MY COVID EXPERIENCE IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

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The principal's voice came over the intercom and announced that school was going to be closed for two weeks in response to COVID. I'm going to be honest, at that moment I was very relieved and happy that I was not going to have to make the one and a half hour trip to school each day and that I could finally sleep in. Then reality struck. This virus that seemed to be so detached and far away from my life was now here.

Things started to change dramatically. My mom was asked to work from home and although I could sleep in, school was still prevalent. My dad who works as a radiology technician was one of the essential workers that was required to go to work every day. Every day I was worried not only for his health, but also for my mom and my grandparents who live with us. The whole world was affected by this virus and yet it had still not been labeled as a pandemic.

Everything in my life came to a halt and I started to miss my friends as the initial two-week period off from school was extended. I wasn't as engaged in my schoolwork anymore. Learning virtually for me was not ideal. I didn't have the same confidence or the same motivation to finish my work as I did in school. I was physically disconnected from my peers, yet in an odd way I felt more personally connected to them because we were all experiencing the same thing. We were all being affected by this horrible virus that scientists knew so little about.

Each day I would watch the news or I would check my phone for updates on the cases around the world. It was hard to comprehend the numbers. Each day I worried not only for my family in the states, but also for my family back in Albania where medical care was unsophisticated. Each day I would talk to my aunt in Albania about what was happening and she would tell me about the people who had died months before, but she said that no one knew it was from COVID. I kept worrying about the conditions overseas and every time I opened my phone to check the updated COVID cases, I saw Italy in bright red with the highest daily losses and case increases. Videos of crowded Italian hospitals made me fearful. Italian hospitals were beginning to pick and choose who they were going to treat and who they were going to let die. I was terrified. I was scared that something like that would occur here and that my dad may be caught in the middle of it.

Quarantine continued and I became more bored. I didn't know what to do with my time and I couldn't visit my friends or my grandparents. Online school was becoming more bearable as I became more comfortable with the situation and the technology. Teachers were being more understanding and I felt like I could finally breathe in the midst of what was going on, but of course that lasted a very short time. I started to think about what I could do stuck at home. I decided that it was time to take a break from Netflix and do something useful. I started to volunteer virtually and really enjoyed it. Virtual volunteering let me meet new people who I could connect with despite this horrible pandemic.

Virtual volunteering was a nice change of pace and it helped me use my free time in a better and more productive way. I volunteer for a non-profit organization called Feast of Justice in Philadelphia, PA where we help underprivileged families receive meals. I have noticed that many of these families are immigrants and they have trouble with communicating with the volunteers especially during COVID now that everything is online. I got the chance to translate online documents from English to Albanian to help Albanian guests with the process. This experience sparked an interest in me to help more people through translating. I became a Lead Albanian Translator for Climate Cardinals, an organization that helps inform the public about climate change. It was such a great experience to help translate documents that would be published across the world and to help educate more people about an important topic.

As school was nearing an end, there was one thing that was stressing me out terribly: college applications. I was supposed to apply to college in a few months and now everything had gone up in flames. I could no longer make college visits and virtual experiences didn't give me the same perspective or "feel" for the campus as an in person tour would have. In addition, COVID had disrupted all testing sessions and all the uncertainty surrounding changes in college applications stressed me out. I didn't know how the process worked and now that school ended was I expected to navigate it on my own? I was expected to know what to do and when to do things, but the truth was that I had no clue. I watched YouTube videos and got advice from TikTokers who were devoted to giving advice to rising seniors in the college application.

Quarantine forced me to become even more dependent on technology. Technology helped me stay connected to my peers and continue to learn. Technology informed me about what was going on in the world and it helped me stay in touch with my friends and family. It helped me think about my impact on my community in different ways. It allowed me to approach the latter in a different way. Technology made a difference in my quarantine experience and although I was physically disconnected from the world, I was still able to connect with them virtually.

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