PANDEMIC

 PITTSBURGH

stories of a city in the midst of a global pandemic
A born and bred procrastinator, big projects and me never usually work well — something concerning, given the fact that media curriculum basically only consists of large-scale assignments.

So, when Dr. Dillon offered me the position as editor-in-chief for the 2021 edition of Off the Bluff, I knew I was jumping into a challenge way outside of my comfort zone; one that would test my time management skills more than any other college assignment.

I’ve never had to do a capstone project, but in a way, I view this magazine as the culmination of all I’ve learned as a journalism major at Duquense. From fact-checking to photo editing, to InDesign layout and follow-ups with sources, this issue is the climax of four years of night classes, hour-long interviews and incessant emailing.

The pandemic added quite a unique twist to the journalist grind, and the stories printed on these pages present one-of-a-kind experiences of the people living in this city. These words share the hardships, joy, loss and hope of workers, parents, students, family and friends that all experienced the last year in vastly different ways.

In a sense, journalists are historians — we play an active role in recording history for future generations. This is the only place where these specific stories are recorded, and it’s an honor to have been a storyteller during this unique moment in history.


Making college work during a pandemic has been rough: Fear of exposure; masks; the acrid smell of hand sanitizer; Zoom ... totems of a year we’d just as soon forget.

Journalism students tasked with exploring their city faced additional obstacles: How do you cover a community from afar? How do you collaborate with classmates who are at least six feet and at most hundreds of miles away? How can teacher and students hold collaborative editing sessions over Zoom?

The answer to each question is the same: With great difficulty!

But difficult is not impossible. You just have to work a little harder. And the students in my fall Magazine Journalism class did just that. They found creative ways to identify topics and interview sources. They held each other up with encouragement and feedback. They gave their best when the world seemed to be at its worst.

Pittsburgh’s streets might have looked deserted during 2020, but the essential Pittsburgh spirit — grit and gumption — was alive and humming. And my students found it. 2020 may indeed be a year they’d like to forget, but the stories and images they produced are unforgettable.
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Spring 2021 marks one year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories in this section share the experiences of those within our campus community and how the pandemic year brought challenges, blessings and surprises to their lives.
College in the Age of Covid: Freshman Year

Gillian Fitzgerald

Waking up an hour before class, she changes out of her pajamas and gets dressed for the day. She glances at her makeup, but decides not to waste it. Instead, she goes to eat breakfast to avoid the temptation of crawling back into bed. She then chooses between her desk, the lounge or the library to sit through her Zoom classes at Duquesne — it can be hard to find the best spot to focus on the bright screen staring back at her morning after morning.

Physical Therapy major Gabby DiNucci has gotten used to the monotonous routine Covid has created for her freshman year.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Flashback to senior year of high school when she made her commitment to attend Duquesne. She envisioned football games, concerts, meeting new people every weekend and getting to know her teachers — all of which seem like a lifetime ago.

Flash forward to the end of August driving to campus: It’s the first year of the rest of Gabby’s life. Bottles of hand sanitizer, bed risers and thermometers packed. Orientation leaders with Duquesne University-embossed masks help them take everything up to their rooms. A mini fridge, disinfectant wipes and alcohol deep down in suitcases — rubbing alcohol, that is. Everything the typical college freshman needs, right?

The inner socially-obsessed student in all upperclassmen can’t help but feel for the current first-years. No events, no sports, no parties, nothing. And though coming back to campus may be familiar for some, other students are arriving with fresh eyes, including Gabby.

Gabby, of Pine Richland, says that starting college during a pandemic is not ideal, but she hates the idea of not being here even
more. In any case, the college experience she has is the only college experience she knows — pandemic college. "It’s been good, but I don’t really know what it’s like without Covid," she says.

“We have nothing to compare it to. My expectations definitely changed with the whole Covid situation, but I was just happy we were coming to campus, because I have a lot of friends that weren’t going to school at all,” Gabby says.

Following what seems like hundreds of new protocols, it’s a different university than the one upperclassmen left in the spring. However, a higher-education researcher at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Kevin McClure, is not very confident about the way schools have decided to open up this fall. Too much is being expected of students and staff, he says.

“Never in my lifetime have I seen the level of compliance that is being expected for this to work,” he told Nature.

On the other hand, Gabby is confident about how Duquesne has been handling the pandemic. Having already visited home for a weekend, she was anxious to get back to campus despite everything. After being at home all summer in quarantine without seeing friends often — and having her last year of high school cut short — she was ready to give anything to go away to college. Spending even one weekend away feels wrong when things could change in an instant. Students living at Duquesne don’t know how much time they actually have this semester.

Though happy to be on campus, Gabby worries about the depth of the education she’s getting from Zoom University. With most of her classes online or the HyFlex model, she has to keep herself focused in her dorm room.

“It takes a lot of self-discipline. You have your phone there, you can turn off your mic and camera if you want … it is a lot of self-discipline to pay attention,” Gabby says. "It’s also harder to be personable with teachers — you don’t really know them.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

Of course, education is the whole point of going to college. But, for freshmen, classes are usually the last thing on their minds. Students look forward to a complete experience — new friends, organizations, going out and exploring the city.

Gabby, her roommate Madeline Albanese and her friend Mitchell McMarlin, who live in St. Martin’s Hall, agreed in unison that they don’t think they’re getting the full college experience. Despite this, the three freshmen continue to maintain a positive attitude about it all.

“I heard there used to be a lot more activities, and yeah we’re probably missing out on a lot, but at the same time, like Gabby said, how do we know? People getting together — parties and such — there’s been none of that for the most part just because we all want to stay here. We don’t wanna go home, so we’re definitely making the best of it, even if it is a little unfair,” Mitchell says.

“My mom kept saying, ‘just make the most of it, just make the most of it,’ and I feel like we’ve done that,” Gabby says.

After watching her two older brothers go through college, it was hard for Gabby not to see herself at tailgates and campus events. She has to remind herself that she can’t compare her experience to theirs and has to find other ways to create a new normal for college life. However, the lack of a fulfilling college experience raises an important question: Is it worth the money?

Gabby considered other plans at one point. “It crossed my mind … if Duquesne went all online and I would’ve been living at home anyway, I would’ve considered going somewhere else.”

And Gabby’s not alone. According to a news feature from Nature, “higher-education consultants SimpsonScarborough, based in Alexandria, Virginia, surveyed more than 900 incoming first-year students in July and found that 40% might put off attending university, potentially slashing tuition income.”

Duquesne’s freshman class usually gets bigger every year, but this year 1,217 freshmen enrolled...
versus the 1,315 that enrolled last year, according to the Duquesne University Times. 100 students may not seem like much of a difference at Duquesne, but many would-have-been first year students across the United States decided to take a gap year or go to a school closer to home. According to a survey done by the higher education market research firm Art & Science Group, “roughly one in six high school seniors definitely or most likely will likely change their plans to attend college in the fall because of coronavirus.”

It’s difficult for universities that need the money to keep their doors open. But it’s just as difficult for high school students who have looked forward to college to decide whether attending within the limits imposed by the pandemic is worth it.

Now that these students are on campus, the pressure is on to stay within university borders. They don’t want to risk leaving “the bubble,” as Madaline calls it.

“I do feel a little bit trapped here,” Madaline says. “Seeing friends from different colleges stay out until 4 a.m.” is very different from her experience at Duquesne so far.

“Are they being over cautious?” Mitchell asks. “Yes, they have to be. If we want to stay here, we have to go with what Duquesne is telling us.”

It’s a double-edged sword between wanting to have fun but also wanting to make sure campus stays open.

“I think everyone’s doing a good job at following the rules,” Gabby says. She doubts Duquesne will have to send students home, and hopes for the best for not only this semester, but the next as well.

In the midst of a pandemic, and in the midst of what Nature calls “the most intensely social phase of their lives,” it’s quite easy to acquire a negative view of the first year at Duquesne. Random Covid screenings, masks obscuring familiar faces, takeout dining — it’s the new and not-so-improved Duquesne.

But, like Gabby, Madaline is optimistic about how the fall has been going.

“I came in with the mentality that it is what it is, I’m just going to make the most of it ... at this point I’m just glad we’re here.”

The best part of the semester for the two roomies? Exactly that — being roomies.

“Especially because of Covid, we’re together all the time, so I feel like if you had a roommate you didn’t get along with ... I feel very bad for those people,” Gabby says. There may not be much to do on campus, but they’ve found a way around that, even if it is a little party for two. “Honestly, we have dance parties in our room by ourselves for fun,” she says.

Though the two officially met through masks and a socially distanced move-in, they knew of each other from their childhood passion: Irish step dancing.

Gabby and Madaline have been dancing since the age of six, and continued competing until their senior year of high school. The two planned on stopping before college, but that deadline came even sooner once Covid hit.

“Covid took away our World Competition and our Nationals too ... it took away the end of my senior year, and I wasn’t planning on dancing in college anyway, so it just cut it short,” Gabby says.

Irish dancing was a big part of their lives, and they’re grateful it brought them together.

“Gabby slid into my DMs and that’s how we became roommates,” says Madaline. “We’re very restricted to staying in our rooms, so I’m just glad we get along so well.”

It can be nearly impossible to get to know others virtually, so the connections freshmen make during class and orientation week are vital to their first semester at Duquesne. Without sports and non-socially distanced events, meeting new people any which way possible is a miracle during Covid.

Gabby’s freshman year, though not typical or ideal, will definitely be one that she’ll remember for the rest of her life. Covid may not be going anywhere anytime soon, but Gabby plans on staying on campus as long as possible and having the best year she possibly can — which includes lots of dance parties.

“I don’t think we’re going to forget any of it. I think it’ll be something we’ll always remember. It’s going to stand out, that’s for sure,” Mitchell says.

“Oh, definitely,” Gabby adds. “We were the 2020 year.”●
The Heart of College Hall
Ollie Gratzinger

It’s still dark at 5 a.m. For a good bit of the year, it’s cold. But that doesn’t stop Della. Nothing does.

Duquesne University students whose morning classes put them in College Hall — the right place at the right time — have probably crossed paths with Della before, even if they might’ve walked right by her.

With short tufts of red curls, a blue custodian’s uniform that matches her disposable mask and a workcart that’s nearly as tall as she is, Della can be easy to miss. But without her, classrooms would go unsanitized, bathrooms unswept, stairwells unpolished — and as a pandemic holds the world in its grasp, Della’s work is more important than ever.

“That’s pretty much extending my shift to go from 5 a.m. to 3 p.m. Our day is just constantly [making] sure everything is pretty much disinfected. Covid made it different because now we don’t go into the offices. We stay away. That way nobody has to worry about nobody giving them anything.”

Still, Della says she goes home happy every day — and when she comes back in the morning, she’s happy, too. She talks with her hands and smiles with her eyes, which makes her joy clear as can be, even behind a mask.

“The people in [College Hall] are beautiful,” she says. “Everybody’s been confined for so long you can’t help but be happy.”

Della has worked at Duquesne for 20 years — since before most freshmen were born. She’d seen an ad in the paper shortly after her husband had died. She applied, and the rest, she says, is history. Even after two decades, Della loves her job — and the best part is the people.

“You meet all kinds of different people, and it’s really neat,” she says.

But the pandemic has taken its toll on that, too. Instead of interacting with people like she used to do, there’s typically just a quick hello, and according to Della, it all adds up to a fairly substantial disconnect. But she doesn’t let it get her down.

“[The light at the end of the tunnel] is coming. We just have to wait for it,” she says. “You know, God is good. But sometimes I think he does things for a reason. And this time it hit the whole world and not just one little part of the world.”

It’s Della’s strong religious conviction — an unyield-
ing trust in God — that James Swindal says makes her special.

“She sees things in a bigger orbit because it’s part of her faith,” says Swindal, who has taught philosophy at Duquesne for about 15 years. From 2011 until 2019, he was the dean of the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts.

“[Della] is a person that sees her life in a faith perspective. It’s not just on the side. It’s pretty central to her, and that’s unusual,” he says.

Della grew up on the South Side, but for the last 43 years, she’s lived in the Oakland home in which she raised a family.

“I have two daughters. I have seven grandchildren, one great grandchild and another great one on the way,” she says, smiling. To Della, family is everything.

“I don’t get a chance to see the boys anymore the way I used to … so Grandma’s pretty much left to herself, but I enjoy it. I enjoy that time. Because I babysitted them all their lives; I was the first one to watch them walk instead of their parents, you know.”

For 13 years, Della had the graveyard shift — about 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. — and so she was there during the day to watch her grandchildren while her two daughters worked.

“I enjoyed that. My mom did it for me. She’s now passed. So I always wanted to give back what she gave me,” Della says.

The pandemic has made it more difficult for her to see her family — particularly her grandson, a recent college grad who, like most young adults, feels like he’ll live forever. But Della’s still a self-described “old grandma,” doing all the things that old grandmas tend to do.

“My grandson called and said, ‘Grandma, I got a taste for meatloaf,’ so yesterday I made him a meatloaf,” she laughs. “Today his mother should come today and pick it up for him.”

Even if she can’t see her grandkids as much as she’d like, and even if the pandemic has made her hours on the job longer and harder, it’s that strong and unique religious conviction that keeps her smiling — even when times get tough. Especially when times get tough.

“I believe in the Lord. I believe that walking sometimes … his shadow, he’s right behind me and he carries me. Religion is very important to me,” she says matter-of-factly, with a soft kind of certainty. “But I believe in a religion that every man is created equal. I believe there’s enough room on Earth for every single human being. You know what I mean? That’s the kind of Christian woman I am.”

Della is a beloved staple in College Hall; you’d be hard-pressed to find a professor or faculty member who doesn’t have something nice to say about her.

“She’s always lively, funny, quick-witted,” says Bill Klewein, an academic adviser who has been at Duquesne for 14 years. “She’s always here and she always has kind words to say. She’s just very warm, very compassionate, very genuine. Cares about students. She’s kind of like the duct tape. She holds this place together in so many ways.”

Swindal has also taken note of the way Della cares for Duquesne’s students, and he agrees that she’s just as much a fixture in the Liberal Arts School as the sprawling lawn outside.

“I just saw her for the first time in how many months, and it was like, it’s weird being back, but if Della’s here, we’re back,” Swindal laughs. “We’re all doing this together.”

In five years, Della says she’ll be ready for retirement. She’s thinking about selling her house and accompanying her granddaughter down to Texas, just to try something different.

“She wants somebody to go with her, so I might go with her for maybe a year so she can explore and not be lonely at the same time. And then when she gets ready, she can always give me the boot,” Della says. “When she finds her a friend, she can always say, ‘It’s time for you to go, Grandma!’ That’s what we plan on doing, me and my daughter. Just going down with her.”

But in the meantime, she’s the heart of College Hall.

“Duquesne is lucky to have her,” Swindal says.
Even in the best of times, a normal day for Jason Mignanelli looks a little different than that of the average student. Sometimes he’s spending hours catching up on his journalism homework. Other times, he’s in the Northside reporting for his part-time job.

During the pandemic, though, he’s spending a lot of time driving toy trucks with his 2-and-a-half-year-old son, Santino.

Being a parent and a student during a pandemic is stressful, but for Jason and his family, the situation has its perks.

“It’s absolutely wonderful,” Jason says. “It couldn’t be better because my wife is home every single day. We wake up with our son and my wife can go to work in her pajamas, and she has been home for months now. So he has both of his parents at his disposal pretty much 24/7.”

Pre-Covid, Jason, a multi-platform journalism major, was taking classes in person, and his wife, Nancy, worked on campus as a manager in the accounting department, so Santino spent five days a week at his aunt’s house. Now, Jason takes all his classes online.
so that he can spend more time with “Tino,” who clearly benefits from having both parents home.

As Jason talks about family life, he takes a break to play outside with Tino, per Tino’s request. Tino also scores not only one, but two green popsicles — a pre-lunch snack.

“Covid has actually been somewhat of a blessing as far as family relationship goes,” Jason says. “... There’s so much family time and we’re bonding so much, I think it’s gonna be more difficult when my wife has to go back and when I have to go back to school.”

Jason started at Duquesne in 2019, but it wasn’t his first time in college. After high school, he studied for a couple of years at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he spent most of his time “enjoying college life” with his frat brothers. Before starting his junior year, Jason was offered a job — and a tempting paycheck. He never finished his degree and spent the next 14 years of his life working various sales and marketing jobs.

Now, approaching 40 and with a son, Jason’s motivations to go to school have changed. Not only does he have a family he wants to support, he has a passion for writing he wants to pursue and a career field he’s fallen in love with.

“If I’m gonna do this and go back to school and make that commitment,” Jason said, “I’m gonna go for something I love and something that I’m interested in.”

The family lives in the North Hills now, where Jason and Nancy both grew up. They bought a house there during the pandemic — a decision seemingly supported by Tino, who’s claimed the living room as his play space. The area is full of the best toys: a ride-on fire truck, a play kitchen and his favorite Matchbox cars.

Jason and Tino’s nighttime routine consists of a few solid minutes of driving.

“He has a little tacklebox, and he fills it with Matchbox cars so you can’t even barely get it closed anymore,” Jason said. “He runs back in the bedroom, jumps on the bed, opens it up, dumps it on the bed and then drives race cars on my stomach, and makes me take cars out and drive them.”

Jason and Nancy waited for five years after getting married to have kids.

“We didn’t want to have financial stress at the same time as having the stresses of raising a child,” Jason says. “Both of us feel like financial stress...
in a family could definitely take away from what you’re able to give that child.”

Jason and Nancy’s years of marriage have allowed them to get accustomed to each other’s strengths and weaknesses. They know what works best for each other within their relationship, and that prepared them for the different roles they have today.

“People joke around about my wife’s and my relationship because they can’t believe how well we work together,” Jason says. “We know our role and what we’re good at.”

Having her husband go back to school while raising a child was an adjustment for Nancy, but she acknowledges the different responsibilities Jason has as a student, and if there was ever a time for him to go back to school, it’s now.

“Anything’s a big change, even if it’s a new job or becoming a student — just making sure that everyone’s needs are met. It’s an ongoing challenge, but that’s life,” Nancy says.

The challenges didn’t only exist at home. Spending 14 years away from the classroom was enough time to make Jason nervous about going back. But once his classes started diving into their topics, he realized he brought a very different, yet valuable, perspective to the table.

“Just being around … there are a lot of things that I know just from being an adult,” Jason says.

While the majority of students don’t have children to come home to after class, most professors have had classes with student-parents. But not all of them are trained on how to teach these types of students, or even know how to teach them well, according to Matthew Ussia, an English professor in the Liberal Arts school.

“Many students have invisible challenges. Many students are fighting with things that are bigger than anything that happens in my classroom,” Ussia says.

Jason was a student in Ussia’s Imaginative Literature class during the spring 2020 semester. Having students like Jason who can bring adult experiences into the classroom is always special for Ussia, as they show other students perspectives only learned over years of living.

“He had a much easier time imagining other people’s experiences because he just knew more people, time had passed for him — he has a greater understanding of how people change over time,” Ussia says.

In Ussia’s eyes, returning students are no less than brave. While students who go back to school often feel insecure about returning to the classroom, Ussia has noticed that they come back eager, focused and serious about learning.

“You have to admire their toughness. You have to admire their moxie. You have to admire the courage it takes to make that kind of decision,” Ussia says.

Jason was ready to make the sacrifices he needed in order to balance being a father, husband, journalist and student. A man of many talents, he’s published a book, won awards for his poetry, hunted and participated in competitive bass fishing tournaments. Once Tino came into the picture and Jason realized he wanted to go back to school, everything else was put on hold.

“What you have to do is sacrifice something,” Jason says. “I wasn’t willing to sacrifice my relationship with my wife. I was absolutely not willing to sacrifice my relationship with my son, and going to school and getting my education had become more important than my hobbies.”

Fortunately, Jason has plans to return to all his hobbies — and with Tino by his side. Life is long, and by putting a hold on his hobbies to focus on school and raising his son, Jason is saving the joy of his hobbies for when he can share them with Tino when he’s older.

As Jason talks about the family’s plans, Tino sits perched atop their living room couch, dressed in a Superman tee and waiting patiently for their daily walk to the park. Jason talks of dreams for big family dinners, just like he had every Sunday growing up. There may also be another little Mignanelli in those plans — but for now, the focus is on their family of three.

“I just want him to get a good education, and I just want him to be happy,” Jason says.
A nurse learns more in the first six months on the job than the four years of university education. The learning curve, however, becomes infinitely steeper when those first experiences unfold in the midst of a global pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic didn’t turn nursing student Kate Devlin away from a dream opportunity interning at UPMC, where she got an inside look at working in a hospital during a global pandemic.
For fourth-year nursing student Kate Devlin, a 2020 summer internship at UPMC Presbyterian was a dream opportunity. Receiving the acceptance letter in early January, she never imagined her experience would be out of the ordinary. It’s customary for nurses to deal with sickness and death, but never before in recent history has the work doctors and nurses do been more hazardous to their own wellbeing.

Kate was about to earn her stripes in a hospital setting when the simple act of stepping through the doors became a risk.

For Kate, whose only experience working in hospitals came in short-term, risk-free clinicals, the prospect of being thrown onto an active hospital floor and expected to perform all the duties of a nurse would be daunting under normal circumstances. No one would blame a green nurse-in-training for being apprehensive about her first dip into the world of medicine becoming a dive into the whirlpool of chaos that is a hospital during a public health crisis.

Surprisingly, though, COVID-19 was not the greatest of Kate’s worries. The potential loss of a learning opportunity was a far bigger threat to her future.

Like everyone else in March 2020, Kate experienced a haze of confusion and anxiety as every event and institution across the country was slowly blinking out one by one. For a brief moment, the internship was up in the air.

“I was mostly freaking out for the fact that it could be canceled, and I did not want that to happen because I knew this would be the biggest learning opportunity,” Kate says. “I needed this.”

For future medical practitioners, the goal of an internship isn’t a mere resume builder. Within these fields, every scrap of knowledge matters because one day, someone’s life could depend on it. Kate hopes to eventually work in natural disaster relief and provide assistance in developing countries. She knew this internship would be crucial not just for someday working in hospitals, but also an invaluable learning experience for a future of providing help amid crises.

“I think I was more scared that it was going to get canceled versus actually going into the hospital and dealing with it,” she says.

The hospital took important steps to ensure its new interns were kept safe and not forced to stand on the front lines of the fight with Covid.

“But they also assured us that we were not allowed to take care of any patients that had corona or even be on a floor that had it or even be in contact with people who they thought they might have it, especially in the emergency room,” Kate says.

“Covid or not, I got the opportunity to see how a hospital actually works in very difficult situations,” Kate says. “Not only was it in stress management, but kind of learning how people react and how a hospital has to react to everything so quickly.”

Moving forward, Kate is very realistic about the fact that by graduation in May, the COVID-19 situation likely won’t be resolved and could possibly be worse. Having this trial by fire, she feels comfortable returning to hospitals with all the COVID-19 prevention measures in place and confident in her ability to take on anything nursing life might throw at her.

“I was able to learn so much and was able to do it in one of the most stressful times for nursing, so I feel like if I was able to get through it now, I will be able to get through it when it is all over,” Kate says.
Pittsburgh is described as a city of resilience and strength — and its residents emulate these qualities. The following words tell the stories of individuals who make the city what it is: unique, diverse and inspiring.
YOU CAN’T ALWAYS PAINT WHEN YOU’RE CRYING

Local artist Stew Frick adapts to a changed art world in the wake of COVID-19

Ollie Gratzinger
Stew Frick is driven by restlessness, and in a world of waiting, there’s a whole lot of that to go around.

Stew, who prefers to use gender-neutral they/them pronouns, has been creating and selling custom-painted clothing in Pittsburgh for a little over four years now, and they own an online shop called Sweet Tooth Customization. Art began as “a personal coping technique” when Stew hoped to find themself after what they called a few traumatic years of college. But now, that art has become a full-blown career; they’ve designed fashion pieces for local runway shows, galleries, music videos and more, and when the coronavirus pandemic pressed pause on life as we know it, Stew knew they didn’t want to press pause on their work. But that’s not to say they didn’t change focus. “I’ve made very emotional and personal pieces and I kind of transferred into doing more technical pieces,” Stew says. “You can’t always push yourself. You can’t always paint while you’re crying.”

Stew’s work is colorful and exuberant, with bold lines and stylized shapes. It ranges from a portrait of the Pittsburgh skyline on a ruby-red bomber jacket to vines and budding flowers painted on blouses and leather coats. Also included in the Sweet Tooth collection are painted Doc Martin boots, custom Converse, baseball caps and patchwork designs sewn onto flannel shirts, all handcrafted with care.

Stew had left the house for the first time in three days to drive to Michael’s Craft Store for thread in order to keep creating. Prior to that, they’d been hanging out at home working their remote job as a salesperson and making art as often as they could, all while staying safe from a pandemic that has infected 122 million and counting worldwide. But it could be worse.

“There hasn’t been as much force or power behind making distraught art because I feel very fortunate,” Stew says. “I have a job. I’m bored with a stable life, but the fact that I have a stable life to be bored with is very fortunate.”

Still, Stew misses the social aspects of the local art scene. For them, it was about the people they’d run into at shows and events just as much as it was about the art being shown there. “In some ways, [the art scene] has gotten a lot less fulfilling and a lot more lonely,” Stew says. “Before, when you were making something, it was building up to something. It was building up to a runway show or a gallery opening or even painting myself an outfit to go out to a show and just look really sick. But now it’s like, what, you’re going to be part of a virtual gallery?”

While Stew’s glad that digital shows are still happening, blank squares on Zoom can hardly compare to the experience of being in-person, especially since most of their connections are made face-to-face connections now broken by the pandemic.

“There’s so many people that I know primarily through the art world. You’d see them at shows. It’s not like you called each other and asked to hang out; you would just sort of see them every once and awhile and share a hug, ask how things are going and stuff like that,” Stew says. “I miss everybody.”

Most of Stew’s work is done in their living room under the watchful eye of Coal, the aging cat their girlfriend got for Christmas as a kid. Nearly all of the clothing they use for their wearable art is ethically sourced — purchased from second-hand shops — and made to last; Stew even waterproofs each work after finishing it up.

Not only that; every piece is imbued with a deeper meaning. Stew’s primary logo is an illustrated jaw, which appears on multiple works of art and on their website. Stew says it’s based on a hallucination they had in the midst of a psychotic episode awhile back, and the name — Sweet Tooth — is based on a poem they wrote about the vision.

At the time, their work was mainly inspired by the trauma of episodes like that one, and in building their brand identity around it, they sought to “take back the power,” to salvage something meaningful from a very dark place.

But now, working on honing technical skills, Stew says it has been a time to take a step back to refocus — or just to take a breather.
“I feel like there’s a lot of people who are just resting a little bit,” they say. “I think that’s kind of what I’m doing. There’s a bit of a dormancy.”

But dormancy is hardly stillness. Throughout the pandemic, Stew has been working on commissions, which allow them to keep creating while still taking a well-needed break from the emotionally-charged clothing they’re used to making. In a collaboration with local fashion brand All Hail the Hips, Stew focused on drawing bones and other parts of human anatomy — all things that felt much more concrete and technical than the somewhat abstract art found on the clothes in their shop.

They also recently worked with Pittsburgh-based musician Manny Dibiachi.

Manny owns the early-2000s-inspired fashion brand Dimepieces, which sells jewelry and apparel reminiscent of the bedazzled days of Juicy Couture. Like Stew, Manny didn’t want to let the pandemic get in the way of his creative enterprise. Even if fewer in-person events means a loss of profit and experience, it might’ve been a blessing in disguise.

“I think that [the pandemic] sort of made Dimepieces better because it has me being more consistent. Every day, I’m working on a visual, I’m working on a new product or trying to figure out how to market something two months before I drop it,” Manny says.

In September, Manny released Fuego, his second full-length album. Stew helped out with the styling works for his first proper music video, an Alice-in-Wonderland-esque adventure about finding oneself, which accompanied the rap record’s title track.

The pair had worked together before when Manny modeled some of Stew’s clothes at a photoshoot, and according to Stew, it’s easy to get to know someone when you’re hanging around a studio for hours on end. But the video, set to drop sometime in November 2020, marks their first formal collaborative project. With complex musical layers and honest, emotional lyrics, the album meshed perfectly with Stew’s deep artistic style.

“It was great. It was amazing. I was very much so honored because I’m very familiar with Stew’s work already,” Manny says. “After working with them before and just modeling some of their work, this time being able to wear it and move around in it, that was exciting. Especially to have outfits that I felt were picked for me.”

The honor, Stew says, was mutual — and a welcomed respite from the isolation that comes with social distancing.

“[Collaborating with Manny] was so nice, because it really harkened back to the way that things could be,” Stew says. “It just worked out perfectly.”

For Manny, COVID-19 was not a barrier, but rather the driving force behind his need to get his work out into the world. “It just felt like [the music video] needed to happen. I’m a very spiritual person and I just believe that everything happens for a reason,” he says. “I’ve been wanting so long to have a professional visual, and I just felt like corona, if anything, lit a fire under me rather than discouraged me from creating. It showed me that life is so short, so I should go after what I want now.”

For many, the pandemic has served as a reminder that life is temporary and fragile, and even when things can return to the old normal, it will never be like the good ol’ days as we remember them — at least not for quite a while.

“The main hope is that you always think of the glorious day whenever you can go back out there and you see all of the same people and everyone gets to be excited and pour drinks for each other,” Stew says. “But realistically, it’s going to be a really slow, laborious process. So many places that we love have already closed down. There’s going to be a bit of a rebuilding aspect to it.”

But for as temporary and fragile as life is, it’s been good, too. “Even though it kind of sucks, I’m still very grateful and happy with my life right now,” Stew says. “I’m still in the process of adjusting, but that’s not to say there isn’t happiness and that I’m not very grateful with what I’m afforded in my life. I just hope that the community that I love and that I’m a part of and that I want to see people succeed in is able to help more people succeed soon, because I really miss it.” ●
Much of Stew’s work is inspired by a deeper meaning and reflects their emotions and, at times, hallucinations.
In a crowd of people, he’s the only one sitting down. He speaks in dings and clickety-clacks. After meeting him, people may walk away elated, hopeful or in tears — but always with a piece of paper in hand.

Meet poet Taylor Garling.

Wherever people are, that’s where Taylor’s at. Whether it be at the Strip District, Market Square or the Bloomfield Saturday Market, Taylor is there with his 1978 Olympia SM8 typewriter, waiting to render strangers in verse.

On Saturdays, Taylor hits the market. Donning a pork pie hat, he sets up his desk and loads paper into his typewriter as shoppers fill the area. People approach him — either curious about his setup or drawn by his signs advertising “Poetry!?,” “Poetry Store” — and ask for a poem. A few minutes later, they return for the final product, and Taylor has them determine the worth of his poem. As they walk away, Taylor is comforted by the fact that some way or another, he’s impacted their day for the better.

“Sometimes I feel like a bartender in a way,” Taylor says, “because you have someone give you a really heavy topic, and you write them a poem, and they get a really nice sense of comfort from it.”

The poem-writing process is nothing traditional for Taylor. There’s no formula, no recipe to follow — he just goes by his mood and what he feels like writing that day. When he meets someone who’s interested in a poem, he tries to get a read on them — their vibe, their intentions, and starts asking questions.

“It’s really a lot of questions — asking the right ones,
and listening,” Taylor says. “Really listening intently.”

The first poem Taylor ever gifted was for a man going through relationship issues. He asked for a poem that would give him hope — one about love and its challenges. The man gave him $10 for the poem, and as Taylor ended the night with conversations in his mind and cash in his pocket, he knew this was for him.

“I went to the bathroom and I counted up my money, and I had like a hundred bucks in a span of five hours, and so I was like, ‘Okay, this is what I wanna do,’” Taylor says.

The wheel of fate is spinning
it goes and goes landing on the
overflowing cups.
For the will is filled and now there is the
courage which is building.
Pressure pressure, til a POP.
(“The Beginning,” part one)

Originally from the west coast, Taylor lives a nomadic lifestyle. Young and tired of clocking in and out of restaurant jobs, Taylor left his home state of Washington at 19 and began hitchhiking around California.

“I was just kinda fed up with the normal ways of society,” Taylor says.

Taylor likes to go with the flow. He’s worked in Idaho, sailed along the coast of Washington with some friends and made his way to Pittsburgh at the start of summer 2020. Sometimes he picks up jobs, but for the past year, writing has been his main source of income — and he likes it that way.

“The appeal of being my own boss, doing my own hours — it’s kinda like everyone’s little dream job in some respects, being able to do what they like to do,” Taylor says.

Poetry wasn’t always Taylor’s thing. He started playing the guitar at 13 and found a passion for songwriting. He would write poems here and there, but it wasn’t until he started poetry busking — or writing poems on the street for donations — that his affinity for poetry took off.

“It kinda just fell into my niche of something I was already doing for a while,” Taylor says.

Even then, he doesn’t always get requests for poems. He’s written lists, letters, wedding vows — even poetic resignation notices. The topics of his poems range from odes to deceased loved ones and ill friends, to lighthearted stories about relationships or weed. He’s even written some spells and incantations.

Some of the heavier poems he’s written were for the memorial of a mother’s dead son and a letter to the family of someone with terminal cancer. Something about Taylor’s demeanor makes them comfortable enough to share their stories of loss and heartbreak, and request his rendering of their pain into art.

His favorite thing to write about? Love. Though his tattoos and cigarettes may suggest otherwise, Taylor’s a softie, and the theme of love fills most of his poetry.

One of Taylor’s favorites he’s written is one he wrote for a guy in Texas. He asked Taylor for a poem about being scared to fall in love — a feeling Taylor empathized with because of his own personal experiences. Upon receiving the poem, the man started to cry.

These kinds of moments are special for Taylor. He’s empathetic: He loves to give hugs to people after writing for them, and the knowledge that he’s helped make someone’s day better is what he likes most about writing poems for strangers.

“I’m just glad I’m able to be a conduit, I guess, to help those people out,” Taylor says. “That’s always a nice feeling.”

It is time to shed away such
discomfort such emotions that negate
what I truly deserve.
For others have observed my shifting emotions
My apathy. And happily with only care on
their mind to call me out.
(“The Beginning,” part two)

Taylor started poetry busking in the fall of 2019, when a friend encouraged him to try it out. He’s outgoing and kind to others, and his mom, Julie Garling, sees it as the perfect way for those two qualities to come together.
“It’s something he can do to give back or to help them through a situation ... He’s always been sensitive to other people’s feelings and always looked out for the underdog,” Julie says.

As a mother, it’s made Julie proud to see Taylor become a considerate, sensitive and empathetic person. Though she has yet to receive a poem of her own from her son, she loves to see his heart go out to the people he meets.

“Those moments when I see him helping others and being kind are the moments I’m proudest of,” Julie says.

Taylor’s affinity for typing poetry has inspired his friends, as well. Garrett Miller has known Taylor since 2012 and thinks of him as a brother. A few months after Taylor started poetry busking, he encouraged Garrett to do the same, and helped him find a passion during a difficult time in Garrett’s life.

“He sat down with me and he just put his typewriter in front of me and was like, ‘Type me something.’ And I typed something, and I made him cry,” Garrett says.

Taylor and Garrett spent time traveling along the West Coast and into Texas busking along various “bar strips,” or streets lined with bars and restaurants. They write together, drink together and have serious conversations about the challenges of life. Two creative minds, they often inspire each other, and each friend’s writing style has influenced the other’s.

“When we didn’t have people getting poems from us, we were always bouncing ideas off of each other and swapping stories of our past that we didn’t even remember sometimes,” Garrett says.

The joy of writing poetry only lasted for a few months before the pandemic hit. For Taylor, it impacted everything: foot traffic, interactions with strangers, even his presentation. He’d usually set up his table and have some incense burning, but it’s not the same feeling when people are concerned about contracting a deadly virus.

“You can’t really give hugs to people that are crying after you write them a poem,” Taylor says.

Not only did the pandemic affect the flow of traffic, it disrupted Taylor’s writing momentum, as well.

“I felt like I was on fire. I felt like I was really getting into it,” Taylor says. “I had the sense that I was really getting the motors turning, and then all that happened, and now it’s like a total standstill.”

He’s been able to attend some events over the summer, such as open-air markets, where the area is less crowded but people are still around. But it’s nothing like months past, where he’d sit outside on busy streets during the weekends and catch large groups of people.

When the pandemic started, Taylor tried to adapt to the changing circumstances. He began mailing out poems and has kept his Instagram active with photos of his newest works, typed on brightly-colored paper. Still, it’s not the same.

“Doing it in person, it’s a lot easier for the magic to happen ... over the Internet, it’s not as potent,” Taylor says.

This is my life. This is my time.
The past is only a memory
the present is here
a gift a gift that is being wasted.
No more, no more
my soul is done. For i have tasted the new beginning.
it lingers
and I want more.
(“The Beginning,” part three)

The next place on Taylor’s list is Washington — home. With the lack of large crowds and the start of the second wave of COVID-19 on the horizon, he plans on returning to the west coast to spend time with his parents, grandma and sister, who just had a baby. Anything after that is still up in the air.

Though things are a little uncertain for Taylor at the moment, he’s confident in the fact that wherever he ends up, he’ll still be writing. He’s only 27 and has his whole life ahead of him, and doesn’t plan on losing his touch anytime soon. He’s experimenting writing short stories, and even has the workings of a poetry book on his mind.

“I can do this my whole life,” Taylor says. “This is something that I can literally do in my 40s, 50s ... It’s nice to know that I can do this anywhere, all over the world.” ●
How a Point Park filmmaker navigates a pandemic on- and off-screen

Griffin Sendek
Filmmaking is a collaborative art, an entirely communal experience consisting of dozens of cast and crew all working together in close proximity — the exact opposite of what is advised in a pandemic.

However, that’s exactly what senior Point Park University Cinema Production student Leia Christ did. Having just wrapped up the shooting of her senior thesis film Camp Moose Tracks, a horror-thriller about a summer camp secretly run by a murderous cult — which Leia both wrote and directed — the biggest challenge of her trial-by-fire has ended.

Leia was destined to make movies. Her parents tell the story of how at 6 years old, Leia, with a head of untamed bright red curly hair, didn’t cower in fear at horror films but rather almost instinctively turned to say, “I could do that better.”

She finally had her chance at Point Park University’s MFA Cinema Program and proved it with Camp Moose Tracks’ completion.

The script began as a simple summer-camp romance, but her love for horror and desire to challenge herself inspired the story’s dark shift.

“I was thinking about one of my favorite films, Midsommar [another film about a cult], and driving through the woods, thinking about the beauty in that film — the cult aspect manifested itself,” she says.

Nearing the end of the program, having worked on over 35 productions, ranging from micro-budget student films to big studio projects from Netflix and Warner Bros, Leia thought she’d be prepared for anything on set.

The chapter on “filmmaking during a virus outbreak” was decidedly missing from her cinema education textbooks, alas.

“Coming into this year was very stressful,” Leia says. “I swear to God I went through the stages of grief but 30 times.”

Her main concern was not how it would be made, but if her film would be made at all.

“The biggest fear was being canceled. We barely found out we were making a movie in the middle of July and literally up until the day we left for the camp with our entire cast and crew at any minute, it was terrifying to think, ‘I’m not going to get a senior thesis,’” Leia says.

Leia had the summer to completely rework her script, editing not for quality or runtime, but now to ensure safety.

“It was really difficult for me because I was the first production that left Point Park since Covid,” she added.

Not only was Leia charting unknown and potentially dangerous waters with Camp Moose Tracks, she also had to deal with the university breathing down her neck.

“That was terrifying on my shoulders because the entire university was, like, emailing me about everything, so it was a little stressful,” Leia says.

A lot was riding on the success of her production, as it would serve not only as proof that a Point Park film could be made safely, but also light the way for other student films.

Leia’s preproduction had to be airtight; any flaws could have spelled disaster. The stakes had risen — the film’s quality wasn’t only the line but now the health and safety of her entire cast and crew.

As Leia was scrambling to rework her thesis script, the lives of both cast and crew were also upended.

Actors have never lived under the guise of “job security;” it’s always been a life of adapt or die. During Covid, that phrase became morbidly more literal.

But even during a pandemic, a dedicated actor is still capable of finding work.

Jordan Beltz, a recent graduate from Point Park’s acting conservatory, considers herself lucky to be busy working on Camp Moose Tracks and other film projects.

One of the most difficult changes Jordan witnessed in the shift to pandemic filmmaking is the lack of intimacy. Close contact between actors can be essential to convey relationships and emotions, but now that isn’t always possible.

“Alot of our blocking had to get changed for [a different film] because it was husband and wife,” Jordan says. “We had to take all kissing and intimacy out.”

Limitations can be the best seeds for inspiration: They push filmmakers to stop relying on what’s easy but make the best out of what’s possible.
“It was difficult, but it just forced us to think of a new idea, and that’s sort of the beauty of film just the adaptability to change,” she added.

Time is never on the director’s side; making a film is almost always a race against the clock. This contentious relationship with time is even more inflamed during a pandemic.

Previously, getting a set ready was a chaotic assembly line. Social distancing deters close collaboration which, unfortunately, doesn’t make for a snappy setup.

Covid fears weren’t the only snag in production; the university’s laundry list of safety restrictions, though well-intentioned, made Leia’s job significantly more difficult.

“Normally film sets are 12 hours — this year they [the university] were like, ‘okay you have 10 hours and you need to have an hour lunch break,’” Leia explains. “Let me tell you: I’m not exaggerating when I say we went through, I think, 12 shooting schedules.”

Working through university-sanctioned limitations was not only a headache for Leia — it also led to a rushed production.

Between dealing with the university and the virus, making Camp Moose Tracks might have felt like fighting a war on two fronts, but Leia was able to get it done. That’s far more than the majority of freshman and sophomore cinema majors ever had the chance to do.

The program curriculum is designed around its students creating one film each year, a luxury not granted to sophomore cinema student Ryan Peters.

“COVID-19 hit and I haven’t been able to make my film,” Ryan says.

Ryan is lucky enough to have gone in with enough on-set experience and knowledge of filmmaking before beginning the program. He was able to make connections with upperclassmen to keep himself busy and to make his time at Point Park not feel completely wasted.

If change doesn’t happen soon, he sees trouble on the horizon.

Ryan is currently on track to produce a film for the spring semester. Still, with the cancellation and postponement of classes, combined with the pandemic’s uncertainty, there are no guarantees.

“I am quite worried. It’s not that my experience now has been lessened, but I fear that if it continues,” Ryan explains.

Leia has the privilege of seniority; the hardest piece of her student filmmakers’ battle with Covid is over. For Ryan and other underclassmen, their fight is just beginning.

“We’ve got to be ready for anything and I think that’s the really exciting part about it, and you’re always on your toes and it gets your heart jumping, but that’s why we love it,” Jordan remarked. “We wouldn’t do it if it was easy.”

“Filmmaking has always been based on adaptability as every aspect is always presenting challenges,” Leia says. “Perseverance tests filmmakers in how strong they have to believe in an idea.”

“I always take each challenge with grace because when you’re forced to make a wild, last-minute decision, the outcome is leagues better than the original plan,” Leia says.
Graduate college. Get a job. Make money. It’s what we’re “supposed” to do. Derek Zanetti didn’t question this blueprint of life until his best friend died in a motorcycle accident.

Many people spend their lives trying to find happiness by filling it with things, when they could use their time to create something or take a risk. What singer-songwriter Derek discovered is that happiness isn’t in money or objects, it’s in people and memories.

“I think things that make long term change are small intimate moments that we get to share with each other,” Derek says. “When you die, people are going to think back on those moments as the ones that changed their lives because people cared for them.”

Punk rock isn’t typically associated with tenderness, but to Derek, who writes punk protest songs, it’s the kindest vibe on Earth. The supportive atmosphere is where he found a way out of society’s trap of what Derek has come to see as a meaningless life. He has devoted himself to making his hometown of Pittsburgh a place where others can find a way out, too.

The 37-year-old “musician by trade” taught himself five Johnny Cash chords on guitar — except faster to make it punk. In 2009, Derek started playing cafes, DIY venues and church basements. He never planned on being part of the music industry — he just used it as a way to escape the nothingness he saw around him.

“I just felt like I was going to be eaten up by the nothing if I didn’t do anything,” Derek says.

And so he began writing songs,
like “Young and in Love.”

Forty minutes at a time, I leave my body and I float outside the bar or the club or the basement at church And I start to feel like nothing ... I start to feel like nothing for whatever nothing's worth.

Derek’s awakening came after he lost his best friend, Brian, in a motorcycle accident in 2006. Brian worked hard, made money and had all kinds of gears and gadgets. He sacrificed so much time to feel established, only for it to not matter in the end.

“He did everything he was supposed to do for ‘happiness.’ All the things he filled his life with in order to give him fulfillment just wound up in the thrift store,” Derek says.

It was that moment when Derek decided to throw that blueprint out the window. He may not have known exactly what he wanted, but he knew he didn’t want to be considered a good “cog in the wheel” when he died — a theme he explores in his song “Figure it Out:”

And the one thing we know for sure is that you don’t want a boss no more to say yes sir or say yes ma’am or smile and act like you give a damn ... and your only nights off are spent getting lit to forget the work week that you hate to your core.

There had to be an alternative to that kind of life, and Derek found it.

Traveling the United States and Europe with his band The Homeless Gospel Choir, Derek writes and performs protest songs about important topics like mental health, social justice, global warming and inclusion. He shares his music with the world to create spaces for people who don’t belong, just as he felt he didn’t belong growing up.

Coming from a conservative Christian family in West Mifflin, Derek is the oldest of four. Though they invested a lot of time in family, he didn’t find it a safe environment — but he knew it was possible to create something new. So, Derek broke away from the way he was raised to protest the holes in conservatism’s philosophies. He wrote about what that was like in his song “Normal:”

Nineteen-ninety-four, I felt so insecure growing in my hometown like a cancer. Something so unsure was knocking at my door eleven years old then and it was time to answer. I found my escape in that Green Day tape, when the songs would end we’d just rewind them.

Protest can mean something different to everyone, but it comes down to standing up for what you believe in. What is it that Derek believes in? Kindness.

“In a world where our leaders seem to be very unthoughtful of your feelings and opinions, what a subversive thing to do to garner kindness and establish atmospheres where people can appreciate kindness and participate in it,” Derek says. “To be empathetic — that’s what I think of when I think of protest.”

Not only are his shows a place where anybody can come and feel welcomed, but Derek himself tries to be that place for others. Vulnerability and kindness have been his greatest assets in life.

Friend, fellow musician and Duquesne alum Chris Daley met Derek going to basement punk shows, and knew from the beginning that Derek embodied those qualities.

“If someone knocks on our door, it’s either Amazon or Derek ... he’s the kind of person who has neighborly values. He’s the type of friend that will drive you to the airport,” Chris says.

Derek is also the type of person to inspire tattoos.

Some have tattoos of his lyrics, another has a tattoo of Derek’s face, but Joy Daly has a different message tattooed on her arm that was meant just for her.

Joy, a fan of The Homeless Gospel Choir based in Rhode Island, has been listening to Derek’s music and going to his shows since she was 15 years old. Now 21, she’s met Derek several times and got her first tattoo of something he wrote out for her. It reads “I BELONG HERE,” with two lines underneath. It’s something he’s stressed to her in each conversation they’ve had, and in his song “Don’t Give Up:”

Don’t forget! To love yourself! Be yourself, you don’t have to be anyone else! Times get hard, times get hard! There’s a light
at the end of the tunnel for you, when times get hard.

Derek has advocated for Joy to care for herself, and even motivated her to start her own band as a mental health outlet at the end of high school. As a “punk without a cause,” meeting Derek at a young age helped her realize she has so much potential and heart.

“Derek’s warm yet realistic outlook, free spirit and utter kindness is something that has inspired me to be a better version of myself, for my sake and for the sake of others,” Joy says.

Derek always leaves people feeling impassioned and accepted, just like he did with Joy. He even starts out every show uplifting the audience:

“We’re The Homeless Gospel Choir from Pittsburgh, Pa., welcome to the punk show. This is an atmosphere free of racism, sexism and homophobia — everybody’s welcome here,” Derek says. “This is for people who don’t have a place.”

COVID-19 hindered the ability to offer this introduction on a tour of Derek’s new album, but he’s willing to wait to share his art until it’s safe. However, as an advocate for inclusion, understanding and mental health, he has to be around people to make change.

Spending months in quarantine has made this almost impossible — it’s more difficult to stand for something when the pandemic forces everyone to sit at home. On top of Covid, Derek feels this “badness” around him due to the increasing injustice and human rights violations going on in the U.S.

Despite this feeling, Derek finds inspiration in knowing there’s an “ocean’s worth” of good in most individuals — and it’s worth pulling out and cultivating. He tries to do this for people through music, and hopes that his listeners can do it too.

“There is goodness inside people and if they can focus on that, they can see it in others,” he says.

For Derek, it’s the connections we make that help us navigate the uncertainty of the world and of ourselves. His art tells people that it’s okay to be weird, to need help, to be sad or angry — we’re all punks and protesters, and we don’t need to be normal.

By bringing people together and filling them with this kindness, Derek escapes the nothing.

“It’s easy to make money, but to make an investment of a different type in humans and other people, and to show love and care — I think that’s the reason why we’re here,” Derek says.
People aren’t the only thing the pandemic changed. Businesses, schools and restaurants all suffered at the hands of the virus. But they, too, are resilient, and this section’s stories paint a picture of some of Pittsburgh’s favorite spots — and how they’re fighting Covid.
A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Bloomfield Saturday Market brings fresh goods and vibes to the city

Katia Faroun

Photo by Katia Faroun
During the week, the lot between Gross and South Winebiddle Streets on Liberty Avenue is just that — a parking lot. But on Saturday mornings, the area begins to awaken.

Chairs scrape along the asphalt, tents unfold and block the morning sun and baskets of fresh and local goods cover long tables, transforming the empty Bloomfield lot into a lively and bustling market.

On these mornings, Collette Walsh has a routine. She bunches her best flowers — from vibrant, magenta celosia to delicate, sunset orange amaranthus — loads them in the back of her classic rust red Chevrolet El Camino and drives the “flower mobile” down to Bloomfield. She then sells to long lines of flower-lovers — regulars familiar with her Sol Patch Garden stall, or first-timers drawn by the color and aroma of her bouquets.

“It feels really good being here,” she says simply.

The Bloomfield Saturday Market has been a staple of the community for decades, acting as a place where locals can purchase their week’s worth of fresh produce and vendors can offer their goods and services to the neighborhood.

As shoppers weave through the rows of vendors, the smell of freshly baked bread, sweet pickles and fruity soaps give the area a feeling of comfort and warmth found only at an open-air market. Talk of high school sports and polite yet eager sales pitches rise and fade with the passing of each stall. Neighbors and strangers meet at the same block in Bloomfield, sharing the same desires for a morning of conversation and shopping.

In 2020, alas, all of this takes place masked up and at a distance. Lining up by Gross Street, shoppers are directed by volunteers and caution tape toward the eastern corner of the market — the new entry point. Traditionally long lines extend by an extra few feet per person. Familiar faces become less recognizable as masks obscure smiles and muffle voices.

Jayashree Iyengar, a Point Breeze resident, says these barriers have only slightly changed the atmosphere of the market. “It’s pretty much the same,” she says. “It’s not that hard to go around and get stuff. Covid has changed it somewhat, but not totally.”

Prior to the pandemic, the market was a place of lively community. Visitors could expect the smell of grilled chicken before seeing a family lunching on gyros or empanadas, and maybe even hear guitars and drums from around the corner.

For Meredith Seltzer, the memories of pre-pandemic summers haven’t faded. “It was more of an event than a farmer’s market. People came for the music, to hang out, to have lunch, meet up with other people — it was a fun atmosphere,” she says.

Tia Tumminello and Rebecca Harrison had attended the market as shoppers before vending with their tailoring business, Old Flame Mending, and distinctly remember the market as being a social event.

“It was the Saturday morning thing to do on the East End here,” Tia says.

Meredith’s 6-month-old daughter, Hallie, bounces her feet against her mother’s stomach as Meredith talks about Mill Creek Trout Farm, the business she owns with her husband. They’ve vended at the market for seven years and have usually had success, but the pandemic has caused a decrease in sales.

“We have lost a lot of what I would call regulars, just because they don’t come out anymore — especially the older folks,” Meredith says.

While lines are still long, they’re certainly loose. The area extends to each edge and corner of the lot, but the crowd itself is not as dense as vendors and shoppers are used to.

For Jayashree, this is actually a benefit. She enjoys the airy feeling of the Bloomfield market; it’s “nicely spaced,” and that sets it apart from other markets.

Sunlight filters through the honey locust trees lined along the border of the lot. The occasional breeze and warmth from the morning sun balance each other out to create a comfortable space for market-goers.

For friends Grant Miller and Rich Carryer, the atmosphere actually sets the market apart from its city surroundings.

“It’s definitely interesting that it’s in the middle of a city, but it
feels similar to any market that you would expect. The city isn’t getting in the way,” Grant says.

“I almost forgot I was in Bloomfield,” Rich adds.

The atmosphere attracts people of all demographics. Families with young children, elderly dog walkers and young locals, like Grant and Rich, escape the hurry of the city as they pass through the entrance of the fenced-in lot. Young, eco-friendly hipsters and garden-loving retirees are found wandering the aisles between plants and produce.

The fresh air and local, farm-fresh goods aren’t the only things drawing people to markets during the pandemic. People are hesitant to do their grocery shopping indoors, and Rebecca thinks that individuals are longing for any type of social interaction, albeit in a distanced environment.

“Even though it’s not as social for the customers necessarily ... I think it is people’s one weekly social interaction with multiple people at one time,” she says.

Collette even thinks the recent emphasis on supporting small businesses has made people reconsider shopping at local markets instead of chain stores.

“People are really showing up this year in a different way ... For a lot of us vendors, we’ve been really ecstatic and happy that people are showing value to something that we think is really important,” she says.

Closing time for the Saturday market comes around at 1 p.m. The crowd dwindles, and while a few stragglers complete their final purchases, vendors load up leftovers into the backs of their vehicles and start folding up tables. The last car drives off, and the area returns to being a simple parking lot for the next six days.

For the lucky ones, the hours of sales leave nothing to bring home but a profit and high spirits. But everyone — vendors and shoppers alike — leaves with the hope of a return to normalcy for the market.

“I’m guessing it’ll take a little bit of time to go back to what we would call normal,” Meredith says, “but I’m hoping ... people will start coming back out again and see that it’s okay to be around again.”
Friday night? Fuggedaboutit. Head to Smokin’ Joe’s Saloon on a Friday afternoon instead. Walk across the faded hardwood floors and grab a classic draft or local IPA. You’ll get a glimpse of what South Side was like 15 or 20 years ago: The jukebox plays classics; football reruns flicker on the TV; beer signs cover every square inch of the walls; customers sip on one of the 60 beers on tap.

Smokin’ Joe, aka Joe Dawson, has seen it all from behind the bar. Whether it’s the not-quite-21 kids who are turned away, college students or teachers Joe had as a kid, the crowd varies week to week, day to day and even hour to hour.

“I just think we’ve been here for so long now, we try to be everything to everyone,” says Joe.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Joe was no stranger to the South Side atmosphere even before owning the bar. And though he is the sole owner now, he isn’t the original Smokin’ Joe — that honor belongs to his dad.

The father-son duo wasn’t exactly a duo until later in Joe’s life. They had butted heads since Joe was young, but he learned everything about the industry from his dad. After being in different places for some time, the two came back together when the building went up for sale. Smokin’ Joe’s opened on St. Patrick’s Day 1996.

Joe, who had been working for a company in Georgia, moved back to Pittsburgh when his dad called him and asked if he’d come help run the place. It was an impulsive decision that changed Joe’s life; he traded suits and ties for cases and kegs.

“I wasn’t thrilled with corporate life and I couldn’t see myself in a cubicle for the next 30 years, so I said what the hell. And I knew my dad’s health wasn’t the greatest — he was a three-pack-a-day smoker — so the Smokin’ Joe’s thing was really kind of fitting,” Joe says.

Joe gutted the place with his dad and nailed in the very floors below his feet. “I remember being here pounding planks of wood at two, three, four in the morning,” he says.
Running the business with his dad for the short amount of time they had together is bittersweet. Just a few years after they opened the place, he passed away.

“My dad was awesome ... he was a mean son of a b----, but you ask anybody that knew him — whether they liked him or not — they respected the s---- out of him. I don’t know how he did it. I felt cheated because I lost him at 32 years old, and we had just gotten to the point where our relationship was super cool. So by the time I was open to soaking up what he was trying to teach me, he was gone,” says Joe.

Drew, who’s worked at Smokin’ Joe’s three times — fired twice, quit once — walks the floor looking for people to chat with about his day. He now works at S&S Candy and Cigar Company, but drops by often to see his best friend, Joe.

The familial environment sets Smokin’ Joe’s apart from so many others in the neighborhood. They’re not here for the money — well, maybe a little bit for the money — but it’s the individuals who come through the establishment that make it all worthwhile.

“It’s about the people,” says Joe. “Treat the person that tips like s--- the same as the person who tips a twenty on a $20 bill, because it all evens out in the end if you’re nice to everybody.”

Granted, good etiquette isn’t enough to sustain a business.

“Obviously you want to have quality products ... you don’t have to be LaMont or Hyde Park Steakhouse, but you have to have quality products. Good products, fair prices, good service — you’ll make it,” Joe explains.

The bar has lived by this simple advice over the years, and has kept up its core values and traits because of it. But South Side is a different story — it’s no longer the tight-knit community it used to be where neighborhood celebrations outweighed night spot attractions. From closing down the streets for pig roasts years ago to the multiplying dance clubs of today, it’s a different era.

“What’s hardest on me is the environment of South Side. 20 years ago, South Side was awesome, freaking awesome. It was a different thing; you didn’t have these clubby places down here and all that other bull,” Joe says.

One bar versus three floors of them; oldie classics versus EDM; 60 unique beers versus the same five light ones; chill hang-out versus shoulder-to-shoulder dancing. Smokin’ Joe’s is like a glimpse into South Side’s past, and it sticks out on East Carson Street because of that.

Mario’s, Carson City, Foxtail and Jimmy D’s are the usual go-to joints for college kids. They’re fun and exciting, yet are typically meant for high heeled shoes and blacked out nights. Smokin’ Joe’s? It’s the place to grab a beer after work, grab a bite on a Wednesday night, and, yes, to grab some friends and get a little sloppy, too. It’s perfect for any night of the week.

Old Rege is most recognizable in South Side as the Santa Claus look-alike who walks around with a cane. But at Smokin’ Joe’s, he’s most recognizable as the guy who arrives every day at 3 o’clock and drinks 12-14 shots of Jack Daniels, chasing it with Heineken.

“This used to be the college bar back in the day,” says Tommy Carroll, a Smokin’ Joe’s bartender of 18 years.

“There’s no such thing as the college bar in South Side anymore,” Joe continues.

Pop up businesses, clubs and superficial bars galore, the infamous East Carson Street may be unrecognizable to those who lived here decades ago. But not only has the climate of the neighborhood changed, the difference in generations creates a divide too — especially during a pandemic.

College students are conditioned to seek out the best deals and find what’s cheapest. But in the time of Covid, Smokin’ Joe’s, like many other places, can’t afford to run specials when trying to keep up with bills from months of lost income. The pandemic is bound to set back so many one-of-a-kind places, and the favorites on East Carson are no exception.

“My special today is we’re actually open,” says Joe. “We can’t give anything away right now ... most people are two to three months behind on their rent.”

Whether it be Tommy’s older brother placing a to-go order and tipping $100 every week, Billy drinking his six to seven beers a night after spending the day running his Oakland-based company or Rege bringing in a chocolate milkshake every Saturday for his
favorite waitress, Tara, people have different ways of showing their support, financially and emotionally, even in the middle of a pandemic.

“It’s the regulars like that that keep you going,” says Joe.

Anita sits at a hightop for two and finishes up both her beer and some work she took home — to Smokin’ Joe’s, that is — as she does every day. She chooses her next drink wisely, going back and forth between a coffee stout or her new favorite, Blake’s Caramel Apple Cider.

Not only have the “salt of the earth people” kept Joe going, but so have the memories that come with running Smokin’ Joe’s for 25 years — from love to hate to everything in between.

“We’ve had five marriages come out of here. Tommy, my bartender, married Tina, my other bartender. My general manager married one of the waitresses here ... and a few others,” says Joe. “There’s been some altercations here and there too, but we usually can get it outside before it escalates.”

Just as Joe has borne witness to love and hate, the building itself has too — with an emphasis on the love.

Back in the day, the Smokin’ Joe’s property was the Louis Hotel. But, it wasn’t exactly Tripadvisor-recommended.

“It was kind of a brothel-y place ... you know you wouldn’t rent the rooms by the month, you’d rent them by the hour,” Joe chuckles. “If the walls upstairs could talk, I’d be afraid of what you’d hear.”

Despite the building’s off-putting past, the memories at Smokin’ Joe’s keep being made and the customers keep the good times rolling.

Red-lipped Anita Kulig, with her computer out and a full beer next to her keyboard, has been coming in for years. Though she looks forward to trying new beers every week, her favorite times at the bar center on Halloween.

“One time, a guy came in wearing a pink bodysuit with a shoe on his head — a boot. I asked him what he was, and he said he was gum under a shoe! I thought it was the best costume ever,” Anita says.

Leaving Smokin’ Joe’s on a Friday afternoon is like leaving a family reunion — the owner, the bartenders and the regulars. Joe checking on customers, Tommy stocking beer, Anita with her after-work stouts, Billy with his seven beers seven days of the week, or Rege with his shots of Jack Daniels each add something different to the bunch.

It’s hard to come across pieces of what South Side used to be, but if you look hard enough — specifically on 19th Street — you’ll find one. Just follow the neon sign inside and grab a beer.
Mr. Smalls Theatre gets creative in the overlap of COVID-19 and music

Bailey Lis
The year is 1874. Churchgoers in Millvale are going about their usual Sunday routine as they attend St. Ann’s Catholic Church on Butler Street for Sunday mass. The priest is passing out communion, the choir is singing in unison and the sermon is as long as ever.

Fast forward 146 years: Snoop Dogg is preaching in place of the priest and the “congregation” is sipping local IPAs instead of communion wine. This is the home of Mr. Smalls Theatre, which occupied the former church in 2002 and has since served as a music venue as eclectic as the people who go there.

While Mr. Smalls Theatre is known best for hosting lesser-known “indie” bands, large headliners such as Fall Out Boy, Snoop Dogg, Smashing Pumpkins and Kesha have graced its stage.

With four stages, a bar, a cafe, a recording studio and a club known as The Funhouse, Mr. Smalls has become a mecca for music enthusiasts, fans and lovers of a good times.

For now, though, the good times are on hold as they are at many bars, restaurants, clubs and venues.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Mr. Smalls was forced to close its doors until the restrictions were lifted on large gatherings. With concerts being their main source of revenue, there was no way to remain open or pay their employees.

“We were gearing up for a great spring and had to cancel 50 plus events,” says Liz Berlin, co-owner of Mr. Smalls and member of the band Rusted Root.

In March 2020, Liz organized a GoFundMe for the employees of Mr. Smalls to assist the employees during the pandemic.

“The bartenders, security, sound engineers, lighting designers, kitchen and cafe staff and production staff that make your nights at Mr. Smalls memorable need your help more than ever,” Liz says.

Many non-essential workers in the city of Pittsburgh have been without a paycheck since the pandemic hit. With businesses opening according to the “red light, yellow light, green light” system, entertainment businesses are among the last public places to open, as Governor Tom Wolf remained motivated in slowing the spread of the virus.

Community members and fans of Mr. Smalls happily donated to the GoFundMe, as the employees of Mr. Smalls have contributed much of their lives to hundreds of concerts and making the venue a place where music lovers had a place to relax, enjoy and connect.

The GoFundMe campaign raised over $16,000. With over 273 donors, fans of Mr. Smalls were happy to donate. Julian Baughman is one of them: “I’ve had so many great memories here, hoping this little bit helps make sure I have a few more.”

While concerts at Mr. Smalls were canceled due to COVID-19, the venue has been following the rules set in place regarding social distancing and large gatherings, as they organize and create new ideas for a concert experience that is the “new normal.”

Recently, Mr. Smalls has created a new idea for concerts called the Street Series that take place outside. Musical guests Jeremy Caywood, Tyler Heaven and Sierra Sellers have performed so far. The Street Series is a free event but it also allows Mr. Smalls to sell food and beer while following all CDC guidelines.

While concert experiences have changed drastically since the pandemic hit, fans of Mr. Smalls were quick to share their love of the venue despite not being able to enjoy concerts and shows as they once did.

Long-time Mr. Smalls regulars Jason Tarolli and Sarah Fusarelli express their gratitude with a smile.

“It’s a very small intimate venue, but we always have loved it here,” Jason says. “It has a really good lineup of non-mainstream artists each year, so it really gives you the chance to explore new music.”

The Washington County couple enjoy recalling their favorite memories of Mr. Smalls.

“We loved it here since the first time we came to see one of our favorite bands. We always know we are in for a good time when we come out to Millvale. We just hope they’re able to stay afloat during the pandemic so we can count on Mr. Smalls for more great memories and great bands we have yet to see,” Sarah says.

While the uncertainty of the pandemic still is a large concern, Mr. Smalls has a strong hope for the future of the venue and the potential of the music scene in Pittsburgh. ●
In a little shop on East Carson Street, old is new and out-of-style is in. Three Rivers Vintage is a vibrant home for yesterday’s fashions. Strolling past the storefront window, Three Rivers Vintage first appears as an unassuming clothing shop. With a passing glance, the quartet of mannequins in the crystal-clear window appear ordinarily dressed. Upon closer inspection, the shop comes to vivid life.

Lean a little closer and the shop pulls you in. A plastic female figure finely styled in a tweed vest stitched together with spiraling woven leather immediately catches the eye. Peeking from underneath the vest is a burnt orange button-up whose overflowing deep-V-collar perfectly accentuates her chunky gold necklace. It’s clear that this isn’t just any thrift store.

Three Rivers Vintage owner Scott Johnson opened the
store six-and-a-half years ago on a whim.

“I was retired and I was bored, so I needed something to do, and from nowhere I decided to open a vintage clothing store,” Scott says. “I had zero experience — I had never been in a vintage clothing store, I didn’t know anything about vintage clothing, I just said, ‘Let’s give it a shot and see what happens.’”

Since taking the leap and opening the store, Three Rivers has become the most comprehensive vintage shop in the city. One step through the glass door is a leap back in time. Behind the register, clad in a dress straight off the disco dance floor and a beehive hairdo reaching to the ceiling, is house seamstress Kayla Ledkey, who greets everyone who walks through the door.

“Not only do I love clothes, but I love the atmosphere,” Kayla says.

Van Morrison’s “Brown Eyed Girl” plays softly over the radio and the scent of a cinnamon candle fills a room that is packed, floor to ceiling, with clothing more colorful than an acid trip.

The items on sale go as far back as the 1860s and are as modern as the 1970s.

Many of the items on display at Three Rivers are so old their original owners are dead. The biggest source of vintage clothing for the store is people who, for obvious reasons, won’t be needing them anymore.

“95% of it comes from private buys. The phone rings all week long: ‘My aunt died,’ ‘my mother died,’ ‘my father passed,’ so we schedule private buys right at the houses and literally start digging through dresser drawers,” Scott explains.

The journey from the closet of a deceased relative to the store shelves is a multistep process that Scott has broken down to a tried-and-true formula that he’s followed for hundreds of sales.

“Make them an offer, bring it home, wash it, dry clean it, steam it, price it, measure it, curate it,” Scott says.

This process is what keeps the new items flowing and the quality high.

Three Rivers is a vintage clothing aficionado’s paradise, and according to longtime loyal customer Kathleen Kenna, the shop’s wide variety “has only improved over the last five years.”

“I feel [Scott] has the widest range of stuff, and he’s the nicest vintage store owner — always gives great advice,” Kathleen says.

Those who wear vintage daily flock to the shop, desperate to add items to their collection. Among them is Effie Pearson, who has worn vintage every day for the past 30 years.

“You don’t see this caliber of vintage. You see ‘90s, but this is much older stuff, and I love that they have Victorian,” she says.

Effie waltzed in wearing a plaid dress of turquoise, tan, red, navy and yellow, a color combo that by all means should be an assault to the eyes, but she makes it work. That’s the magic of vintage clothing: It goes against convention and makes the impossible possible.

“I love that it’s sustainable, things fit better and they have character, and who doesn’t love dressing with character?” Effie says.

Handwritten on the tag of every item is the decade it’s from. With years of experience personally handling hundreds of vintage pieces, Scott has learned to pinpoint the decades kind of blended into each other.”

The different vibe the store gives off and the shopping experience are not a result of happenstance — everything about the store is carefully planned by Scott.

“I literally pick every piece that’s in here for its quality and condition,” Scott explains.

When garments are in need of some extra help, Kayla comes to the rescue with her sewing expertise.

“I do a lot of the restoration work, a lot of the mending, some of the intense stuff that needs taking care of so that it’s wearable for other people and off the shelf, and that’s part of
the curation that we do here too,” Kayla says.

This work takes a delicate and gentle touch; however, there is a simplicity to the way that vintage pieces were crafted that Kayla finds easy to work with compared to modern-day clothing.

“A lot of our stuff is handmade. So, when it touches my hands I’m able to pick up where that person had left off,” she says.

The attention to the proper cleaning and care for each piece truly makes old feel like new. The drabby smell and overall dingy feel of stores like Goodwill are not present at Three Rivers.

The tag might indicate 20th century and the patterns and styles might be so far removed from any fashion today, but the condition of the garments doesn’t feel aged a day.

Carefully handling a dress in a plastic cover and examining the handwritten “1960s” on the tag fills one with an overwhelming sense of curiosity of all the places it has been.

It’s an unfortunate reality that in 50 years, vintage clothing stores sporting styles of the 2020s will likely be rare. The admiration for retro fashion might be timeless, but all modern clothing is not.

“The clothes made today are disposable. It’s not made well, it’s not quality,” Scott says. “You know the clothes from H&M and American Eagle and those mall brands aren’t going to be around in 50, 60, 70 years, ’cause they just aren’t made as well as these [clothes] are.”

Everything has an expiration date — one day, even the clothes at Three Rivers will be lost to time. Until then, Three Rivers offers the unique opportunity to own a sliver of history.

Scott’s little shop on East Carson gives its customers the chance to continue the story of garments long forgotten — the ability to take a dress that hasn’t done the twist since homecoming 1966 and once again dance all night long is truly priceless. ●

The vintage clothing and accessories at Three Rivers seem to take shop visitors back in time.

The vintage clothing and accessories at Three Rivers seem to take shop visitors back in time.
RAIN OR SHINE, IT’S LUNCHTIME

The pandemic hasn’t stopped John Morrow Primary’s food service staff from providing for students

Ollie Gratzinger

Photo by Katia Faroun
A boy in a bright yellow Spongebob Squarepants sweatshirt trudges up the hill, flanked by a smaller redhead with basketball shorts and a gap in his teeth. They chat eagerly about nothing in particular, racing along the perimeter of a rusted chain fence and hopping through pothole puddles.
Once they come to the courtyard of the school — pale stone walls, red brick, black-top and a muddy sprouting garden — they pull their masks up over their chins and turn their attention ahead to the table set up just inside the front doors.

“Excuse me?” calls the boy in the cartoon jumper. “Can we pick up some lunch, please?”

It’s just another day at John Morrow Primary, located in the North Side’s Brighton Heights neighborhood. The ruddy brick building seemed to fit the scene, sitting unassumingly beneath a gray city sky. It’s part of the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) district, and despite pandemic-related closures and remote learning, food service staff haven’t missed a day. They’ve been carrying on, bagging up and distributing lunches for an average of 130-150 neighborhood families — some of whom might otherwise go without.

“It’s a hefty bag. There has to be something a kid likes!” laughs Paula Gregory, sitting across the table in a low seat made for kindergarteners. She typically works in the cafeteria at Morrow Intermediate down the street, but has since been posted at the elementary school to help with food distribution.

“White milk, chocolate milk, a juice — either orange or apple — a can of fruit. There could be some goldfish, and then there will be a breakfast item like a [doughnut] stick or cereal,” she explains. Behind her, a few other workers are assembling the bagged meals. “A lunch could be pizza, and we have some type of vegetable in there, whether it be potatoes or peas or corn. It’s quite a lot for one bag, and a bag goes to each student.”

Like many schools, Morrow Primary closed in early March when the coronavirus pandemic pressed pause on life as we knew it. It serves students from Brighton Heights, Northview Heights, Perry South and other parts of the Upper North Side, where poverty rates climb as high as 70%.

According to Feeding America, COVID-19 has been especially disruptive to vulnerable groups including the food insecure; a significant rise in unemployment and a corresponding rise in child poverty would result in a total of 18 million children experiencing food insecurity. That proportion is roughly 25%.

“In the city, you have a lot of situations that aren’t terrific, so you want the kids to get fed no matter what,” Paula says.

While most of the recipients of Morrow Primary’s food distribution program are locals who walk there, Paula also says she delivers to four families for whom transportation is an issue.

“We try to adapt to have everybody get a lunch. We don’t want any kid to go hungry. That’s the goal,” she says. “I think it’s working pretty well — at least for our school.”

Morrow is one of 16 distribution centers district-wide. It’s open from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m., and most folks come during a short rush right around lunch time.

In addition to daily food packs — called Grab-and-Go lunches — students can also pick up a plant kit from a table marked Grab-and-Grow on the other side of the courtyard, near the entrance to the auditorium.

“[Children can choose from] peas, beans or chives. It comes with a bucket, it comes with the dirt, it comes with the seeds. It’s really cool,” Paula says. Another worker explains that she’s trying to grow chives at home — not because she likes the taste, but because they’re pretty when they bloom.

Grab-and-Grow is part of a science project for first graders, provided in conjunction with Grow Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, PPS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Over the summer, attendance and pick-up rates were lower, and there were only two workers at each of the 16 food distribution locations. But now with the school year back in full-swing, Morrow Primary has eight workers on-hand.

“Our director didn’t want to lay anybody off, so she said, ‘Okay, everybody’s going back to work,’” Paula says. “I commend Food Service for wanting everyone to go back to work, helping everybody out.”

And despite working throughout the duration of
the pandemic — even as positive case reports trended upward — Paula says she never felt unsafe. All the workers at Morrow Primary stay a safe distance apart and wear masks and gloves while assembling the bags and distributing the food. Most of the families coming to pick up wear proper protective gear, too.

“I think it’s been a safe environment. I have no qualms. If anybody didn’t feel well, of course we told them to stay home,” Paula says. “But really, it’s been fine. There’s nobody around except us and the custodians.”

This is a sentiment shared by Dorothy Derbish, a food service worker at Morrow Primary who has been in the business since 1998 — and in Morrow’s cafeteria for more than 10 years.

“We wear our masks all the time. We wear our gloves all the time. We’re spaced out, too. We aren’t all clustered,” she says.

But safe as it is, it hardly negates the sense of strangeness felt as the world continues to adapt to a so-called new normal. There are parts of the old normal that many dearly miss, and for folks who have been in the PPS food industry for as long as Dorothy and Paula, the transition has been surreal.

“I miss the routine. I miss the moving around,” Dorothy says. “The day went so fast because you were always doing something. I miss cooking.”

Standing off school grounds on the cracked public sidewalk, she lights a cigarette.

“But this is the new normal. I wonder how long it’s going to last?”

Kids are scheduled to return to in-person classes in the Pittsburgh Public School district on Nov. 5, 2020, but the workers at Morrow are skeptical that the return will be a success — or that it’ll happen at all.

“I don’t see it happening, but we’ll see,” Paula says. “The parents are real concerned, as I would be too if I had little ones. I cannot see them wearing a mask all day in school.”

While it was previously assumed that children were all but immune to the coronavirus, recent studies have tracked an uptick in positive cases as many primary schools around the country start to reopen. Children of all ages now make up 10% of all U.S. cases, up from 2% in April, according to the Associated Press.

“I don’t know if it’ll be ready [on Nov. 5]. I’m looking forward to going back to normal, but I want to be safe, too,” Dorothy says.

A mother with five little ones in tow makes her way through the courtyard, and the kids point excitedly at the plants in the garden. They receive their Grab-and-Go lunches, complete with enough food and drink to fill their bellies for a day, and promise to be back tomorrow. In the basement cafeteria, a trio of workers are pre-assembling the packs they’ll pick up then.

“So many parents come in and thank us. There’s so many that are really appreciative, and they’ll say, ‘Thank you guys for what you’re doing, you don’t know how big of a help this is,’” Dorothy says. “It makes you feel good.”●
For many reasons, the 2020 Presidential Election was one like no other. A polarized nation in the midst of a pandemic set the scene for a week of tension, confusion and emotion. The stories in this section share unique moments from Nov. 3 as seen from the eyes of our writers.
A writer reflects on being a first-time voter — and a victim of COVID-19

Gillian Fitzgerald

Courtesy of Gillian Fitzgerald
Participating in Election Day from my couch isn’t exactly what I had hoped for, but thanks to technology and the all-consuming media we can’t live without, I’ll be kept up-to-date every second of the day.

Testing positive for COVID-19 days before the election is not something I ever expected but, then again, it’s 2020 — I should expect the unexpected at this point. And although the election causes anxiety in us all, the idea of not participating is far worse.

Between the last day to request absentee ballots on Oct. 27 to Election Day on Nov. 3, thousands of people tested positive for COVID-19. Luckily, there’s a system in place that takes this into consideration: the emergency absentee ballot.

Voting by emergency absentee may not be the same as going to the polls, but I and many others will happily settle for this over nothing at all. I have a feeling in my stomach that this election will be long and arduous — but maybe that’s just from Covid.

Before
Symptoms: Sore throat, slight cough, nervousness, frustration.

“The good news is the test came back early,” Nurse Bree said. “The bad news is that means it’s positive.”

As I sat there tearing up at Duquesne’s Health Services, the truth is COVID-19 wasn’t the main cause of my distress. The first thought racing through my mind wasn’t, “How am I going to get through this?” It was on a different, but just as worrisome topic: “How am I going to vote?”

It was Friday, Oct. 30 and the election was coming up. I was only four days away from taking all the stress and hope I have to the polls. Though I was ready to use my voice, my infected body wasn’t. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew there was no way I wasn’t voting.

After walking home as fast as possible with an N-95 mask on, I immediately opened my laptop and looked up “how to vote with Covid” — a dismaying phrase I typed in with a sigh. I read article after article and website after website until finding my answer in the emergency absentee ballot.

It was made for occasions like a pandemic and allows citizens to designate someone to pick up their ballot and turn it in for them as well. I needed to submit an application to receive this ballot, but there were no instructions on how to do this or how to designate someone as the ballot receiver and runner.

Calling the County Elections Office for help, I was No. 24 on hold, waited 20 minutes, and once I was finally put in touch with a person, they transferred my call and it went straight to voicemail. This process happened three more times.

Waiting for a call back that would never come, I was frustrated and unsure of how to continue. I couldn’t leave my house, couldn’t get through to the election office and couldn’t get any more information online about what to do.

I refused to entertain the idea that I may not get to vote in one of the most important presidential elections in my lifetime. I would vote and I would not endanger others to do it — I just needed to find a way to contact Allegheny County Elections while in quarantine. Not so hard, right?

During
Symptoms: Headache, stomach pains, anxiety, excitement.

When the County Elections Office opened at 8:30 a.m. on Monday morning, my roommate and I drove up and flicked on our flashers outside the Downtown building. I put the window down so there was only a small slit wide enough to slide my emergency ballot application through. My friend Maria Paula Quintero stood on the other side to grab it.

In hopes of receiving my ballot as my official designee, she went inside while I stayed in the car watching others pull up to drop off their ballots. Cars came and went, but many proudly expressed who they were voting for that day with “Women for Trump” or “Biden, Harris” bumper stickers. Masks on and gloves gripping envelopes, the
people of Pittsburgh showed up to take part in democracy, even if they weren’t there to vote.

Whether it be employees from Public Works dealing with traffic, the Democracy is Delicious food truck handing out granola bars or my roommate Grace O’Grady taking the time to drive me, everyone was doing their part to make sure the people’s voices are heard.

When Maria walked out of the front doors almost half an hour later, I just about jumped out of my seat. She secured my ballot and slid it through the window while a public works official approached our car — after all, we had been parked for a while. When I held up a piece of paper that said, “I have Covid, filling out absentee ballot,” he held two thumbs up and made sure I took my time. A team effort I was thankful for.

As I sat in the passenger seat and filled out my ballot, I smiled under my mask and blackened the empty bubble next to “Joseph R. Biden, Kamala Harris” on the page in front of me. Just a few days prior, I feared the virus would stop me from voting, but once in a while, worry will get me up early when I know the day ahead of me is important. And Nov. 3 is an important day.

With the relief of voting yesterday comes the fear of the actual results. Knowing how confusing the procedure is voting emergency absentee, I also fear so many with COVID-19 decided not to vote because of it. However, fellow Covid-positive voter Halie Smith was just as determined as I was.

“I am making my vote count,” Halie texted me.

Seeing her share the process over Twitter on Monday, Halie posted a tweet asking for help: “hey twitter! if my house is under quarantine due to Covid, how are we able to go about voting? I can’t figure out where to submit the emergency ballot app form & all the phones are busy. pls help!!!”

She received a response from a volunteer of Common Cause, an organization that advocates for accountable government, and found out where and when to submit the correct forms. Halie sent a friend, Alyse Kaminski, as her designee to submit her emergency absentee ballot today.

“Friends help friends vote,” Alyse shared on her Instagram story.

Getting Covid at the high point of our political crisis was less than ideal for me and so many others. According to the Department of Health, there were over 3,000 positive cases reported in Pennsylvania from Sunday to Monday. So, as I sit on my couch now, I just hope they were able get through the long process too. Every person has the right to vote even if they are quarantining, but spending days figuring out how to do it was almost as stressful as waiting for results now.

Impatiently stewing inside doesn’t help, but it’s about all I can do — along with refreshing the election results page every two minutes. I know it will take days to know the outcome because of early votes and mail-in ballots, especially in Pennsylvania. But as someone who had to vote absentee, I’m willing to wait if it means my vote is counted.

I am both hopeful and scared for our country’s future, and the irony of having Covid during an election that could influence the management of the virus doesn’t escape me; rather, it has my chest tight. But, then again, maybe that feeling is from the — well, you know. ●
SEARCHING FOR SKELETONS IN MY MOTHER’S GARDEN

Musings on identity, politics and growing up on Election Day in Trumpian America

Ollie Gratzinger

Photo by Katia Faroun
“Getting the vote out, huh?” asked the man in the cap, his paint-coated hoodie sagging loose on thin shoulders. He seemed keenly aware of the fact that I was out of place in the pot-holed backstreets of Brighton Heights, and well-tuned into the fact that there was only one good reason I’d be there.

“Absolutely,” I replied, tucking my hands into the pocket of my orange coat and wincing at the sun. “I went out early myself, right when things opened up.” He pulled out a box of Newports and lit one. His workman’s clothes, Steelers hat and faint Appalachian accent told the story of a grit-and-grace Pittsburgh man, up at dawn and just passing through, watching passively as cars parked along the battered road and people trickled into the firehouse.

“Wouldn’t miss it if my life depended on it,” I smiled at him. “It might,” he replied solemnly, not a smile to be seen. He walked away, then, without a goodbye, vanishing like a ghost behind the shadowed facade of the North Side library.

“Well,” remarked my mother, with a bit of a huff. “He was cheery.” By all counts except the stranger’s, it was still early. The air was crisp in a way it only ever seems to be before 9 a.m., and though the sky was blue and the sun was high, it was cold. I’ve never been a morning person, but today, I made an exception.

“I thought there’d be a line,” I said to my mother. It was her first time voting. The stakes were just that high. We had a box of rubber gloves and two layers of masks each; nothing could stop us.

“There’s never been a line,” said my father, with a shrug. If there had been, I don’t think he would’ve been too bothered. I’d never seen him bothered about anything short of a home run by the Phillies in the bottom of the ninth.

Inside the firehouse — our polling location — there was a pile of exercise equipment pushed to the side and roped off. At the far end of the near-empty room was a table with a computer monitor on top, and two women sitting nearby with books of names.

“Name?” asked the first woman. “Ashlee Gratzinger,” I told her. My given name felt strange in my mouth, like a flavor I’d tasted once a long while back but hadn’t quite liked enough to ever try again. No one had called me Ashlee since primary school. No one, of course, except for the U.S. government.

“Ashlee, with two e’s, and Gratzinger, with a Z.” Her eyes narrowed for a beat, and then she looked up at me from behind thick-framed glasses.

“I’m going to need to see an ID, baby.”

I already had my driver’s license in my hand. This is a dance I am very used to.

Satisfied, the second woman passed me a sheet that I signed, and then a third poll worker ushered me along to the computer screen. I cast my vote, got my sticker and put a picture of it on Twitter. Behind me, my parents followed suit.

We were in and out in less than 10 minutes. After hearing stories of hours-long wait times around the state, I’d come prepared with a day’s supply of hand sanitizer and a book in my bag. But with time to spare before I had to be home to start working on election coverage, we made a quick pit stop at McDonalds for eggs and coffee, and we ate it in my father’s dying Chevrolet Impala.

“Mom?” I asked from the backseat. “Why’d you decide to vote this year?”

“Our country is in chaos,” she replied sternly, as-a-matter-of-factly, without looking away from the road in front of her. “I want everything to go back to the way that it was.”

My roommate got home in the same rush as always, untucking his scarf from his tan coat as he stepped into the house.

“How was it?” I called from the kitchen. I’d put the kettle on, and a cup of Earl Grey was brewing on the counter.

“Fine,” he replied, unbothered. “Was there a line?”

“I’m pretty sure I was the only one in there, actually.” He draped his coat over the back of a chair and turned on the sink to wash away any germs he might’ve picked up at the voting booth.

I sat down at the table and opened Twitter. An old coworker of mine from a local paper was standing in line in McCandless for hours. Another, somewhere in the North Hills, had tweeted that the line wrapped around the block.
“I guess we got lucky,” I said. “Hopefully that luck sticks around.”

We share a lot of things. We’ve been best friends for nearly three years, and we’ve lived together since our time in university dorms. Two things we share are a far-left mentality and a sense of smallness in the grand scheme of things. The world is big and broad and almost everything important is out of our control.

“If Biden wins,” I began, “do you think there’s going to be a peaceful transfer of power?”

“Absolutely not,” he replied honestly, filling a pot with water and searching through the pantry for a box of mac and cheese.

A package arrived at the door addressed to me. I didn’t order anything. The imaginative kid in me started to think about the episodes of Criminal Minds my mother used to watch when I was little — specifically, the one in which a little girl picked up a package from her front porch and was promptly, without any warning, blown to bits.

As a child, I was secretly enthralled with the guts and gore of the horror genre. It felt taboo, so subversive to the quietness within me, and I was a born and bred rebel. When I was about nine or so, older kids in the neighborhood told me that my house was built on an ancient burial ground. (Spoiler alert: It wasn’t.) But instead of worrying about curses or hauntings, I made it my mission to upend my mother’s tomato plants in search of hidden skeletons and forgotten graves, all because the world told me these things were meant to be scary and from a very young age, I think I had a point to prove: I am not afraid of anything.

And it was that same stubborn refusal to admit fear that led me to plop the package down on my kitchen table.

“Open it,” urged my roommate. I gave him a cautious look. “What if it’s a bomb?”

“You aren’t important enough to get assassinated yet,” he reminded me, and I couldn’t help but agree.

I cut it open. There was a sleek red box, and inside of it, a dozen little chocolates shaped like ladybugs.

“Thanks for all you do,” read a card stuck to the top of it. “You’re a rock star.”

It was from my supervisor of my internship, a sweet surprise in the midst of a bitter election that would have me, a hapless political reporter, up all night. I laughed, partially out of relief that I hadn’t been blown up, and partially out of amusement at my own nihilism. Mean world syndrome, I thought. I should probably watch less TV.

“Why are you awake, lol?”

“I’m so terrified right now,” read a Snapchat from a guy I hadn’t talked to since high school. “We can’t do another four years of this Nazi.”

“Biden’s looking good,” I snapped him back. “So far, so good.”

I paused and typed out another line.

“Why are you awake, lol?”

“Up drinking!” It should’ve been obvious. “Want to come over?”

I could never stomach the taste of beer, and despite the distraction of an election, there was still a pandemic on and I wasn’t eager to go anywhere. I laughed out loud to an empty living room and replied with a picture of my laptop, strewn with Excel data sheets and half-written articles.

“Tempting offer,” I captioned it. “But I’m working all night.”

“Take care of yourself,” he said. “Yeah,” I responded. The president was set to deliver a press conference sometime before 3 a.m., and I was set to write about it. “You, too.”

Across the street, there’s a GetGo. It’s the only one I’ve seen of its kind — unwedded to a gas station, just a stray convenience store plopped in between two alley streets. In its parking lot — maybe a hundred feet from my front door — a white pick-up truck rolled up blasting “Proud to be an American.”

“Well,” my roommate reached for his beer. “That makes one of us.”
Dawn breaks on the morning of Nov. 3 to reveal an ocean blue sky, one the city hasn’t seen for almost a week. The sunshine is startling and almost distracting enough to make anyone forget, at least for a moment, that this particular day begins what would quickly become called America’s Election Week.

One of my roommates wanders into the living room and joins me in looking out the large window that faces Downtown. After pondering the view for a moment, she turns to me, eyebrows raised and mouth agape. AirPods in, her voice comes out a little louder than expected.

“The sky looks so blue today.”

From the outside, the day seems like a normal weekday on a college campus. Students rush down the stairs of campus residence halls at 9:15 a.m., aiming to be early to their 9:25 a.m. class. Others log onto Zoom from their bedrooms, still in pajamas and with a cup of coffee brewing in the kitchen.

As everyone files into the classroom, virtual or not, a certain tension is felt in the air. The silence before the professor begins class is filled with unasked questions. Are we going to talk about this? How careful are they going to be? I wonder who they voted for?

All eyes on the professor.

“How’s everyone doing today?” asks Environmental Justice professor Tiffany Taulton. Blank stares. She sends out a poll, with “Did you already vote?” woven in between questions relating to the previous class assignment.

“It’s a pretty nerve-wracking day, I think,” she says, before moving on to cover the day’s topics.

It’s the same pretty much everywhere, including Steve Mellon’s Video News Gathering and Field Production class.

“Who’s already voted?” he inquires. Two in-person students raise their hands, and the black boxes on Zoom remain black boxes. “Well, those who haven’t voted yet, vote,” he says in response. And he proceeds with the lecture.
But as classes start, students pull up red and blue maps of the country on their computer screens. Eyes flick back and forth as online students stare at their screens, reading headlines instead of PowerPoint slides. The anticipation of whatever would have come from a discussion — heat, controversy, empathy, curiosity — dissipates, and class on Election Day remains just class.

A block away from the university, men and women in neon yellow vests direct traffic along Forbes Avenue between the Allegheny County Courthouse and the City County Building. Drivers turn on their flashers and rub their tires along the curb before stepping out of their cars, white envelopes in hand.

Young voters walk briskly into the City County Building’s side entrance, passing slow-moving elders and workers sharing a smoke. Signs advertising “ballot returns” direct a light flow of individuals up the stairs and to the right, where they hand off their ballots to a masked and gloved worker. They exchange a few words, nod heads in confirmation and turn around to leave again.

A young man approaches the entrance before stopping dead in his tracks. He pats his pockets, front and back, and hesitates before entering the building.

“Need a mask?” asks one of the men in the yellow vests. Before the young man can respond, he reaches into his vest pocket and pulls out a stack of surgical masks, handing one to the man. The voter thanks the mask-distributor before putting it on and turning to head inside.

As men and women exit the building, they walk over to their cars, chins tucked against their chests as they peel their “I Voted” stickers off of their labels and attach them to their shirts. Almost as soon as one car pulls away, another takes its spot.

The blue sky turns orange, then pink, then dark blue as my roommates and I gather on the couch and loveseat in our living room. A laptop is hooked up to the TV’s HDMI cable, and ABC News’ Tom Llamas appears on the screen, enlarging a digital image of Virginia’s red and blue counties.

Eight eyes are glued to the TV. My roommates try in vain to focus on the notebooks in their laps, and occasionally scroll through their phones before being drawn back to the larger screen.

“There was one Biden sign in the area,” Katie’s saying, as she talks to my roommates about her experience voting in-person in her hometown of Mars. Her eyes are bright, and her smile never leaves her face. “I did see a handful of Trump cardboard cutouts, so that’s always good.” Sarcasm, with a hint of amusement, fills her voice.

Her sister calls. Outside of the living room, they catch up, and the raspy voice of George Stephanopoulos replaces Katie’s for a moment.

“How much does one vote actually matter?” Katie finally asks, her eyelids lowered in skepticism. A silence settles over the room, as our roommates exchange glances, unsure how to answer the question. I peer out the window, and a pattern of glowing lights makes the Steel Tower stand out in the night, a projection of the American flag standing tall in the sky. ●
Journalists usually share the words of others, leaving their own thoughts behind. But in this section, our writers used their voices to speak up about what matters to them, and what they want others to hear.
I absolutely love being a writer. I’ve known this is what I wanted to do from the moment I got my primary school press pass in 2006 and got to write about the Scholastic Book Fair for my third-grade class newspaper. Being a storyteller is as fundamental a part of my identity as being queer, and that’s why it feels so strange to me when it’s implied I cannot be both at once.

It’s a mean old world out there, and being a journalist in the midst of it all is certainly no easy task. With the pandemic, what happens outside the newsroom is pretty chaotic now, but for writers who identify as non-binary, there are difficulties which arise from within the newsroom, too.
Non-binary is one of many terms for a gender identity which doesn’t align entirely with the binary identities, male and female. Non-binary folks sometimes prefer alternatives to the traditional “he/him” and “she/her” pronoun sets. Most common is “they/them,” which is used as a gender-neutral singular rather than a plural, though some folks prefer “neo-pronouns” like “xe/xem/xyr,” “ze/hir/hirs” and “ey/em/eir.”

The Associated Press Stylebook — the journalist’s Bible — took a big step in 2017 to allow the use of singular “they” in limited cases, but for us queer reporters, that isn’t quite enough.

“They/them/their is acceptable in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun, when alternative wording is overly awkward or clumsy. However, rewording usually is possible and always is preferable. Clarity is a top priority; gender-neutral use of a singular they is unfamiliar to many readers. We do not use other gender-neutral pronouns such as xe or ze,” it reads. “Use the person’s name in place of a pronoun, or otherwise reword the sentence, whenever possible. If they/them/their use is essential, explain in the text that the person prefers a gender-neutral pronoun.”

I've always hated this policy. Granted, it’s an improvement from forbidding singular “they” altogether, and in journalism history, advancement is made through baby steps. The New York Times didn’t allow gay couples to print announcements of their civil unions in the society pages until 2002 (the wedding announcements of heterosexual couples were warmly welcomed). And prior to 1987, The New York Times did not permit use of the word “gay” at all, insisting instead on the clinical and often pejorative “homosexual.”

But still, the press has historically played a massive role in influencing public opinion. If mainstream newspapers fail to recognize certain queer identities, it follows that the public will fail to recognize those identities, too. Transgender reporters were not involved in the writing of the Stylebook; it seems counterintuitive to the storytelling nature of journalism that folks who don’t share our identity try to tell us how we’re allowed to talk about it. And unfortunately, queer journalists are sometimes pushed out of the industry entirely because their identities are reduced to a Stylebook violation, and they’re boxed into writing about exclusively queer issues.

I’ve been commissioned to write essays about my experience as a non-binary trans person, and in these essays, I’ve borne my soul for the public eye. I’ve made a spectacle of something that’s a rather small part of my identity because people, with our fascination for the macabre, want to read about what they think will be the mortifying ordeal of being different. But it’s really not like that at all.

True, I was fired from a job once for being trans because my boss was an Evangelical Christian who refused to sign my paycheck until I accepted the Word of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But I’m privileged in that I was able to walk out laughing. I didn’t rely on that job to feed a family, or to pay tuition, or to keep a house. Not everyone would’ve been so lucky.

This all goes to say that no trans experience is the same. And in its attempt to universalize queerness, the AP Stylebook is actually working against the interest of readers and failing to tell the whole truth.

For gender-variant folks who have braved the cold of unsupportive newsrooms, the Trans Journalists Association was formed in 2020 to “support trans journalists in their workplaces and careers,” according to its website. Part of its mission was to produce a stylebook of its own, which better reflects the nuance of the queer experience.

“When a non-binary source is introduced, reporters often include a phrase explaining their gender. Not only are these definitions often inaccurate, but they’re also unnecessary and treat trans people like oddities. The public is aware that non-binary people exist, and this level of explanation is no longer necessary,” it says. “They/them pronouns are only confusing when stories are written poorly. When a source uses less common pronouns, it’s acceptable to have a quick, appositive phrase mentioning their pronouns.”

This is a much better way to approach writing about queer identity — and it’s sanctioned by actual queer folks. As Bob Dylan sang, the times, they are a’changin’, and it’s the duty of the Associated Press — and journalists everywhere — to keep up.
“What’s up, baby girl?” the kitchen line cook yells to me as I walk in for my shift. This is the typical greeting I get — something I don’t even bother fighting. I just say a casual “hey” back to him and get ready for work.

Having to change in the not-so-private break room, I make sure I’m early in hopes of being the first one there. I put on my uniform dress that’s too tight and too low, and tie my hair back out of the way. Shoes on and skin revealed, I get on the floor and see where my section is at.

Swiftly moving from table to table, I take orders and bring drinks. Then I take some more
orders and bring plates of food. And then — you guessed it — take more orders and bring over checks, all while weaving in and out of customers and co-workers.

5:30 p.m. You don’t need to put your hand on my lower back to walk by.

“Hi guys, how we doing today?” I start my spiel, as I do for all my tables. “My name’s Gillian and I’ll be your server today. Can I start you all with some drinks or appetizers?”

Rushing around with heavy trays and sloshing cups of fizzy soda or foamy beer — both of which I’ve spilled three, four, five too many times — I can see the disregard they have for me as a person just trying to make a decent wage. Instead, I know I am just a means to an end, an underpaid therapist or someone to stare at.

I am a waitress.

The restaurant industry is quite similar no matter where you go. It’s a work culture that is frequently replicated and not-so-frequently questioned. In all three restaurants I’ve worked at, misogyny is always apparent.

Making myself invisible is all I want to do, but it’s hard to make money when you don’t smile big, laugh at jokes or make conversation with the lonely ones. My tips are my paycheck, so that 20% is the only way to end the night with any income when I get $2.83 hourly.

Giving a customer his check, he follows me into the server hutch to ask, “Where are you from? How old are you? Are you in school?” He stands too close for comfort in a place where customers aren’t supposed to stand at all, but I politely answer his questions while smelling the booze on his breath.

I swipe his card, give him a pen to sign and continue entertaining the conversation until he has officially paid.

7:45 p.m. Suck it up for the tip.

He tips me the same amount his bill was. I know it wasn’t the service that prompted it — I’m not that good of a waitress. I let out a sigh of relief as he stumbles out and leaves.

When I head back to the kitchen to check on my table’s food, I am confronted with more discomfort as raw as the burgers they were putting on the grill.

“Mmm mmm, if only I was 20 years younger,” another kitchen guy says to me.

I cringe but laugh it off. When your job description is being bubbly and booby, it’s all you can do.

I feel lucky that my entire existence doesn’t rely on this job. As a college student looking to make some money and pay bills while in school, it serves its purpose for the time being. But other servers don’t have that luxury.

Most of my coworkers depend on their tips for everything: groceries, rent, car payments, a family. This job is how they fully support themselves and others, but unfortunately the environment itself isn’t supportive of waitresses, and neither are the uniforms.

I go to a table where a husband and wife sit and set their silverware down in front of them. As I describe the beers we have on tap, I watch the man’s eyes flicker up and down like a light switch.

9 p.m. My eyes aren’t on my chest.

Another table comments on my rosy cheeks and asks why I’m blushing. Naturally, my face reddens when running around with heavy plates of food and making sure everyone gets what they need — or what I like to call doing my job. But when creepy businessmen ask me about it, the blood will also naturally rush to my face.

As I finish my side work and closing shift duties, I’m itching to get out of my uniform and put on a big sweatshirt that will shield me from this place. Clocking out, I get ready for my walk home and say goodnight to the coworkers I like while simultaneously hoping I don’t run into the ones I don’t. I unscrew my smile on my way out and put in my headphones. The cash secured in my apron convinces me it’s all worth it.

11:45 p.m. Why does he think it’s okay to call me baby girl?
Though it’s in the name, a photographer’s goal should not be a photo-op.

Merriam-Webster defines “behold” as to gaze upon, usually something of impressive beauty. Multiple religions place an emphasis on beholding the glory of nature, and some treat nature as its own deity. The Judeo-Christian worldview encourages believers to see God’s presence in nature and to respect it as part of what he created “in the beginning.” Aesthetic philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, use nature as a basis to analyze judgments of beauty. It’s evident that in the metaphysical realm, nature is revered and respected as at least complex and at most holy.

But now, nature seems to play a different role.

I’ve been blessed with experiencing countless stunning landscapes — ones of majestic mountains, colorful skies at sunset or deep blue oceans splashing against a rocky coast. Almost as soon as my eyes land on the scene, I whip out my camera and spend the next 10 minutes clicking open the shutter, shift-
ing inches to the left and right to get the perfect angle and bumping my exposure up to get the best lighting. At minute 11, I take a look out of the viewfinder and face an exhausted scene somehow not as striking as it is on my camera display — and walk away, already scheduling what time an Instagram post that evening would gather me the most likes.

Only later does the guilt set in — that I’m blessed with the responsibility of documenting a fleeting, once-in-a-lifetime piece of history, but instead of beholding the spectacle with my eyes, I see it through an expensive hunk of glass. I approached a piece of natural beauty, a combination of the wonderful and awe-inspiring forces of nature and science, and abused it by viewing it in angles, white balance and framing.

Yes, a photographer’s responsibility is to photograph compelling images — and sometimes time puts limitations on a photographer’s ability to fully enjoy the scene they’re taking photos of. But it’s also our responsibility as visitors of this planet to respect it and honor its greatness. The temptation to view a spectacle of nature as a 12-by-8 canvas is just another form of exploitation of the natural world — a way to demean the grandeur of Earth by seeing it as something to consume, rather than to behold.

Today, beholding nature seems like a lost art. Technology has brought recent generations an abundance of convenience and joy: ways to communicate with loved ones across the world, document important life moments and access more information than ever imagined. But as always with convenience, there comes the temptation to take for granted exactly what this technology is granting us access to. Exhibit A: photographers who see beauty as just a pretty picture.

However, it’s not always photographers that commit this crime. Tourists walk down city streets taking selfies with La Sagrada Familia and spend lunch editing iPhone pictures of the beach they’re sitting on. Teenagers seek out scenic places and spend their time taking photos of each other “for the Gram,” not stopping for one moment to admire the beauty they’re trampling. It’s a bad habit egged on by digital photography and rewards in the form of likes, comments and follows.

The truth is, it’s easy for photographers to get caught up in our job. Our natural urge when seeing something beautiful or photo-worthy is to capture it — and to capture it well. Framing, lighting, shadows and contrast are all necessary to creating an impactful image. But these techniques are inherently distracting, and it’s inevitable for any photographer to not be truly in the moment when on the job.

However, with all things, there’s a balance. While it may not be possible for photographers to be looking on from a first person point of view when taking photos, it is possible — and essential — for us to take a moment and simply be a human beholding a marvel of nature.

It’s a humbling experience to recognize the complexity of nature and our finiteness as human beings. Voyager 1’s 1990 image of Earth surrounded by the vastness of space reminded mankind just how small the pale blue dot we call home actually is. And to be reminded of our seemingly insignificant mark on the history of the universe forces us to reckon with our pride and egos.

For at our core, we are all human beings. Yes, we may wear a lab coat or a press badge or a hardhat, and for a moment resort to this temporary identity. But first and foremost, we are complex anatomical beings, consisting of nerve endings and blood vessels and various biological systems. We are the result of millions of years of natural development and evolution, and we are still far from perfect beings.

Though the existence of the human race may only be a small fingernail shaving off the span of time, there are things that have lasted much longer. There are mountains and ravines, canyons and oceans, volcanoes and waterfalls that rise and fall at Earth’s command. And as we enjoy our short time on this beautiful planet, we can humbly look on, reminded of our identities as its visitors.

As the book of Genesis so fondly reminds us, “For dust you are, and to dust you will return.” Who are we to exploit this wonder-filled planet by shoving DSLRs and smartphones in its face? We at least owe it the respect of beholding its natural, non-man made beauty, and making that the image we walk away with.

Put the camera down. Enjoy the view.
No Need to Call a Therapist: The Psychology Behind Our (Normal) Attraction to Crime

Bailey Lis
We are attracted to chaos. Whether it be a riot, a car wreck, a fire or that couple fighting slightly too loudly in public, we are drawn towards anything that disrupts the peace — not to mention the hundreds of crime movies, TV shows, podcasts, books, etc., depicting stories of gruesome murders and kidnappings available at the snap of our fingers.

Yet, the question is ... why are we so intrigued with crime? Is it because we are so amazed at the thought of someone committing such acts? Are we interested in learning how to be safer so we do not become a victim of these crimes? Or, is there a little part of us that is afraid that we could be the killer on the other side of the screen?

Many people believe they are not normal if they enjoy this genre of entertainment. Some people might even feel judged when they bring up the newest serial killer documentary. While this fascination may feel a little odd, there is a completely reasonable explanation for our intrigue, and it all stems back to our psyche.

Whether or not you’re well educated in psychology, the subconscious is something we’ve learned in the most basic psychology class. Sigmund Freud was one of the first psychologists to study the unconscious mind, and created the Freudian model of the unconscious, which we still use today. In this model, Freud believed that many thoughts of life and death were stored in the unconscious. This creates a strong correlation between your repressed thoughts about death and a show or a movie about death.

For example, if you’re curled up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn, watching Netflix’s Ted Bundy Tapes, your subconscious is processing thoughts or feelings we internalize about death in this manner. Due to the fact that you are thankfully not the victim of this crime, your brain unknowingly creates serotonin because you are safe — for now, at least.

You may feel a little weird to feel grateful and happy after a movie like this, but you can blame your subconscious for that.

Another factor in the obsession with crime is simple human interest. Psychologist and philosopher William James explained that curiosity was essentially the desire to understand aspects of life that we do not understand personally. As humans, we are conditioned to connect with other humans and take an interest in their lives. Whether that interest involves wondering how the man on the sidewalk begging for money became homeless or what the inside of your teacher’s house looks like, human interest is embedded in all of us.

To appeal to this desire of relatability, many true crime shows, fact or fiction, create a victim or perpetrator that you can relate to. This sparks curiosity, or human interest, as we search for a little bit of ourselves in the characters.

Many of the stories also tend to follow the same plot line as well: The girl disappears on her way to work, the boy never makes it home after the party, etc. These plot lines revolve around experiences we know all too well, which makes us more interested because we see how easily that could be us.

While you may feel you are to blame for being obsessed in these dark topics, it’s something that has been basically forced onto you from a young age. Think about what is being covered every time a news station is on: a stabbing, a kidnapping, a robber on the loose, etc.

Of course there was never a day you sat down and decided to become interested in serial killers, but when we are exposed so much to a certain topic, we are programmed for this to be in our psyche, referred to in psychology as your brain being on “auto-pilot.”

So, if you catch yourself choosing a horror movie or murder show next time you open up Netflix, don’t worry — you’re perfectly normal. Whether it be for a sense of comfort or feeling like you relate to the victim, there’s many reasons to enjoy this entertainment.

Unless you relate to the killer ... but that’s a different conversation.
A Brief Encounter with a White Supremacist Group

Griffin Sendek
A unified shout echoed through the streets of Downtown Pittsburgh. As soon as the news networks called the election for Joe Biden, that afternoon, there was bound to be some response — whether it be celebratory sighs of relief or enraged declarations of voter fraud.

But this cry in the streets — it was... different.

Moving closer, I saw red and blue smoke rise above a line of trees along Grant Street; I caught the first glimpse of more than 70 men marching in matching uniforms, flags in hand.

Darting across the busy road, ripping a camera from my bag and slinging it around my neck, I followed the group to the steps of the City County Building, the popular location of many Pittsburgh protests.

I fired off a few shots from my Nikon as more smoke bombs engulfed the area in a deep blue haze. The rest of the group stood solemn and silent as one member began screaming into a megaphone. From the little I could decipher, it was some vicious anti-establishment rhetoric: "Take America back."

"Back from whom? I still had no clue who these people were and why they were here."

As I approached to get a better shot, I was stared down by a man carrying a small riot shield, seemingly guarding the rest of the pack. Even though his sunglasses, I knew I was receiving the death stare.

This group had its own team of photographers, all zipping around like paparazzi.

The moment one photographer spotted me, he stopped in his tracks; we locked eyes for just a second before he brought his camera up to his face. Like a western standoff, I immediately drew mine as we swapped photos of each other.

Though it was an equal exchange, I couldn't help but feel like I lost the duel. My goal was to document. It was clear he pointed the camera to intimidate — and it worked.

By no means was this a typical protest — malice hung in the air thick as the blue smoke. I dared not get any closer.

I crossed the street and got my first glimpse of the banner they carried. "Two Parties One Tyranny." Whatever that means.

I snapped some close-ups of the young man with the megaphone; he couldn't have been much older than myself. As the speech promptly wrapped up, the group started leaving. I instinctively followed. They turned into a nearby parking lot, packed everything up into a U-Haul and drove away in vans.

I checked my watch. It had only been 15 minutes since the first shout. The only trace they left was a handful of empty smoke canisters scattered across the sidewalk.

Quickly cycling through my photos, I zoomed in to read: "Patriot Front."

So that’s who they are.

A quick Google search gave me all the answers I needed. White supremacist, American National-

alist, neo-fascist and neo-Nazi — Patriot Front had every name in the book.

Patriot Front had formed out of the deadly fascist rally in Charlottesville, Va. in 2017. Vanguard America dissolved shortly after the rally, but former member Thomas Rousseau, 18 at the time, took Vanguard America’s platform and followers and rebranded it as Patriot Front. A new splash of paint with all the same hate.

How did I not notice immediately? The matching uniforms, the flags with strange symbols, the armbands, the enraged speeches: They weren’t hiding the fact they’re Nazis. Perhaps I try to see the best in people and don’t immediately assume they’re fascists.

There were no other media present. Other than random passersby with cellphones, I was the only one with any evidence the rally even occurred.

As a journalist, there’s a certain level of excitement and an opportunistic rush that comes with breaking news and knowing you have the scoop. This exhilaration was somewhat diluted by the realization that Nazis now own multiple pictures of me.

I’ve always known that being a reporter could mean putting myself into harm’s way, but I’ve never had to face that reality until now.

For a moment, I debated not publishing; I thought of hiding my byline — a choice in the name of safety... and fear. But I didn’t. I wasn’t going to let Patriot Front intimidate me into silence. •
Pittsburgh is known for its ketchup, sports teams and television personalities. But hidden in the history books are facts and mysteries so intriguing, they prompted investigation that led to the following stories.
HISTORY

THE FALLING SKY

When a B-25 bomber plane crashed into the Mon, it was never seen again — or was it?

Ollie Gratzinger

It’s 1956. America is embroiled in Cold War woes, the Montgomery Bus Boycott is making history, President Dwight D. Eisenhower adds the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance amid a rising tide of McCarthyism and Elvis Presley has his first hit, “Heartbreak Hotel.”

With so much going on, some things were bound to get lost in the shuffle. The B-25 bomber plane that crashed into a Pittsburgh river was not one of those things — but then again, it was.

It was Jan. 31, and the waters of the Monongahela were icy. Maj. William Dotson and five crew members were flying from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada to pick up cargo at Olmstead Air Force Base in Harrisburg. But with fuel low and engines malfunctioning, Dotson was forced to make a hasty decision, guiding his plane over what’s now the Homestead Grays Bridge and splashing down into the 34-degree river. All six crew members survived the initial crash, but two — Capt. Jean Ingraham and Staff Sgt. Walter Soocey — drowned trying to swim to shore, according to clippings in the History Center’s B-25 “Ghost Bomber” collection.

And as for the plane itself — it was never officially seen again.

How do you lose a 16-foot tall plane in a 20-foot deep river? Well, Pittsburghers all have their own ideas.

According to an article on the Heinz History Center’s website, some think the aircraft carried mysterious cargo — a nuclear weapon, or a UFO pulled from the vast deserts of Nevada — and that the U.S. government swooped in to hide the evidence before anyone else could find it. Others think that the Mon, polluted by chemical waste and runoff from the steel mills, essentially melted the plane, leaving only rusted engines and landing gear stuck in the muck deep below the surface of Beck’s Run. Yet others allege that the plane carried Soviet agents or Las Vegas showgirls en route to D.C.

But for Duquesne University archivist Thomas White, who has authored multiple articles about the missing plane, written about it in his book “Legends & Lore of Western Pennsylvania” and even gone out on the river with a team called the B-25 Recovery Group, the mystery is deeper than idle conspiracy talk.

“There’s all these layers to it,” he says. “I had a friend whose dad … was a driver for the Pittsburgh Press delivering papers in the ’50s when this happened, and he was across the river and he swears he saw that plane without the wings on hanging there by its tail.”

Thomas explained that the predominant theory is that the plane was lifted out of the river and chopped up down by J&L Steel Company on the South Side. (For a company used to hauling steel, lifting a comparatively light aluminum plane was no great challenge.) Its wings were allegedly transported away on one barge, and another carried the fuselage downriver to the Coast Guard station.

“Sometimes, you’ll get people who used to work at J&L that say, ‘Oh no it’s all made up,’” and then you get other people who say, ‘Yeah it’s real, it was really taken out,’” he says. “I was told by one guy that officially the union told us, ‘This didn’t happen. If you want to keep your pension, this didn’t happen,’ so everyone acted like it didn’t happen.”

But one question still re-
mains — why?

According to Thomas, the answer might not be as nefarious as one might expect.

“One thing during the Cold War, the U.S. used to cover up a lot of stuff just on principle, just like, ‘We don’t make mistakes.’ There’s all kinds of military mistakes that have happened over the years and they just sort of hush them up,” he says. “It may be that it was something that today we might consider pretty minor. Some people claim there was an extra passenger.”

Thomas says that the newspaper articles from the era were confusing, and that some seemed to indicate that even if you counted the Baldwin police officer who jumped in to help the stranded military men swim to shore, some clippings seem to include an unnamed seventh man.

“Some people even say it was Howard Hughes or something crazy like that,” Thomas says. “A Russian defector, or a mafia figure. Generally, now that it’s getting on in years, I don’t know if we’ll ever really know.”

Others think the plane was never pulled out and instead went to an underground river. But according to Thomas, the aquifer under the city — often incorrectly touted as Pittsburgh’s fourth river — only flows at about five miles per hour.

“The plane can’t just sink into the aquifer and disappear,” he says. “That isn’t how it works.”

And as for the acid river melting away the B-25’s aluminum body?

“People were drinking that water. They found older things in the river that are made of aluminum that didn’t dissolve. It’s not acid,” Thomas says. “And the engine block can’t dissolve. Glass doesn’t dissolve. There’s things that should’ve been found.”

But Thomas admits that without an un-redacted version of the documents detailing the incident, one can never really know for sure what happened that night. And Pittsburghers love a good mystery.

Legend has it that when a tugboat picked up Maj. Dotson and brought him the docks of J&L Steel after the crash, men in suits were already there waiting for him. After a cloak-and-dagger debriefing that lasted about five minutes, Dotson was brought in from the 28-degree air and taken to Montefiore Hospital, where nurses were allegedly instructed not to ask any questions that didn’t relate directly to his medical condition.

When Thomas tried to call Dotson from a Smithsonian affiliate and ask him about the crash years later, the seasoned pilot promptly hung up.

“Some people say it’s because he feels guilty because two people died,” Thomas says. “He had put down planes in the Pacific during World War II and was an experienced pilot, and if there was a fuel leak, that isn’t anybody’s fault.”

Thomas himself believes that the government did pull the plane out and sail it away discreetly down the river, but he doesn’t think it was done without reason.

“I think there must’ve been something they wanted to hide. I don’t know if it’s really anything that would be that shocking. In the ’80s people started saying maybe it had aliens on it, but no. It could’ve been a person, or it could’ve been something chemical or biological or some kind of communication or weapons system that they didn’t want to have known that they lost it,” he says.

“If it was chemical or biological, then they might want to recover that quickly because they weren’t supposed to be working on that stuff, and they didn’t want people to know. And if it gets in the waterway and the drinking water for the city comes out of it, it would be in their best interest to find it before it leaks.”

Whatever really happened, though — and why — will likely remain a mystery forever. Various teams, including the B-25 Recovery Group, have scoured the Mon for clues only to turn up empty handed.

In 2013, reporters from the Post-Gazette dug into the myth and found that not even the file remains in the archive; a team of reporters found notes indicating the existence of a photo portfolio called “Monongahela River — B-25 plane crash, January 31, 1956,” but its location is as much a mystery as the plane’s final resting place.

But for history enthusiasts like Thomas, that’s not a problem at all.

“I kind of hope it never gets solved,” he says. “That would take the fun out of it!”
Pittsburgh is the home of many large inventions: the Big Mac, the retractable dome roof — oh, and Czechoslovakia.

On Memorial Day 1918, Czech and Slovak leaders and activists met in the Moose Hall in Downtown Pittsburgh to begin a two-day event that marked the creation of their future country: Czechoslovakia. The Pittsburgh Agreement officially documented the intent of Czech and Slovak leaders to unite their countries. Back in 1918, Pittsburgh was one of the 10 largest cities in the U.S., busy producing steel and fighting the Spanish Flu. But Slovak and Czech leaders decided that it was the best location to include Americans of their descent, and Duquesne history department chair John Mitcham agrees.

“Pittsburgh has such a large Czech and Slovakian community here, that if you’re going to create a formal document calling for the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia, you don’t want to do it in Oregon or Arizona or Charleston, South Carolina, where there are no large Czech and Slovakian immigrant communities,” Mitcham said.

The goal was to create a singular state out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for Czechs and Slovaks, who shared a similar language, religion and culture. As the empire was dissolving at the end of World War I, groups of Czech and Slovak activists in the U.S. sought to protect their cultures from outside rule by encouraging the unification of the two ethnic groups.

The event wasn’t only Europe’s business. An estimated two million Europeans — a quarter of them Slovaks — had immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Pennsylvania at the end of the 20th century, drawn to Pittsburgh for its coal mining and steel industries.

The work of American Czech and Slovak activists paid off. Across the street from the Benedum Center, leaders from both countries sat down to declare their intent to unite, including the nation’s future president, Tomáš Garrigue-Masaryk. Downtown, more than 10,000 Czechs from across the country joined the Slovaks to celebrate the historic signing, according to estimates by The Pittsburgh Press.

100 years later, this agreement is commemorated by a small plaque standing on the corner of Seventh Street and Penn Avenue. And while Czechoslovakia may no longer exist, Pittsburgh will always hold the title of being its birthplace.

“This is one of these odd experiences where the origins of a state in Europe were actually 4,000 miles away in the city of Pittsburgh,” Mitcham said. “There’s not many examples of national origin stories that follow that kind of trajectory.”
hosts, goblins, ghouls — oh my! Ghost-hunters will get chills and experience paranormal activity as soon as they arrive at Hill View Manor in New Castle, Pa. Patients of the “poor farm,” or “inmates,” as they were referred to, are said to haunt the home in the afterlife.

A troubled orphan boy of around 8 years old is known to be one of the first residents from 100 years ago. Today, people call him Jeffrey, and he reportedly wanders the manor interacting with guests. No one knows what happened to him, but according to the legend — and Haunted Rooms America — those who see Jeffrey will perish.

The building he wanders was first built as a city home in 1867 and turned into an institution in 1926. Mary and Perry Snyder opened the asylum as a place to house outcasts in society — the homeless, elderly and mentally ill.

Hill View was the place where hundreds took their last breath — naturally and by their own hand. Haunted Rooms America states that staff and residents of the facility occasionally jumped off the building or hung themselves, unable to cope with life at the manor. Those without family were buried in unmarked graves near the property.

And although some ghosts have a positive outlook on afterlife, most still hold a grudge. The facility was known for mistreating residents due to lack of staff and resources. Hill View finally closed in 2004. The manor has been abandoned ever since — by the living, that is.

Eric Bollinger housed his grandmother at Hill View before it closed, but removed her due to the neglect she endured. “We took her out after two weeks because of it,” Eric says. Despite the negligence, Eric was drawn to the place because of its ghosts. He is now a tour guide at Hill View and has interactions with spirits every time he “steps foot inside the manor.” In July 2011, Eric says a ghost of a doctor told him that he witnessed the neglect of his grandmother.

While everyone experiences something or someone different at the haunted home, there are ghosts who consistently make themselves known, like Mary Virginia. The ghost of Mary Virginia supposedly wanders the halls of Hill View, but mainly resides in her own room, which is preserved as it was on the day she died there. With dolls covering her bed, jewelry scattered across her dresser and a music player on the nightstand, it’s said her spirit is triggered if guests touch any of her things or play the show tunes she loved when she was an inmate. Don’t worry though — the spirit of Mary Virginia is friendly as long as you entertain her, according to Ellwood City News. The one you really need to worry about? Eli.

Recovering alcoholic Eli Saurri came to the asylum drunk one night and residents helped him to the boiler room to sleep it off and get warm, as stated by Ellwood City News. The next morning, Eli was found dead and has haunted the room where he passed ever since. His angry ghost is known for harassing women by grabbing and pinching them.

Many souls have been unable to peacefully rest at Hill View Manor. While some look for companionship in visitors, others resent the manor for a life of suffering and take it out on guests that treat their afterlife as a tourist attraction.

Though the manor is not for the faint of heart, fear of the hair-raising spirits shouldn’t stop adventurers from visiting them. Besides, what can ghosts really do anyway? Well, besides slamming doors, touching people and moving objects?

Happy haunting.
CIRCLE IS SMALL
Avoiding conflicts of interest is usually necessary in reporting. However, this section makes an exception. The following pieces tell the stories of those within our writers’ inner circles, and how our loved ones experienced the past year.
It’s not going to last that long.”
“They’re just extending spring break, then we’ll be back on campus.”
“It’s just like the flu.”
“It only affects old people.”

For many college students, the beginning of the pandemic was not something to worry about. It was something that was celebrated, an extended spring break, classes canceled for a few days and the Saint Patrick’s Day celebration the following week. After two weeks, Duquesne students would be returning to their dorms or houses, ready to pull all nighters in the library, and squeezing the last bit of partying in before returning home for the summer — or so we thought.

Nine months later, the COVID-19 death rate has risen to 290,000, businesses have been forced to close, semesters have been canceled and seeing somebody without a mask is a stranger occurrence than seeing someone with one.

The term “a new normal” is the phrase used to address the state of our world, as the lifestyle we knew pre-pandemic is an impossible way of living as we head into almost a year of Covid.

Yet what exactly is the new normal? Working from home? Throwing parties over Zoom? Never leaving the house without a mask and a bottle of hand sanitizer? Or is the new normal an unachievable expectation as we are forced to continue life as we know it amid arguably one of the hardest times?

When the semester began, I began noticing all of my friends had the same mindset starting off this semester: “Classes are online this semester — they’ll be easy.”

As the semester progressed, I noticed the men-
CIRCLE IS SMALL

The health of each and every one of my friends began to affect their lives in a drastic way. Some stopped reaching out, others moved back to their childhood homes and many searched for an antidepressant that would help them get through the day.

20-year-old California University student Megan Raymond opened up about her struggle with the pandemic and the expectation of universities during this time.

“I felt so isolated and stressed out all the time,” Megan says. “It got to the point where I needed medicated or professional help, as I was experiencing depressive thoughts.”

Since Megan has always been an exceptional student, always maintaining a 4.0, school was never something she struggled with, yet the switch to online learning brought forth a harsh reality.

“Many of my professors this semester decided to give me more assignments and tests than they normally would to make sure we were keeping up with the material,” Megan says.

When California University canceled in-person classes for the semester, Megan lost her job as a paid tutor on campus.

“I started working two jobs to be able to afford my schooling, while attending class and making sure I keep my GPA up,” Megan says. “I wasn’t even able to see my friends to give me a break from the nonstop work and school routine.”

With many students living at home this semester, visiting a friend or even going to a public place to study was simply out of the question, as students feared exposing their parents or grandparents to the disease.

21-year-old Duquesne senior Alex Pompe was one of the students who chose to live at home instead of at his Pittsburgh apartment for the 2020-2021 school year.

“Because all of my classes are online and I work from home, I figured it would be best if I moved back in with my parents,” Alex says. “It can get really lonely when you do everything from home and you don’t get to see your friends as much, but at the same time I have family members that are at risk, and keeping them safe is my first priority.”

While the struggles of school have always been present in the lives of college students, it was easier to escape the stressors of school in the past, when students were able to visit a friend or catch a movie.

“I felt very alone and was unable to turn to the things that cheer me up, like social interaction,” said 20-year-old Chatham University student and member of my inner circle Abigail Sanders.

Much like Megan, Abigail has always been a stand-up student, always striving for a perfect GPA and taking higher level classes within her major of cellular and molecular biology.

“It wasn’t just school or just work or not seeing my friends causing the stress, it was everything combined,” Abigail says. “I have to work as many nights as possible to afford my rent and keep food in my fridge. This is my first year living on my own, and not even being able to see my inner circle caused me feel more anxious, stressed and depressed than I ever have been.”

As Megan is studying political science and pre-law at California University, she is worried about her future when it comes to her plan of attending law school at Arizona State University.

“With the uncertainty of everything, I am worried I may have to begin school online, which feels near impossible while juggling two jobs,” Megan says.

Duquesne University student Sydney Haedrich also felt the stress of her future looming as she plans to attend medical school.

“There is so much extra stress because of deadlines and such,” Sydney says. “I know that medical school is the path I am taking, so there really are no ifs, ands or buts about it — it is just one more thing that I have to worry about every day.”

Sydney explained her frustration and stress about her classes and the expectations she had to uphold this semester.

“My professors would give a lot more work than we would get during a normal semester; I would have class for an hour and a half, and then have a 40-minute lecture to watch from the same class which counted as attendance,” Sydney says. “I would have to try and watch the videos after I worked a nine-hour shift.”
With school expectations being at an all-time high for students, the demands of life do not stop during this time, as essential and non-essential workers must adapt to the changes in their work yet still put in enough hours to obtain a liveable paycheck.

“I love living in South Side, but the price of living is so high. My rent is over $600 a month,” Sydney says. “There were many times that I had multiple assignments due, but I still had to go to work to get my paycheck, [so] I would bring my laptop and work on my assignments on my break.”

Yet with all the negative perspectives of this semester and the difficulties my friends faced opening up to me about their mental health during this time, my circle always is able to provide a positive outlook.

“One thing I did this semester to lift my spirits was making the decision to bond with my co-workers,” Sydney says. “It sounds strange that the highlight of my day was going to work, but I feel like it was the one thing I did that was not online, and I am grateful that I am someone who was able to have at least a little bit of interaction during the day.”

With a friend group of many different personalities, some friends were more optimistic than others. When asked what she did this semester to make her happy, Megan responded with a laugh and said, “What did I do to make myself happy? I don’t know, does drinking wine and FaceTime count?”

Abby also had a pessimistic outlook on the question. “I hate to say it: not really much. I’ve sat in my room and sent my friends stupid Snapchats all day — I guess that made me a little happy.”

While our college lives are not what we expected them to be, the most important lesson I learned this semester was that having hope for the future is more important than any Zoom class, paper or quiz we are posed with.

I have hope that we will return to normal life. I have hope that once again college students will be able to stumble down East Carson Street in search of cheap liquor and a good slice of pizza. I have hope that we will all find the path we are destined to follow. I have hope that we will be able to hug our family members again, and I have hope that the world will once again know peace.
For some, life during the pandemic has become more stressful and cramped. For others, it has become a chance to slow down and take a breath. Life for my family in Massachusetts has become a little bit of both.

COVID-19 has flipped our world upside down. We have lost so much of the human connection we were accustomed to — and may have taken for granted. That being said, interaction for my immediate family has been anything but lacking.

Our family of seven is used to a full and loud house — see the sign in our garage that says, “Welcome to the Zoo,” for reference. So, when the pandemic arrived, we were ready for the zoo to get even louder and more compact.

“Being quarantined initially was not that bad, but everybody is always home. There’s never any alone time. And that’s not just me — I can’t imagine how everyone else feels,” says my mom, Michelle.

Quarantine was an unfamiliar concept for us when most of the time the only place to have peace and quiet is anywhere but The House. And according to Forbes, alone time is imperative for increased productivity and empathy — something we’re all in need of during this tough time supporting one another.

As for my four siblings and I, quarantining together has been the most time we’ve spent together since I was in high school. Bunking with my sister, Kylie, for six months in our small room wasn’t exactly ideal — but at least it still felt like I was living in a college dorm.

“It’s definitely clustered,” Kylie says. When everyone is home, it can be a lot to handle as a big family.

Waking up every day to the same people and the same routine has also caused the days to blur together. We hardly know what day of the week it is or how many days in a row we wear the same pair of sweatpants.

Although my sister, my mom and my dad, Paul, are all still working throughout the pan-
demic, the strict schedule of waking up, going to work and coming right back home is monotonous and repetitive.

“It’s like Groundhog Day every day,” Paul says. “When scheduled events go away, it basically disrupts your whole work-life balance ... it’s the same day over and over again.”

Both of my parents are immunocompromised, too, so we’ve had to be very careful about being around people. And we clean and re-clean. Of course, they’re careful, but they also can’t stop living their lives when supporting a family big enough to have its own basketball team.

My brother, Aidan, spends the most time at home as he takes his college classes completely online. Although he interacts with mostly the same people, he knows that when you have a bigger family in one house, the bigger the risk of exposure.

“A disadvantage is that more of us are going out and leaving, but then coming back after seeing others,” Aidan says.

Despite these challenges, we’ve been thankful for the company a big family provides. Of course, it can be cramped and crowded, but the alternative is much worse.

“Think about the people who live by themselves — they are literally by themselves,” Michelle says. “We’re all in this together, but other people are hit harder.”

According to a KFF Tracking Poll and data from the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey, social isolation and loneliness are linked to poor mental health. Many people have to deal with the stress and anxiety of Covid on their own and have been unable to see or hug family and friends because of it.

No matter how much we want to lock each other out of the house after spending so much time together, we’re all grateful to have that human interaction that is almost impossible to live without.

“The pandemic has impacted every single aspect of our lives, and we’re fortunate because we have a large group, so there’s still interaction,” Paul says. “But others don’t have that.”

“I don’t think being alone during this for this long of a time period is good for anyone. No matter if people are introverts or anti-social, it’s just not healthy on a person’s mentality,” Kylie adds.

Although every person has been affected in a different way by Covid, human connection and even human touch are so important, and they cannot be replaced by the technology we’ve been using. Most have gone months without hugging their friends or holding hands with a loved one.

Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, says touch is fundamental to connection and trust. Having to go without that is depriving people of a form of love which impacts them physically and mentally.

“It’s sad. You don’t realize how much human interaction and human touch we need,” Michelle says.

Of course, Zoom has been great for students to continue their education, adults to work remotely or families to have get-togethers with grandparents. And while technology has helped keep connection alive, it doesn’t replace being face to face with other people.

Stress can be relieved by being close to others, as revealed by research efforts published in Behavior Medicine, along with the improvement of physical health. Oxytocin, or the cuddle hormone, is released when holding hands or hugging another person, which lowers cortisol, the stress hormone. But, the distance Covid puts between us forces people to be away from one another, so that form of stress relief and health improvement isn’t exactly possible through screens.

“Zoom meetings get tiring really quickly and they can contribute to a social disconnect,” Paul says.

My family has been lucky that within the seven of us, this social disconnect isn’t very prominent and we’ve been able to still be close to one another, even without Zoom. There are more people around for support from Covid stress and to give daily hugs or pats on the back — we all need the cuddle hormone to survive as human beings.

The pandemic has shown that although being alone can be a great break from the zoo, being together is better than facing the global outbreak without human connection or touch.

“It definitely is better to have a lot of family members around you so you’re not always cooped up in the house by yourself,” Aidan says.

“I can’t imagine going through all of this and being alone,” Michelle adds.
Sebastián Henao García hadn’t seen his mom for more than six months when she applied for a visa to visit him in Pittsburgh. She had an interview with the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia on a Monday in March. If she was accepted, it would be the first time she left the country.

It wasn’t long before their hopes to finally see each other dissipated. The Friday before — the 13th — all non-emergency visa appointments were canceled because of COVID-19, starting the day of his mom’s appointment.

“If she would have had the interview the day before, it would have worked,” Sebastián says. “But it didn’t happen.”

The COVID-19 outbreak caused friends and families to be separated for longer than expected. Stay-at-home orders and fear of infecting vulnerable loved ones had people all over the world hunkered down for months. But for some of my close friends studying outside of their home countries, the distance created by the pandemic only adds to the separation they already feel being away from home. Border closures, travel restrictions and visa suspensions eliminated any possibility for students studying internationally to see their loved ones.

Sebastián is pursuing a master’s in computational modeling and simulation at the University of Pittsburgh. He’s been in the city for two years and was looking forward to showing his mom — his closest family member — his new life here.

“I was looking forward to showing her what life in the U.S. looks like, and more specifically what my life in the U.S. looks like,” Sebastián says. “I have shared a lot of details with her through the phone, but I wanted that she could experience that firsthand.”

Valerie Umaña Anderson can empathize with Sebastián’s longing for family. A sophomore secondary education major at Duquesne, Valerie and her brother, Victor, were planning on spending their summer in Honduras, where they’ve lived for the majority of their lives. They couldn’t wait to see their grand-
parents, aunts and uncles and finally sleep in their own beds.

When Valerie realized she couldn’t go back home, she was overwhelmed by sadness and frustration. She hadn’t been to her hometown of San Pedro for a year and longed to revisit the places and people filling her memory. And as the summer came to a close, it was all she could think about.

“I was very down, very sad, very much struggling and not wanting to make this my home, because all I could think about was going home and seeing my family,” Valerie says.

Adding on to the pain of being physically apart from her family was the knowledge that Honduras was struggling to fight the pandemic. The country’s hospitals were quickly overwhelmed by patients, and the weak healthcare system caused many people to die from the virus.

Things got worse when Valerie and Victor’s family found out their grandpa had cancer — and tested positive for COVID-19 while being screened for surgery. Not too long after that, Honduras was hit by Hurricane Eta, and the already burdened country found another obstacle to overcome.

While Valerie was longing to be back in San Pedro making piñatas and eating rosquillas, she couldn’t help but feel guilty that she was in the U.S. while her family was dealing with greater challenges in Honduras.

“My family’s gone through a lot back home while we’ve been here ... comfortable, social distancing, while they’ve been locked down,” Valerie says.

But it wasn’t worth it to spend the summer worrying about something they couldn’t fix. Though unplanned, Valerie and Victor felt that they grew in their relationship with each other and their parents during their time in Pittsburgh — something they both aren’t taking for granted.

“Blessings come out of weird places,” Victor says. “I wouldn’t have thought that staying in Pittsburgh was going to be a good thing, but it was.”

And even though they couldn’t be physically together over the summer, Sebastián and his mom were still able to support each other as they each learned how to live alone during a pandemic.

“I think our connection only became stronger during that time, even with the distance that is between us right now,” Sebastián says.

Being forced to navigate a partially shut down city he had only lived in for six months was a challenge of its own.

“The only thing I knew was how to navigate my neighborhood, and then I was like, okay, now I need to stay at home, I need to figure out how to do groceries without having a car and without taking the bus,” Sebastián says. “So I also need to figure out how to keep my sanity now that I cannot interact with anyone else.”

As the first wave of COVID-19 began to decline, borders started opening and travel seemed more feasible than it had in March. Valerie and Victor began to plan a visit to Honduras during the winter break, and after consecutive cancellations to his mom’s visa appointment, Sebastián finally bought a round trip ticket to Colombia for over Christmas.

Returning home will be bitter-sweet for Valerie. While eager to see her family and be back in the town she grew up in, something will be missing: her grandparents’ home. They moved out in the fall to be closer to where her grandpa’s getting treated, a town about two hours away.

“It was like the house I dreamt of returning to,” Valerie says. “... I’m really sad that I’m not able to go back to that kitchen, or have cake there, or make a piñata, or celebrate Christmas in the living room.”

Christmas in Colombia is special for Sebastián, who has his own traditions with his mom. Aside from cooking together and exchanging gifts, one of their favorite activities is reflecting on the past year and discussing their hopes and expectations for the next.

“I think I’m kind of looking forward to experiencing the whole Christmas season in Colombia and connecting again with that part of my culture and my upbringing,” Sebastián says.

While the pandemic continues to disrupt life outside, the magic of being with loved ones for the holidays remains unchanged. And the extended absence from home just makes the longing stronger for students abroad.

“I just want to sit in my room,” Valerie says. “I just want to feel like I’m home again.”
During the start of the pandemic, Valerie longed to be back with her family in Honduras.

Though separated physically, Sebastián feels that he and his mom have been able to grow stronger in their relationship.
My mother woke up at 3:30 in the morning on Thursday.

This is nothing new. She’d worked her whole life in one way or another — from a first-time mother at 16, running submarine blueprints for engineers at Connecticut’s Electric Boat Company to an eight-time grandmother at 59, serving lunches in a North Side elementary school. It was never easy, and she never complained.

Today, her work is different. It starts and ends in her burnt-amber-orange Brighton Heights kitchen, with a turkey in the oven at 5 a.m. and stuffing on the stovetop not long after. She sits down only to eat a quick meal, and then she’s back at the sink doing dishes. Any attempts to help her are met with a fond slap on the wrist and a stern command — go sit down,
relax, it’s almost time to bake the pies. I tell her she works too hard, and she replies, “That’s what mothers do.”

“It looks amazing, Jude,” remarks Aunt Nancy, eyeing the 26-pound bird sitting in the center of the table. It’s flanked by bowls of stuffing and mashed potatoes and green bean casserole and my grandmother’s “secret” cornbread recipe that’s only really secret because no one else ever bothered to look at the back of the Jiffy box. There’s cranberry sauce — from a can, but laid out as nicely as jiggling canned-shaped fruit could look — and bronzed gravy in a pouring dish.

“There’s only five of us,” Uncle Dario says. He’s a man of science, of reason, of logic — the kind of man banned from most trivia pubs because he knows too much and the other patrons think it isn’t fair. And there’s no logical reason five people needed 26 pounds of meat and all its accoutrements. “Why’d you spring for the big one?”

“Because I could,” says Mom with a simple, stubborn shrug, as if it should’ve been obvious. Maybe it should’ve been. Judith Gratzinger likes to have control. The trouble is, our world is suddenly uncontrollable, unpredictable and un-everything-else-able. If Judith Gratzinger could control the size of the turkey, she was going to control it, logic be damned.

“To family,” says my father, raising his cocktail. “To family,” we echo in a way that feels congressional. Glasses clinked and clattered around the table, and then there came a hearty pause while we sipped our drinks — a mix of vodka and Kahlua flavored like mint mocha, a dangerous kind of drink that tastes like sugar and spice and everything nice, and like none of the not-so-nice things you’ll feel the morning after. But that was a problem for tomorrow, much like all the other broken things we all silently decided not to think about.

Beyond the warm walls, there sat an uneasy world, dotted with rot and withered like a lime left too long in the fridge. We ate, drank and were merry, while maintaining the knowledge that we, for all we lost these last few months, are among the lucky ones.

“There are more feelings of sadness than happiness this year,” says my father, later in the night. “It just doesn’t feel the same. The spirit of the holidays is just in our hearts this year.”

To my father, family is everything — the holiday parties, the bonding moments, the gluttonous family dinners and the football games with pizza and wings and aunties and uncles. The holidays, for him, have always been about the little things that feel gigantic, the moments that money just can’t buy.

“I hope we can get back to the old-fashioned ways of being with family and friends, making holiday memories that make us happy,” he says.

My mother, standing over the kitchen sink, nods in agreement. “I think this year feels different because people seem to be not as happy. We can’t travel to see family.”

My mother’s family lives in New England, and this was the first year in all the time she’s lived here that she didn’t get the chance to visit them over the summer.

“Sitting together at the table feels like we should be further apart. It’s like we have to pick our favorite relatives,” she says with a laugh devoid of humor. “I miss not having to worry about who I’m standing next to or how far apart we’re standing. I miss hearing people laugh. I don’t want to have to wear a mask every time I go somewhere.”

My father reaches for a slice of cherry pie.

“I miss being able to go to taverns,” he remarks. As he likes to say, beer always tastes better when someone else pours it.

“The way we’re forced to live now is depressing,” my mother says as she puts the dish cloth down with more force that she needs to. “I hope next year’s holidays are back to the way they were last year and in years before: big Thanksgiving gatherings and big parties,” she smiles fondly. “Greeting family with a hug. People laughing. No muffled voices. Just normal life.”

CIRCLE IS SMALL

OFF THE BLUFF
Inside my Inner Circle

Griffin Sendek

As 2019 came to a close, I recall so much hope for 2020; the phrase “this will be my year” is often repeated to the point of parody, but the aspirations for 2020 were different. From the people in my life to strangers on social media, there was a collective sense that they not only wanted, but needed this year of growth and creation.

The pandemic threw a wrench into all of that; never before have the lives of everyone I know been so rattled.

Above all, COVID-19 has bred a near inescapable environment of fear and stagnation — one that’s upended us socially, mentally and professionally. I’ve seen it through my own experiences and all of those closest to me.

Submitting to this new normal and not crumbling under its weight in the process hasn’t been easy for anyone. By now, many have adapted, but it is still a fight every day to feel in any way normal. It’s a battle, but one that’s still worth fighting.

With an airborne virus on the loose, the smallest circle is the safest. This year I made what was equally the smartest and most ill-advised choice: living alone in a studio apartment.

Living by yourself does have benefits, especially during a pandemic. I admit there was great comfort in knowing I always had a safe, virus-free environment to return to. With no concern about the whereabouts of roommates and far less worry of infecting others, being alone in many ways simplified things.

On the other hand, there was no one to return to — most of my time is spent alone.

One of the most challenging aspects is the battle between the fear of Covid and the need to see other people and fend off a sense of loneliness. Now, any in-person socialization held some level of risk.

My good friend Heather Umbel found the completely reshaped social landscape to be the most difficult aspect of this new life. “All social gathering came to a really aggressive halt,” Heather says. “It’s definitely played a toll on my whole motivation to really do anything, ‘cause I don’t have anything good to look forward to. So, I don’t really want to do the not-so-good stuff.”

The pandemic has put into perspective what truly matters and further highlighted the pointless actions of life that will hold little meaning in the grand scheme of things. The “work the week to enjoy the weekend” mentality has been ingrained in us for years and is a huge aspect of being in college. Now, it no longer exists.

What motivation is there to work hard during the week, when the weekend is full of nothing to do, nowhere to go and no one to see?

“I don’t really want to do the not-so-good stuff.”

On top of that, it’s just my daily schedule has completely stopped,” Heather explains. “Never having a reason to go to campus sort of never made me ‘get up in the morning, get dressed, wash my
face’ — do that stuff right away. I don’t have to get ready for the day, so I just sort of lounge around in my pajamas, and then once I’m done with classes, I don’t really have anything to do.”

Casual hangouts have all but died. It’s been challenging for my friend Kat Holz to adapt to this new socially distant style of friendship.

“I miss the spontaneity of college life. Everything has to be planned now; you can’t just go do things,” Kat says.

One of the biggest motivating factors of college is the social aspect. Now, that’s all but disappeared.

“I would consider myself extremely extroverted … my favorite thing to do is socialize and be around my friends,” Kat says. “All in all, the hardest part has been not being physically present with people.”

The rippling effects that the pandemic has had on socialization and personal relationships is vast, but it’s far from the only thing at stake. The effects of lost social interactions are long term, but the loss of income is immediate.

While some have continued to work, other industries have come to a complete standstill.

Morgan Sendek, my sister, has worked professionally as an actress for over five years. She’s no stranger to an inconsistent job market, but has never experienced anything like this before.

“The most difficult part of the pandemic has been seeing my industry basically halt and not being able to do what I do,” Morgan says.

“Seeing my colleagues, my friends, all my peers in the industry in the same place where there are no opportunities … it’s been very demoralizing for a lot of people.”

The life of an actor is always one of being on the move — a creative hustle that requires work to get work. Now the job market for actors has all but evaporated.

“My life has changed tremendously,” Morgan says. “Before the pandemic, I was constantly going to new places and my weekly schedule was different every single week. I didn’t know even what I’d be doing a month from now.”

Spreadsheets, presentations and business meetings can move online. But the lights, stage, costumes, set and the energy from a live audience? That doesn’t exist in an online forum and it never will.

Heather, a theater major and president of the Red Masquers theater troupe, has experienced a similar stagnation in the theater world. She’s faced with keeping the spirit and creative drive of the Red Masquers going, but is met with roadblocks every step of the way.

“It makes me feel like a bad president. Sometimes I just feel like there’s things I need to be doing, and like, ‘Oh, I should call a meeting. We need to do something,’” Heather says, “but I don’t know what more we can do.”

There is no replacement for live performances; no matter the sophistication or ingenuity of virtual formats, they aren’t a substitute for stage productions. It’s been very difficult to get people on board in these new forms of theater. For Heather, all the work she’s put in to keep it running has oftentimes felt like a waste of time.

“You need people to want to participate to do theater. Theater is a collaborative art, so when you don’t have people to collaborate with, it’s really frustrating,” Heather says. “You’re trying to try new things and make opportunities for people to try and still do theater despite all this, and nobody really cares. It makes it all feel like you’re doing all this for nothing.”

It’s difficult to find the positives in a year like this. So much has been so bad that every step forward feels minuscule in comparison. However, that doesn’t make them worth any less.

Out of this fear and prolonged stagnation, it’s those in our small circle who have helped us the most and who we’ve grown closer with in the process. Whether we like it or not, we’ve all adapted to this new life and have done everything we can to work through it.

Heather has found love in her new puppy and solace in the presence of her boyfriend.

Kat has learned to cherish everything about the outdoors and is always thinking up new, fun ways to virtually hang out with her friends.

“I see very few people, but I’ve been able to be closer to the people I love and care about the most,” Morgan says.

And for me, the time I’ve spent alone has granted a much-needed opportunity to take it easy and work on myself. ●
Park filmmaker navigates on- and off-screen

Griffin Sendek

Photo by Griffin Sendek
The previous pages consist of pieces written by storytellers who observed and documented the changing world around them. Here, they reflect on what it’s like to be a student, writer and human being in a pandemic world.
Let’s get one thing straight: I wasn’t even supposed to be in this class. It’s my senior year, and I was set to cover my remaining multiplatform journalism requirements this semester, save for three credits I set aside for an elective in the spring. I was thrilled to be taking only four classes this fall — my smallest course load ever. But at the urging of fellow classmates, Duke coworkers and my mom, Magazine Journalism made it into the mix just a few weeks before the start of the semester — and thank goodness it did. (Don’t tell my mom I said that.)

I walked into the first class carrying years of experience writing for The Duke and taking journalism classes, yet see myself walking out with almost double the knowledge and skill I came in with — and with pandemic coverage under my belt, as well.

When I was in high school, I subscribed to National Geographic. Upon reading the first issue I received in the mail, I knew that photojournalism was what I wanted to do. Stories and images of beautiful countrysides, fascinating humans and intriguing societies captivated my curious mind, and an unquenchable desire to be the person behind the lens in those photos filled my heart.

Of course, I wanted to learn the skills it would take to become a photojournalist, but the news-centered curriculum on my transcript had me convinced that this experience would come only with internships and fieldwork. But as soon as we began discussing assignments, I knew that Magazine Journalism was the class I had been waiting for.

One of the best things about being a journalist is getting to meet unique and inspiring people — and if you’re lucky, you make new friends. I was able to have hour-long conversations with a student whose toddler continued begging him to play outside, a poet who snail-mailed my professor a personalized typewritten poem and small business owners who became best friends as they bonded over a mutual ex-boyfriend. I heard stories about joy and success, and the way the pandemic altered these individuals’ lives in a matter of days was an underlying theme of them all.

There’s no denying the challenges described in the words printed on these pages. But there’s one emotion that stands out among the rest: hope. Hope lies in the hearts of the characters in these stories. It lies in the hearts of students, restaurant workers, artists and families. And it also lies in the hearts of the journalists, who’ve broken the walls of Zoom and scaled the mountains of mask-muffled answers to relentlessly pursue the stories they desire to tell.

Though the circumstances are less than ideal, I’m grateful to be a student journalist during this pandemic — not just because of the lessons I’ve learned, but for the inspirations my classmates and the people in their stories have been with their grace, resilience and determination.

The pandemic may have left us confused and troubled, but these stories stand as reminders that through everything, hope is one thing a virus outbreak can’t shut down. ●
Being a journalist is new to me. Well, kind of new. As a senior, I always thought of journalism as a second major that I liked, but wasn’t overly excited about — it was never the thing I dreamt about since I was young or saw myself doing in the future. I mainly joined the journalism department because of my love for writing, but found that a lot of my courses revolved around the multimedia part of the major (I know it’s officially called “Multiplatform Journalism,” but as a freshman, I didn’t exactly know what that entailed). Don’t get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoy those classes and have learned so much from them, but writing is the real reason why I decided to major in journalism.

It wasn’t until this semester — and this class specifically — that I actually started going out and writing stories that weren’t just for my personal journal. I started doing what I love — but, of course, I waited to do what I love until the pandemic and a political crisis (clearly perfect timing on my part).

The political crisis was like a drug for journalists. They — who am I kidding, we — couldn’t get enough of it. Lucky for most, they were in the heart of it all and were able to cover the events. Unlucky for me, I was stuck inside with Covid. I couldn’t go out and write about it, and instead I had to keep up with it from my couch. I’m really fortunate that my symptoms were mild and I have been healthy after the fact, but it definitely hindered my ability to feel like a journalist during it all. Despite that, it was interesting having a different perspective on it and I was just as excited to have been able to watch and participate in one of the most important elections in my lifetime.

As for the pandemic, a lot of people had to alter how they normally conduct interviews and write stories with the new challenges of social distancing and mask wearing. But, for me, I was learning how to do this for the first time.

In a sense, this made it a bit easier because I didn’t have any previous habits or routines that I needed to change. And although I was nervous about the pandemic, I made sure to follow the rules and guidelines on wearing masks and sitting apart. Granted, I’ve also been subject to the strangeness that comes with conducting interviews over the phone or Zoom, which was definitely challenging when trying to get to know someone and be personable. But, overall, I didn’t have to relearn how to be a journalist because I had never actually been one.

On the other hand, it was difficult because I felt a bit behind my other classmates and wanted to make sure I was following the right “steps” (spoiler alert: everyone has their own way they go about journalism). It was both exciting and nerve-wracking to tell people I’m a journalist and reach out to strangers, but over the semester I’ve learned that it’s okay to not know things and, as a result, I’ve felt my confidence grow — so much so I started writing for our school newspaper, thanks to the encouragement of a classmate. I’ve been able to appreciate the field and remember why I chose journalism in the first place.

Not only have I been able to write so much, but I’ve met so many new people in the process and made connections I never would have otherwise. Whether it be new friends among my classmates, the owner at the restaurant-bar down the street treating me like a regular or the singer-songwriter reminding me that kindness is everything in life, I’ve been able to do so much and see what it’s like to actually be a journalist. Getting a glimpse into another person’s life by listening to their challenges and being inspired by their hopes has been a privilege. I’ve loved sharing those stories with the community and having the opportunity to write more than I ever expected to, and I can’t wait to explore journalism in the future — beyond this semester and beyond the pandemic. ●
A year ago, I think I was a different person.

I was the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed editor-in-chief of my college newspaper, interning at the local alt-weekly and freelancing for a few city magazines. I was set to graduate with honors come May — and I was thrilled to take my first step out into the new, post-college world. An internship was waiting for me in New York City, and the future seemed bright.

But then, on a sunny Friday the 13th in March 2020, we learned that our lives were going to change. School would be shuffled online for one week, then two weeks, then the rest of the semester, all in anticipation of a virus coming in like a slow storm, new and lethal. I’m not Catholic — I’m not even religious — but four years at a Catholic school had taught me about the sounding of seven trumpets, one at a time, to cue in apocalyptic events. As I walked to school on that final Friday, keenly aware of the way our world was situated on the precipice of great change, there was a homeless man standing by the 10th Street Bridge, blowing on a red plastic stadium horn.

In the weeks and months to follow, we said a premature and tearful farewell to our beloved college paper, publishing one final issue that semester before turning out the lights and clearing out our desks. The magazines I freelanced for had their budgets slashed almost overnight, and at the alt-weekly, I went from writing reviews of plays and quirky products to writing about COVID-19. My New York internship was postponed a year, and I spent the summer in my small apartment above a pizza shop instead.

And now, a year after the first Covid case was reported all the way across the world, we’re still embroiled in its crisis. Worse yet, it became political. To wear a mask has become a partisan concern; some people on the far-right think it’s patriotic to go out in public unmasked, but there’s nothing patriotic about the 200,000+ families that’ll have empty seats at their dinner tables this Christmas.

My experiences as a journalist during this pandemic have been colored by the turning of the world around me. I’ve written about Covid outbreaks at the county jail, photographers covering civil unrest and food service workers feeding children schooling from home in low-income neighborhoods — all through a screen or cell phone. I miss the in-person aspects of reporting. I miss the little details lost in cyberspace. And most of all, I miss the innocence of covering something light-hearted. Every story now is so charged with love and loss and hope and rage from sources who have lost things that would’ve been incomprehensible to most of us in 2019.

I’ve written about the election, penning articles about how Mike Bloomberg spent $1 billion of his own money on a failed bid for presidency. What if he’d given half of that away to pandemic relief funds instead? Half the country only received $1,200 throughout this whole thing, and the other half hasn’t received anything at all.

A year ago, I know I was a different person. I was innocent and, I think, ignorant. I was younger in body by a year and in soul, by 10. I took a lot of things for granted. But if one thing has gotten me through this hellish year, it’s the knowledge that I am a storyteller living in a time rife with stories. They may not be happy stories and they might not all have happy endings — some might not even have happy middles or happy starts. But these are the stories of our mad old world and the people who call it home, and someday, I’ll look back on them and remember the year life went digital.
This is not going to be a popular opinion, but this time in my life has been an uplifting time. Although 2020 has been a troublesome year, I found the most important lesson: positivity.

Along with two deaths in my family, having Covid twice and falling behind in school, struggling with being a journalist during a pandemic was another one of the difficulties weighing on me. I was not sure if I was pursuing the right path.

In plainer terms, I was lost. Although this was deemed to be an impossible semester — with a pandemic, virtual classes and struggles with mental health — I learned that even through the most troubling of times, you are always able to tell a story.

Whether it was a music venue not able to open, a R&B singer not being able to perform his concerts or a mother on hunger strike after the death of her son, the main theme I felt I learned this semester was hope. I learned that these stories are not only something I will turn in for a grade or something that I will use for my future resume, but they are stories that can help me grow as a writer and a person.

The theme that I was able to take from my stories and the stories written by my classmates is the theme of a comeback.

While COVID-19 changed life as we know it completely, many people and businesses felt down and out. Through my stories of fantastic comebacks from people in Pittsburgh, I learned that I, too, can be one of those people with a comeback story. Whether it be a comeback with my grades, mental health or overall lifestyle, I was able to gain hope that I can have a comeback story of my own.

I felt hope as I received positive comments from professors and classmates. I felt hope as I listened to small business owners speak of their struggles and dreams. I felt hope as I talked to artists who knew they were destined for greatness. And I felt hope as I realized that while it felt as if everything around me was crumbling, the world continued to spin.

When I did not believe in myself, when it felt like the world was falling apart, I felt hope because classmates, professors and friends lifted me up.

While I’ve struggled with choosing a major or a path in life, this semester has made me realize that life throws you the unexpected. I planned on changing my major to forensics at the beginning of this semester — a new beginning for me and hopefully the answer to my life path. I figured that I’d never have a career as a journalist during these times.

Yet as I began my journalism classes, I realized that no matter what is going on in the world, stories will continue. People will still turn on the news to see what is going on, family members will still discuss articles over a meal, we will still head out to our mailboxes each and every morning to see what stories await us.

I realized that being a journalist was not seeing who can write the best story, but who can make stories that leave an effect. Stories that make you cry, laugh, grieve, think or even simply enjoy.

The journalists that I was surrounded with during this class encouraged me to become a better writer and encouraged me to explore topics they intrigued me with. I viewed journalism from a different perspective reading stories by other journalists instead of just reading my own.

Whether it was Ollie’s amazing ability to tell any story in the most descriptive detail, Gillian’s talent of getting the best quotes for her stories, Griffin’s non-stop influx of interesting topics or Katia’s capability of keeping anyone’s eyes glued on her stories, I was able to learn so many great qualities from these amazing writers.

Because in the end, we’re all just stories: a story in a bar, a sad story, a reminiscent story, a story about a champion a story about a hero, a story about a friend. Life will go on and we will end — but our stories won’t.
Covid hasn’t made journalism easy; a medium built on telling other people’s stories doesn’t work well in isolation. Learning to be a good journalist is challenging enough — being forced to do so in the middle of a pandemic is a whole other level of challenge.

Every person in this world has a personal story to tell about the pandemic. There is nothing COVID-19 hasn’t touched. I’ve interviewed nurses, filmmakers, actresses, clothing shops clerks, ballerinas and restaurant managers; Covid has changed all their lives in vastly different ways.

But one thing all of these people have in common is they’ve all found ways to continue doing what they love. Despite a deadly virus pushing everyone to the breaking point, it didn’t defeat them. It didn’t force them to quit. It was clear they’d rather die than stop following their passions.

In the process of doing interviews — whether it be over Zoom or from six feet away, videotaped or between a thick layer of plexiglass — I realized I felt the exact same way.

I’m studying journalism because it’s something I love. Letting the pandemic get in the way of that would be a horrible mistake.

I find myself wishing I had done more, that I had worked a little harder, written something more substantial, produced something better. I try to remind myself that creating anything under the constant stress of a pandemic is an achievement in and of itself.

When living through a time that history is unfolding all around, it’s easy to think that nothing I produce truly matters — with so much at stake, why would anyone care what I have to say?

Furthermore, why am I focusing on sentence structure, good ledes and finding the perfect kicker quotes when a virus is threatening to take away everyone I know and love?

Why am I risking my health to talk to a person to write a story — that no one will read — to add to a portfolio so I can apply to jobs I’ll likely never get in a rapidly shrinking industry?

These thoughts might be anxiety-driven nihilism accentuated by the upcoming fear of graduation and having to live in the “real world,” but there’s the truth beneath it all.

Then I find myself smiling behind my mask as I jot down interview notes in a reporter’s notebook. I spend 20 minutes rewriting the same two sentences because it’s important to me that it sounds just the way I want. I instinctively carry a camera nearly everywhere I go, just in case something happens. I will never grow tired of the rush of seeing my name printed next to words I wrote and pictures I took. It reminds me that taking the risk to speak to people and telling their stories has all been worth it.

Above all of that — more than the personal ego boost and reassurance seeing my name in print provides — is witnessing the happiness this job brings to others. Reaching out and wanting to tell someone’s story has the power to make their day; it can reassure them of their own pursuits, reminding them that they do have a voice and that they do matter.

In four years of learning how to be a journalist, the one with the raging pandemic has, ironically, been my busiest and without a shadow of a doubt my very best.

I understand that the words I put on the page might never have the power to change the world, but they can make someone smile and, for me, that’s all that really matters.