowledge.

“We all had a learning curve when we went home as did our students, so we have a lost a little bit of time,” Banach said. “We are trying very hard now with lots of different tiered intervention services to make sure all of our students are closing gaps.”

Banach has also found that the lack of social connection is a clear barrier when students are learning from home because, even if students live in households filled with siblings and other people, nothing quite compares to being in a classroom of 20, or sometimes more, students around the same age.

“Having the ability to work through peer conflicts, understanding how different people think, feel, operate, it’s just not the same being home. So as the social worker, I’m seeing difficulty for kids coming back that haven’t been in a classroom with that peer interaction,” Banach said.

“It’s like riding a bike. Once you get back you’re going to be able to do it. Some [students] might need a little bit more direct instruction in it than others but when we don’t ride the bike it becomes hard. Some of our students have now been gone for a long time and are going to need ongoing support as they transition back. Others may need less support, but no matter how socially savvy you are, and how

good your social skills are, it’s hard. Kids have been out of practice. We all have been out of practice.”

The Stark family owns their own business, allowing Dawn the luxury to stay at home to assist her daughters while they learned remotely last year. Despite this, she found it difficult to provide them both with the same level of attention, even though she tried her best to stay on top of their due dates and assignments.

“They were not old enough to really be independent workers so I focused more on working with Sammy who is my younger one because she was in third grade and she needed a lot of extra help,” Stark said. “But doing that, it meant Ashley, who was in fifth grade when it started, was working more independently. Even in fifth grade I felt like it was a little bit of a struggle to have her give her best effort when she was just staring at a screen all day. I think it’s really hard for anybody to learn from a screen all day.”

Banach said it is still too early in terms of academics to tell what students have lost and what they can make up. While students were faced with high levels of stress, she said most rose to the occasion, gaining skills in addition to their academics that they most likely wouldn’t have, had the pandemic not happened.

“We are tracking closely our students, especially students who are struggling, but we need a little bit more longitudinal time to understand [whether] those gaps are going to be able to be closed that have formed because of our shutdown,” Banach said.

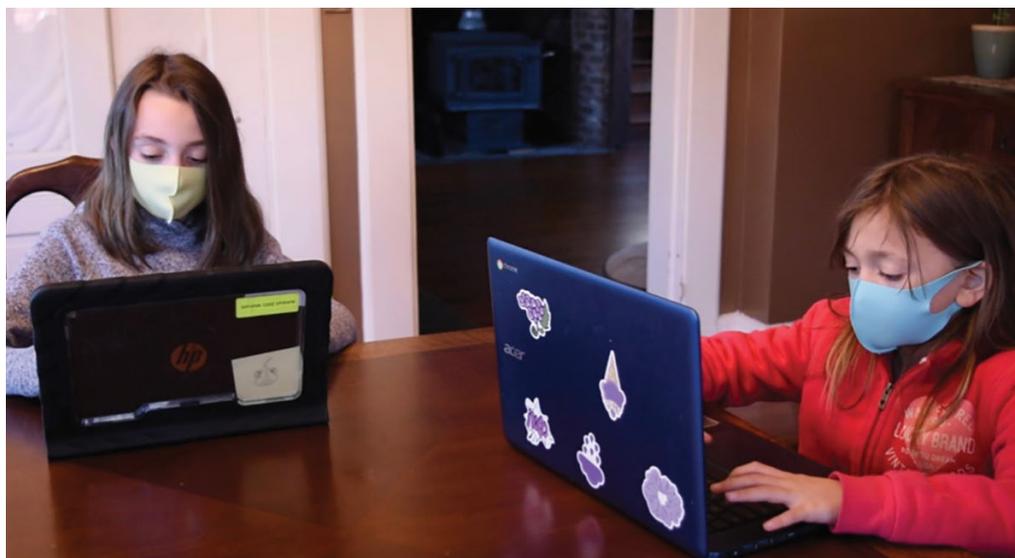
Banach said schools will have to continue to make sure that students, during the pandemic, received the same benefits from the curriculum as their predecessors. Still, she believes students will still be able to meet those goals at the same level they would have pre-Covid.

The Stark family is also focused on the positive.

“[This past year] has been hugely different, but I don’t view it at all as to what we lost,” Stark said.

“I feel like we became much closer. We started to do family fun nights and we started to open up and talk and everyone really talked about what they were afraid of and what they were great with and we were there for each other. I just think in everything in life there’s a silver lining and there were a lot of silver linings with this. As bad as it was, there were a huge amount of silver linings so if we all focus in on that, it wasn’t such a bad year.” ■

Samantha Bender, from Bristol, is a 2021 graduate with a BA in journalism.



From left to right: Sixth grader Ashley Stark and fourth grader Samantha Stark do homework from their computers while distance learning. (Credit: Samantha Bender)

The Covid Crafter

By Madison Murphy



Sharon Graham works on a new felt project. (Credit: Madison Murphy)

Crafting became an essential activity during the pandemic for Annelise Boulay, 20, a cookie decorator from Stafford Springs, Connecticut. “Baking has helped me find a purpose. While being out of work, I needed to find a way to keep myself entertained,” she said. Sharon Graham, 38, another independent crafter from Westhampton, Massachusetts, developed her own crafting business last spring, boosting her income. Graham is the owner of Little Loaf Designs on Etsy.com, an online marketplace, where she sells crafts such as crocheted hats, can koozies and felt animals.

They are among the many who turned to crafting during the pandemic. While some turned it into a business, some used it to keep themselves busy, and for many it became an essential part of maintaining their mental wellness. For all of those reasons, Covid crafting clearly was a trend, and that increased sales at businesses like Michaels, a national chain of art and craft supply stores, which experienced a 353 percent increase in online sales during the pandemic, according to the publication Modern Retail. Likewise, Brother,

which sells sewing machines, saw sales increase 170 percent during the early months of the pandemic, the publication reports. And when it became hard to keep sewing machines on the shelf, Brother introduced a new electronic cutting machine aimed at younger Covid crafters, which immediately became popular. And Joann, which sells sewing and crafting supplies, saw mask supplies jump 300 to 400 percent, according to Modern Retail.

And customers like Boulay and Graham were happy to keep companies like that busy as they pursued their Covid crafting.

Boulay said her goal was to find a hobby that would help ease her anxiety.

“I have struggled with major anxiety for a few years now. Cookie decorating is a way for me to be creative while being able to focus myself on something. My anxiety gets worse when I’m bored and have nothing to do.” She said the “stay safe, stay home” order in the early months of the pandemic left her with so much free time that it fueled her anxiety.

She was among many who suffered from anxiety and depression during the pandemic. The Kaiser Family Foundation reported results from a poll in the spring of 2020 that showed nearly half of Americans felt that the pandemic had negatively affected their mental health. Berkeley Wellness, an online publication that reports on wellness trends, says “the rhythmic, repetitive movements and focused attention required of certain crafts seem to produce a calming effect akin to meditation.”

Graham says that crafting definitely helped her deal with the stresses created by the pandemic.

Graham, who works a full-time job as a graphic designer from her home, turned to crafting in her free time. She also has used her hobby to help bring in a little extra money, using Etsy.com to sell all of her creations. Etsy allows people to place orders online after viewing the products online and have them shipped directly to the customer’s home. That means there is no need for the crafter to deal with a retailer, or have any physical contact with customers, eliminating worries about customers who struggle with the six-foot rule and mask mandates.



New designs of can koozies handmade by Graham. (Courtesy of Sharon Graham)

According to Etsy.com, one of the most popular sites for crafters, the platform had about 4.4 million active sellers by the end of 2020, compared to estimated 2.7 million sellers in 2019.

There are other options for crafters as well, including eBay, Artfire, Amazon Handmade, eCrater, and more. Depending on the site, there may be a small fee to sell items, but some sites provide this service for free.

As nice as it is that her hobby brings in some income, Graham, like Bouley, also appreciates that crafting helped her get through the past 16 months.

“Crafting has helped my mental health by allowing me to be creative. I also use it as a distraction,” she said. ■

*I love
the reactions
my creations get
out of people. I love
brightening up
someone’s day.*

Madison Murphy is a 2021 journalism graduate from Stafford Springs.



LIGHTS OUT

Recovery Remains Elusive For Some Arts Organizations

By Zach Bussell

The Warner Theatre in Torrington is one of the crown jewels of the entertainment scene in the Northwest Corner of Connecticut. Built in 1931 as a movie palace, it is known among theatre aficionados as one of Connecticut's most beautiful venues.

But, like many performing arts venues in the state and nationwide, it has been riding out the pandemic on limited funding, said Rufus de Rham, the executive director of the theatre. "We do have a strong, dedicated core of local supporters who have helped us get to this point and we're extremely thankful for them," he said. "We have taken advantage of some of the loans we have received from the government to keep the place up, but we're still looking at a very long road to recovery here."

Almost all employees of The Warner were laid off during the pandemic, de Rham said. He estimates The Warner's revenue loss as of April 2021 to be as much as \$2 million.

"The Warner might not be as big as the Bushnell [in Hartford]," de Rham said. "But we serve a similar function. We just serve it for the entire Northwest Corner."

All across the state, arts organizations have been hit not only by financial losses, but also by closures of surrounding businesses. And, unlike some venues in larger cities that get help from other attractions when it comes to spurring

business, venues in smaller communities are often the only economic drivers for nearby establishments.

Just after The Warner shut down for the pandemic, Sliders Grill & Bar, a popular sports bar chain next door, closed permanently.

"So many of our downtown restaurants and evening activities rely on the arts community," Torrington Mayor Elinor Carbone said. "A lot of these people who attend shows will go to a bar or restaurant before or after a show and enjoy a cocktail or eat a meal, but that isn't happening right now."

As a result, downtown Torrington has been much quieter than usual.

"In a sense, the pandemic has hit The Warner twice," Carbone said. "It hit them in the sense that people aren't keeping up their habits or behavior. People who regularly attend shows usually fall into a routine, and we're worried if any of those habits change, it will be hard to kick-start them back up again. It has also hit them in the sense that when Sliders closed, they lost a big source of revenue because the rent that was being paid to The Warner for that space was no longer coming in."

Carbone said she was also worried people might not return to Torrington when The Warner and surrounding businesses reopen.

This is not the first time the theatre has struggled. In the 1960s, as television soared in popularity, attendance plummeted at The Warner. The theatre was eventually closed in 1981, and slated for demolition the next year. It was resurrected, but it would close its doors again, nearly 30 years later during the pandemic.

“The Warner isn’t just about its performances. It’s also about graduation ceremonies for our local high schools,” she said. “It’s the biggest indoor venue around that can accommodate them, and opportunities for families to come together and celebrate have been lost because of what’s going on, and it’s sad.”

Just behind The Warner, the Nutmeg Conservatory, a professional ballet school that used The Warner’s stage for rehearsals and shows, turned to livestreaming its performances during the pandemic.

“We tried to perform on stage at The Warner, but that didn’t work because they understandably didn’t feel comfortable and we couldn’t bring in an audience because that would be too expensive, so that was when we decided to do livestreams from our pretty studio,” said Victoria Mazzarelli, artistic director at the Nutmeg.

After The Warner closed, Mazzarelli said Main Street fell silent and no new businesses arrived to the town. The once bright nightlife seemed to have vanished.

In the scenic small town of Norfolk, the home of Infinity Music Hall and Bistro, the situation isn’t much better.

Infinity Hall was built in 1883 as an opera house, barbershop, and saloon. It was later turned into a venue for live musical performances featuring local and national artists. It also offered dining.

Matthew Riiska, the first selectman of Norfolk, wants Infinity to remain viable.

“We’re concerned about Infinity because we really don’t want to lose them,” he said. “It’s difficult for all of us and I know it’s a hardship for them. I know going forward it’s going to be difficult for them to claw back and get back on their feet.”

Riiska said he was concerned about Infinity Hall’s finances and thought about possible ways to operate the venue with restrictions in place.

“We want Infinity to survive,” he said. “They are a big part of the community, and we’re not a big town to begin with, so we really need them.”

Other venues found ways to adapt, at least in part, during the pandemic. Simsbury Meadows Performing Arts Center is an outdoor stage, built in 2005, for concerts, recitals, and community gatherings.

Linda Schofield, chairperson of Simsbury Meadows, said an estimated 80% of its annual income has been lost due to the pandemic. A \$24,000 federal loan helped, and she has used the stage to bring the community together during a tough time.

“We decided to try and stay relevant in our community and help individuals and businesses by treating our facility as a resource,” she said. “Since we’re an outdoor venue, that gave us an advantage over indoor facilities in Covid because indoor facilities aren’t as safe.”

Schofield held movie nights, and invited gyms and yoga studios to safely hold socially-distanced sessions on the stage.

“We were able to do things that I think a much larger venue just wouldn’t be inclined to do,” she said.

Still, Simsbury First Selectman Eric Wellman said he misses the excitement and allure of live performances in the small town.

“It’s something so many of our residents look forward to every year,” he said. “Not having these concerts and other events has been a huge loss for them.”

Wellman said he was impressed at how Simsbury Meadows shifted to hosting smaller events like high school graduations and dance recitals.

“Obviously [the pandemic] was painful to everyone’s budget, but there was still that small silver lining,” he said. ■



The Warner Theatre’s troubles also affected other businesses in downtown Torrington, where it is located. (Credit: Zach Bussell)



Zach Bussell is a junior journalism major from New Hartford.

Retail Workers Don't Want You to Forget That We're Still in a Pandemic

By Abigail Murillo

When Michelle Richards starts her eight-hour shift in a department store at Buckland Hills Mall, it is peaceful as she disinfects the cash registers and her work area before the store opens. But as the hours pass, there are one, two, three, sometimes as many as eight customers in line. They are not six feet apart. Some wear masks under their noses. They sit on the tables where the merchandise is supposed to be, careless.

But this is nothing new, it's just a new normal at a time when it shouldn't be.

The bright fluorescent lights and marble floors of the spacious retail stores in the mall have been a welcome respite for many, who otherwise might be confined at home with the four walls closing in around them. But many of those who are at the mall, moving around shoulder-to-shoulder, act as if the COVID-19 pandemic never happened. Retail workers at these stores have been trying to accommodate their company's new policies in order to keep everyone safe during these times. But light blue masks, transparent gloves, and plexiglass shields are not enough to protect the working associates. In order to be able to give great customer service, workers have to compromise their own safety.

Retail workers have been on the frontlines since the beginning of the pandemic, but they are not considered essential workers like healthcare workers, or even workers in pharmacies, public transit, grocery stores, and the food service industry. A year ago, Gov. Ned Lamont allowed retail and large malls in Connecticut to reopen. Since then, many workers have slowly started going back to their jobs, but some haven't. Not only are retail stores understaffed, but their workers are underappreciated.

The typical retail worker makes the state's \$12 minimum wage. Some workers who have worked at their company for many years get a raise, but not by that much. During the pandemic, many retail stores have started to close their businesses, shorten their business hours, and have cut most of their staff.

"Retail associates like me are exposed to many people on a daily basis," Richards said. "Some are from different cities in Connecticut, or people from other states too. This is not just an issue because of the amount of clientele that is coming in and out of the store, but because we have the bare minimum to keep us safe."

One day, a blonde-haired woman, wearing blue jeans with a green long sleeve sweater, walked to the cash register where Richards was standing. Richards greeted the customer with a smile as the customer put a pile of meticulously selected clothing on the counter. The conversation was light and natural.

And then the store coupon that the customer thought would work, didn't.

Her smile vanished. Suddenly, she leaned over the counter and around the so-called "plexiglass shield" that is actually plastic.

She told Richards to check again.

She didn't understand why it wasn't working. She started to lean closer, and this time she was too close. Richards started to back up and keep her distance.

"Ma'am I am going to have to ask you to stay on the other side of the plexiglass," Richards said. "Please, stand where the line of red tape is on the floor or I'm going to have to call my superior and security."

The customer's eyes, initially welcoming, glared angrily at Richards. It looked like the customer's jaw was clenched under her



Michelle Richards at her retail store in Buckland Hills Mall, Manchester, Connecticut. (Credit: Abigail Murillo)

mask. Her face was red and hot. She gradually raised her voice to call the manager and say, “You’re a bitch!”

After the altercation with the customer, Richards, 38, who has worked at the retail store for three years as a part-time worker with adjustable hours, started wiping the sweat off of her forehead while she inhaled and exhaled deeply.

“We are just trying to make a living like everybody else especially during these times,” she said, visibly shaken. “I want to be able to help out the customers that we have walking through those doors to the best of my ability, but it can take a lot out of you.”

I watched Richards as her co-worker.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we did not work for months and we had to file for unemployment. After a few months, management called us in to work. We jumped at the opportunity to start working again. But we then had to engage in a constant battle, trying to prioritize our health while still doing our jobs. Management, when asked, did not want to speak on the matter. Richards and management asked that the specific retail store at Buckland Hills Mall in Manchester not be named.

Safety regulations require that customer service windows and cash registers lanes use physical barriers to separate retail workers from members of the general public. Stores must follow protocols set by the state, and provide supplies to disinfect frequently touched surfaces in workspaces and public-facing areas. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has encouraged employers to consider options for increasing in-store pickup or delivery to minimize the number of customers shopping in store facilities

The day after the upsetting confrontation with the woman, Richards was working in the curtain department when a short woman with black hair approached her to check out her items. “Are you in our rewards program?” Richards asked. “Did you find everything that you were looking for today?” Richards continued. There was no response from the customer. The woman instead was talking to one of her friends on her phone through FaceTime. Normally, this wouldn’t be an issue. This happens all the time and the associate has to be patient. But after a few minutes, the woman slowly started to remove her mask until it was hanging off of her ear.

As the woman walked closer to her, Richards kept stepping back and repeating the safety regulations mandated for the store. The customer, who had all of her items on the counter, grew

Buckland Hills Mall is eerily quiet without customers. The shopping center closed its doors when the pandemic started in 2020. (Credit: Abigail Murillo)



“ I want to be able to help out the customers that we have walking through those doors to the best of my ability but it can take a lot out of you.”

angry and, suddenly, threw all of the clothes on the floor. She gave Richards a dirty look, turned, and walked out of the store.

“I think that the reason that some people act erratically is because they want things to go back to the way they were before the coronavirus pandemic, but there are regulations in place for a reason,” Richards said. “You don’t have to like the masks, but it’s for everyone’s well-being.”

Some workers have pushed back and talked to the management at the retail store to increase safety

protocols by having signs that tell people to maintain a six feet distance. Workers have also asked to have managers on rotation and be vigilant around customers and to have specific training on how to deal with situations where customers refuse to follow the company’s guidelines.

“I already wear two masks at work, social distance, I maintain my department clean, I want to do everything right because I have four kids at home that I have to think about as well and I just wish people would understand that,” Richards said. ■

Abigail Murillo is a senior journalism major from East Hartford.

ONLINE DATING

a pandemic love story

By Tychell Pinckney-Nickson

Excited and anxious, Estefani Pagan walks into The Place 2 Be in Hartford. As she waits to meet someone, loud RnB music plays on the speakers above the bar. The waitresses and waiters assume that the person Pagan is waiting for is another woman, maybe a friend, but in fact Pagan is waiting for someone she met on Facebook Dating who is now her boyfriend. They met during the pandemic and got together for the first time in person on the 4th of July in 2020. They have agreed to be interviewed about what it's like to meet someone and start dating during a pandemic.

Pagan fiddles with her phone and constantly looks out toward the entrance as she waits. Shortly after the food and drinks touch the table, her boyfriend Joseph Levine arrives. Relief showers Pagan as Levine walks toward her. After greeting everyone, he sits down and orders a drink. In the before-times, all of these things--meeting someone, getting to know them, deciding to become a couple--would be wonderful but perhaps expected for young adults like Pagan and Levine. But, during a pandemic, it's somewhat remarkable. While many online dating sites reported significant increases in the numbers of people trying online dating during the pandemic, some experts have said that the number of people who actually successfully connected was not as high, leaving many feeling more isolated than ever.

For those who were able to connect, the pandemic created a wide variety of obstacles when it came to getting to know each other. Take, for example, the place that most couples choose for first dates, restaurants. During the pandemic, some had to close and some never re-opened. Fortunately, now that restrictions are easing, they are once more a good place to meet someone.

But there are still potential obstacles. Guests must wear a mask when enter-

ing a restaurant, which can be a barrier to getting to know someone. But then diners can remove their mask once they are seated at a table. Going out during Covid is risky, but dining at a restaurant remains an intimate way to enjoy time together.

Pagan and Levine were among the millions who sought love during the pandemic. Increasingly, that means finding love online, and for Pagan and Levine that meant Facebook Dating. The app first launched in 2018 and is one of the newer entries in the crowded field of online dating. The service is offered in 20 countries, including Peru, Singapore, Canada, Mexico, and Thailand. It arrived in the U.S. in 2019.

Pagan's aunt encouraged her to get the app and even set up her dating profile. Pagan, who is originally from Peru but currently living with her aunt and cousins in Manchester, was just getting over a relationship.

"I wasn't really thinking about dating," said Pagan, who was 25 at the time.

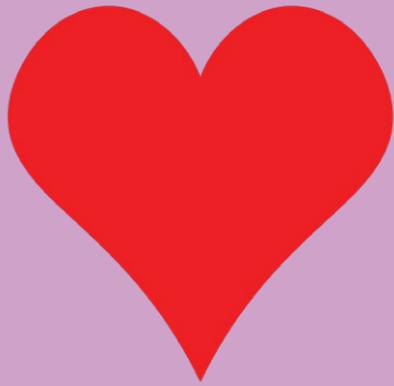
In the midst of the pandemic, many people were making financial security and health their priorities. As Pagan explored the Facebook app, she made use of it in a different way, "I just decided to use it to practice English, because I was actually starting [to learn] English. So, it was kind of a way for me to practice."

Levine joined the dating app to meet friends and potentially find a significant other by chatting. He wasn't able to find anyone on Facebook Dating until he came across Estefani Pagan's profile. "To me, the whole dating apps is not taken seriously, at all, you know for a while. And then I [found] Stefi, and I forgot about everything else," he said.

Within a couple clicks, a user can create a profile easily if they already have a Facebook account. There are other options. Singles willing to pay for services to find a partner can try sites such as eHarmony and Match.com which also experienced surges in usage during the pandemic. The Dating Sites Review



Joseph Levine poses for a photo shoot with his girlfriend Estefani Pagan at Wickham Park in Manchester, Connecticut, in April 2021. (Credit:Tychell Pinckney-Nickson)



“You definitely can meet someone...”

on eHarmony states that a study showed a 22% increase in registrations following in late September as restrictions and lockdowns were in effect nationwide. eHarmony’s registration from January to May saw a 92% increase in sign-ups.

As of March, daily active users on Match.com were 24.8%, and 43.8% of monthly active users. For Match Group’s Q2, which also includes free apps like Tinder, 2020 results show an 11% increase in profits. Single people who are in college or do not have the extra funds can still sign up for many apps that provide similar services, but for free.

Older dating apps are in active use as well. One in particular is Hinge, where Amber Reynolds, 32, and Katz Dos Santos met. Hinge was originally tailored to a casual dating audience, but in the past few years it has been marketed as shifting toward relationships.

“My initial thought was that I’ve used other dating apps in the past, including Hinge, and I liked the quality (type) of guys on this app better than others. They seemed to be more mature and interested in a relationship rather than just a hook-up,” Reynolds points out. She lives in Manchester, while Dos Santos resides in Framingham, Massachusetts. They manage to see one another twice a month, and they do “regular couple stuff, watch movies, get food, video games, and take the dog for a walk,” says Reynolds.

One challenge that they faced during the pandemic “is the limited amount of going-out options,” said Reynolds.



(Credit: Tychell Pinckney-Nickson)



(Credit: Tychell Pinckney-Nickson)

“We went to Dave and Buster’s recently, now that more people have gotten vaccinated, but before that, we mostly just hung out at home.” Before the vaccine was confirmed as being safe and effective, and when vaccinations were only available to the elderly, there weren’t as many safe options for couples to enjoy a night out.

Online dating has always been accompanied by concerns about safety. The pandemic, and the prospect of giving or getting a deadly disease from an otherwise fun date, added to the list of concerns.

Covid required precautions that often would prevent couples from seeing each other for long periods of time. Pagan and Levine saw each other once every other week, at most. The lockdowns and curfew mandates limited options. There were times when people couldn’t even walk outside past nightfall without the police questioning them, so Amber and Dos Santos would have difficulty walking the dog past a certain time. With vaccines becoming accessible to every adult recently, the couples hope for more together time. ■

Tychell Pinckney-Nickson is a senior journalism major from Manchester.



Letter From The Sunshine State

By Mauriah Johnson

When is the best time to move? During a pandemic. Where is the best place to go? Orlando. There is nothing quite like living in a state where 70 percent of the people remain unvaccinated, despite wide availability of vaccines. Let us take a tour.

Business is booming.

Orlando monuments like Universal Studios Florida are still reaching maximum pandemic capacity before noon on a Monday. Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is providing discounted tickets including food packages to keep the ball rolling, and Disney World tickets are still close to a whopping \$200.

“I needed something different, something that would bring some shine to my clouded northern life. So, why not the Sunshine State?” said Sadie Rodriguez, who picked up her life from Connecticut and moved to Fort Myers, Florida in the middle of the pandemic.

“I’ve gone through depression and anxiety through this time [the pandemic], but I changed my mindset and did something I would never do—I found joy in a global pandemic,” Rodriguez continued.

There is something quite special about looking outside your window and having the sun beam on your face and endless tans or sunburns, depending on your heat preference.

According to the Wall Street Journal, since COVID-19 hit hard in April of 2020, the population of Florida was still expected to grow by 1.38% or 297,851 people by April of this year—prompting “some out-of-staters to buy homes in Florida.”

I’m in that percentile, moving from New Haven to the Sunshine State in the middle of a pandemic while my college semester turned online. I spot at least three Connecticut license plates throughout the day. Northern drivers are always easy to notice because we use our turn signals.

There’s even one that lives in my apartment complex, someone who drives a small two-door red Fiat that always looks like a free parking space when you loop around the corner because of how minute it is.

Serious adjustments had to be made when it came to the mask mandates in Florida. I began to get into the groove of running back to my car to grab my mask in Connecticut because I would not be able to buy groceries without it. Over 1,000 miles away in Kissimmee, people were freely walking into Publix breathing in the fresh air that I missed.

It wasn't until October of 2020 that Governor Ron DeSantis declared that officials can require face masks but not enforce them. The order "came on a day when nearly 2,800 people tested positive and 112 deaths were reported in Florida," according to NPR Coronavirus Updates.

In Orlando, officials have enforced mask mandates and even supply them at local stores like Walmart if you walk in without one, but that is not the case for everywhere still.

In Fort Myers, where Rodriguez resides, the infamous Fort Myers beach passed a mask ordinance a few months ago where "masks are required in any public space where social distancing of at least six feet cannot be maintained," as stated in the Fort Myers Beach ordinance.

"That is definitely not followed, no one's wearing masks and surely not social distancing. If you want a social distance, get vaccinated," said Rodriguez.

Toby Ramirez, 49, who moved down to Florida over ten years ago from Connecticut, reveled in the new-found changes and in the rebellion against recommended safety precautions for Covid.

"My husband and I went to Miami for our anniversary during spring break time: the boardwalks, bars, restaurants and beaches were packed with people and no masks. We spent our time sightseeing through our car windows and even having to order room service," said Ramirez.

"It's not the youth that has to worry, it's us older generation," said Maria Reed, 52, originally from Connecticut.

Due to high-blood pressure, Reed was admitted to a hospital for a month fighting off COVID-19, which also tagged along with pneumonia this year.

"I'm still afraid to do normal things, like go to the grocery store, a restaurant and even take a small group photo without my mask on—Covid hit me hard," Reed said.

In Florida, Nyteea, 22, an elementary school teacher who preferred not to give a last name, got vaccinated in April.

"I have asymptomatic kids around me all day, touching things, coming close to me and I know I'll be perfectly fine, but it's about those who might not be that I come in contact with like my grandmother," said Nyteea.

Connecticut has pressed for all educators to get a vaccine; DeSantis issued an executive order opening vaccination eligibility only to K-12 teachers 50 and older.

"Teachers who are younger can go to CVS and they will sign you up, but our [sites] are targeting seniors," DeSantis said at a press conference. "Our view is, if you're 25, you're just at less risk than somebody that's 80. That's just the bottom line."

As of early May, reported cases, tests, and hospitalizations were down in Florida, while deaths continued to climb, according to The New York Times.

All of those interviewed for this story were from Connecticut except Nyteea, the teacher. None of the transplants regret their decision to move here.

"It's still the freedom," said Reed. "We have the choice to decide what we want to do and DeSantis can be thanked for that. Our rules and mandates may be different, but we still make our conscious decisions—I do agree that everyone should wear a mask. But our lives shouldn't completely stop due to Covid."

Rodriguez has also found freedom in Florida.

"There's so much out there for us to still see. I understand precaution but I also understand liberty," said Rodriguez. ■

"I've gone through depression and anxiety through this time, but I changed my mindset and did something I thought I would never do – I found joy in a global pandemic."

Mauriah Johnson is a 2021 journalism graduate from New Haven.

Package Overload

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” -USPS

By Youssef ElSapak



Photos by Youssef ElSapak

Forty-hour work weeks are no more an ordinary thing for the employees at the Enfield Post Office; 55-hour work weeks are more common. Each carrier delivers approximately 100 packages a day in addition to letters and other regular mail. With 36 carriers, they deliver about 3,600 packages a day in Enfield, yet there is always a backup.

Michael Mezzanotte, a 15-year mail carrier at the Enfield post office, said that the past year in the post office is not like any of the previous 14 he has had.

“When people think of the Postal Service they generally think of mail, but you would think we were UPS or Fedex with how many parcels we have had to deliver over the past year,” said Mezzanotte.

Since the pandemic lockdowns, online shopping has become the norm across America and much of the world. With such a high volume of online shopping occurring, the United States Postal Service has been the hub for package delivery.

“We have received and delivered more packages in the past year than we had the past three years I am willing to bet,” said Joe Bromley, Postmaster at the Enfield Post Office, where the accompanying photos were taken. “The amount of parcels we have got due to the amount of people online shopping has been overwhelming at times, a lot of our carriers have been working long hours and even seven days a week. But we have adjusted to the high volume of parcels and became accustomed to the heavy workload.”



Youssef ElSapak is a junior Journalism major from Enfield, where he works in the post office.

How packages get delivered also has changed over the past year. Certain parcels require signatures depending on what is inside. Over the past year, due to safety concerns, postal workers are not allowed to have the customers sign for the package on their scanners. The postal workers have to sign for the customer's order to deliver the packages. Some customers understand the new policy, but others do not feel particularly comfortable with the new way of receiving their packages.

Elizabeth Nardello, who has been an Enfield resident for 16 years, is one of the postal service customers who is not a fan of the new policy for receiving packages.



“I do not see why it is such a big deal for me to scribble my signature for the package. The first time I refused to have the delivery guy sign for me for my package, he refused to give it to me and said he cannot give me my package unless I give consent for signature, and I had to pick it up at the office myself,” said Nardello.

Customers are also frustrated with the amount of time it is taking for their packages to get to them, but, as is the case nationally, even with overtime, there is not enough staff to get all of these packages delivered on time. We all have to adjust to new realities. ■

Photographs by Madison O’Neill

Right: Bailey Murphy draws at home in New Britain, Connecticut, May 2020.

Back Cover: Erica Kulla relaxes on her back porch in New Britain, Connecticut, May 2020.

Both Murphy and Kulla are roommates of O’Neill. She captured the ways each found to cope with quarantine.



For more journalism student work about the pandemic, visit <https://ccsujrnpandemicreport.com/>

