

2022

## **Evanescent- Volume 3, Issue 1**

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# EVANESCENT

ISSUE 3: FALL 2021

EVANESCENT



ISSUE 3: FALL 2021

From the Jefferson Center for Injury Research and Prevention

# CONGRATULATIONS

To the winners of the 2021 inaugural  
Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize

FIRST PLACE

**David Peters**

SECOND PLACE

**Ellen Solomon**

THIRD PLACE

**Chanel Hart**

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Glenn Cooper, Kathleen Furin, Daniel Lefler,  
Andrew Monick, William Pentecost, Pamela Walter

The work of the winners and the honorable mentions is featured in this issue. In addition, the first-place winner was awarded a prize of \$1000; the second-place winner was awarded \$500; and the third-place winner was awarded \$250.

The prompt for next year's prize will have its deadline in spring of 2022; please look for our announcements.



# EVANESCENT:

A Journal of Literary Medicine

Issue 3, Fall 2021

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**Kyle Conner**

STUDENT EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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COVER & INSIDE ART: Zoe Wong

*About the artist:* Zoe Wong is a third-year medical student at Jefferson originally from San Mateo, California. She attended Haverford College where she minored in fine arts with a concentration in painting. She is interested in exploring the intersection of art and medicine in her future career as a physician.

*Artist's statement:* "[The cover] image centers around a letter my grandma wrote to me about my grandpa and his family's immigration to the US. My grandma, a Japanese American from Hawaii, and my grandpa, an immigrant from Hong Kong, have both been major figures throughout my life. When my grandma died unexpectedly at the end of 2019, I struggled with processing the loss and finding a way to still connect to her. Creating this work helped me cope with her death and connect with my family's history."

*Evanescent: A Journal of Literary Medicine* is the journal of the Eakins Writers' Workshop, which also sponsors the Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize. The Eakins Writers' Workshop is supported by the Jefferson Center for Injury Research and Prevention.

**The images in this issue should be appreciated as representing all races, ethnicities, and cultures. In this sense, hands are hands, and as such speak of the human condition.**

The *Eakins Writers' Workshop*, named after artist Thomas Eakins who painted the renowned *The Gross Clinic*, offers programs that facilitate writing as a conduit for healing and self-reflection. It seeks to provide space for the incredible stories witnessed every day by the members of the Jefferson community.

*The Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize*: The annual prize invites all members of the Jefferson community—including all current employees, faculty, volunteers, and students of Jefferson at all campuses, sites, and offices—to engage in the empowering act of writing. The 2021 inaugural year of this prize called for submissions of personal essays that responded to the following prompt:

**Imagine that we are creating a time capsule to be laid in the foundation of one of our new Jefferson buildings. It will be opened 100 years from now, in 2121. Reflecting on the past year—which has presented us with a range of challenges includes a global pandemic and a national reckoning on racial equality—what story would you put into the time capsule for future generations?**

Many of the essays submitted for the prize are included in this issue of *Evanescent*, and all entries will be included in an actual time capsule to be placed in the foundation of the new Jefferson Specialty Care Pavilion at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut, as well as in the Jefferson Archives in Scott Memorial Library. The essays will give a window into what it was like to live through 2020 for decades—if not centuries—to come.

The mission of the prize is:

- To encourage and enable writing as a conduit for healing, self-reflection, and interconnectedness both for the individual and the community

- To highlight and value the many diverse voices of the Jefferson community, including Jefferson patients and the communities they represent, and to foster a sense of belonging in these individuals and communities
- To promote and demystify writing as a powerful tool for self-empowerment for all in the Jefferson community, not only to those who consider themselves writers
- To communicate and celebrate our diverse stories and experiences to the larger community

For more information about *Evanescent*, the *Yeo Writing Prize*, and *Eakins Writers' Workshop*: [www.jeffersoncovidstories.com/writingprize](http://www.jeffersoncovidstories.com/writingprize). Direct inquiries to [evanescent@jefferson.edu](mailto:evanescent@jefferson.edu).





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# Letter From the Editors

Hello and welcome to the third issue of *Evanescent: A Journal of Literary Medicine!* We hope you enjoy the journey you are about to embark upon.

After six years and three issues, we the editorial crew of this craft find ourselves still at the relative beginnings of a journey whose ultimate destination we cannot perceive. This journey started six years ago when Dr. Stanton Miller, our spiritual captain, built the ship with issue #1, with support from editor Jen Fisher Wilson. The journey took a joltingly surprising turn with issue #2, helmed by two engaged health care workers, Dr. Danielle Snyderman and medical student Nick Safian, that led us on a grueling, exhausting but ultimately inspiring tour of the maelstrom of experiences, emotions and hard-won jewels of wisdom that resulted during the Pandemic Year.

And now, moving into a period of relative calm and welcoming a fellow traveler and writer on board our editorial craft, we come to issue #3. So where are we, dear Reader? We are, geographically, in Philadelphia at Thomas Jefferson University Center City campus. We are, historically, witnessing what is hopefully the endgame of a major pandemic. We are, spiritually, both exhausted and uplifted by the indomitable human spirit that has suffered, raged, wept, laughed, struggled, fought, endured, and survived through the essays you are about to read. These essays address hard realities and small moments of kindness; questions that have no answers, and answers that do not need questions; and scenes of unmistakable beauty and humanity that can restore even the most bereft of spirit.

And so, again, where are we, dear Reader? After #metoo. After Black Lives Matter. After civil protests. After a shocking riot at the shrine of our government and a rancorously contested presidential election. After the most extraordinary period of rapid clinical testing that brought not one, not two, but three COVID vaccines to general use within 18 months. Where are we? ...We are in new terrain, that's where we are, frighteningly, inspiringly, excitingly, disorientingly new terrain. And in new terrain, we must re-situate ourselves, smell the new air, get our bearings, test the ground, sight new landmarks, and then, gradually, slowly, we must begin to move forward.

With this issue we share a selection of essays submitted for the inaugural Drs. Theresa and Charles Yeo Writing Prize. The prompt for this year's competition was: Tell your story of the pandemic year. We wondered what kind of responses we would get. We found out that a lot of people had incredibly compelling stories to tell. These stories come from all levels of the Jefferson community, and speak to the myriad of experiences of and responses to the pandemic. Many occur in the healthcare setting, and many occur outside that realm. Some voices are despairing, some are tongue in cheek, some are wondrous, some are enraged. Taken together, they offer a mosaic of an unprecedented year in human history, and we fervently hope that they offer some balm and assurance of the persistence of the human spirit and can serve as a repository of knowledge for future generations. Not all journeys are easy, but we can learn something from every journey.

So here we are: *Evanescent* #3. We claim diversity, inclusivity and storytelling as our goals. We hope to represent many voices, because every person has a voice that is worth hearing. We want to change things. We want to make health care more equitable, and then hold it up as a beacon for all. We want people to recognize their common needs as the basis for social progress. And we believe this is achievable through the collecting and sharing of human stories and expression. Our brains are built to listen to each other, so we intend to do just that.

As we move forward, we will need to make decisions. We will need to create criteria by which we select work to be published. The essential elements of grammar, syntax, word choice, stylistic vigor, and imagination, will be important. But we also will consider the stories and feelings being expressed, the communities being represented, and the adversities faced by those courageous enough to submit their writing. We may make mistakes in our choices. But hopefully, we ultimately will chart the right course where all voices are represented and valued.

We hope you will join us as we continue this journey. We welcome you to *Evanescent*.

*All aboard!*

## **The Eakins Writers' Workshop**

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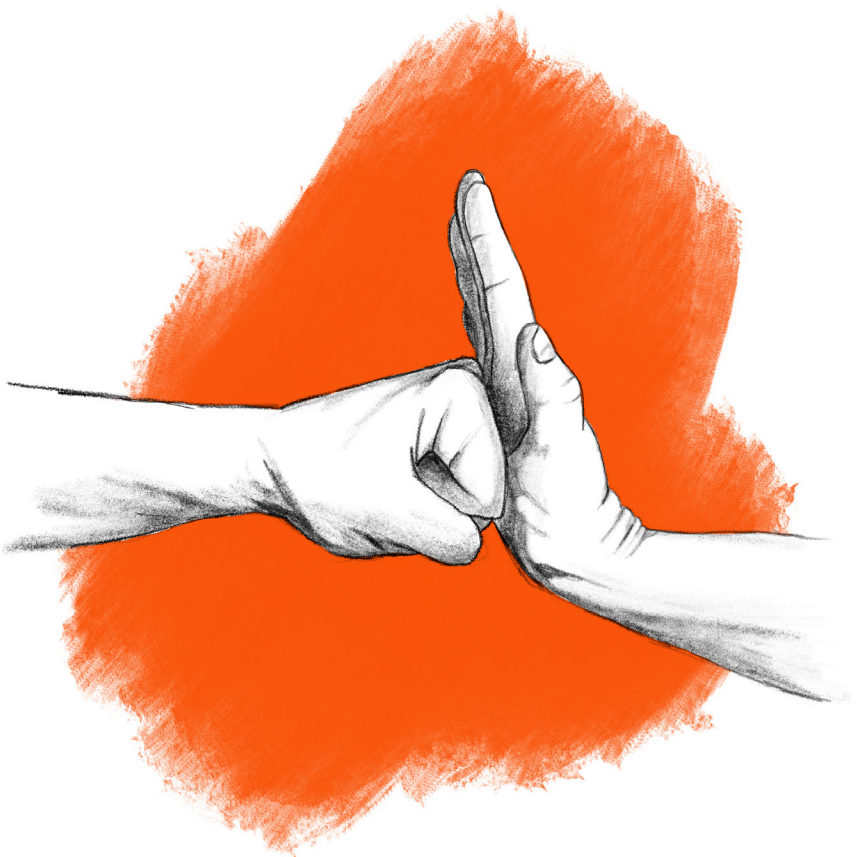
Nick Safian, Medical Student  
Sidney Kimmel Medical College

Jen Fisher Wilson, Medical Writer/Editor  
Center for Teaching and Learning









# VIRUS

BARBARA URMSTON | Administrative Assistant

Congratulations, the treasure you seek is here. Not a substance of gold, jewels or money, but words of someone who is surviving a world of segregation divided by disease, religion and class. Those whose skin colors determine their eternity. Where deadly decisions were made in seconds of time without thought or remorse. A virus in the air that permeated through the population and affected all those who were either sickened or endured the unknown.

I dig and scrape in order to hide the discrimination of who I am and why I am still here with the hope that those who are reading this are appalled by the division of societies because skin tones directed their fate, the faith of their organized religion, the money in their pockets, their political views and the destruction of the climate. I search for the right place. This is a time of fear and failure.

Those who separate themselves with arrogance against the crowd of reality are hovering over the less fortunate. I seek answers to the relative thought *that we are all one*. There is only one being left to read this note, and they are those who seek the words with faith, hope, kindness and simplicity of love.

The focus of our world is now at peace. I smell the grass and the flowers. I hold the moon, the stars, and the sun in my calloused hands. Those who stopped the beatings, the senseless reactionary shootings, the theories of fear and injustice have survived. We are the virus. Those who turned their back on their fellow man and animal were left isolated and destroyed. I am holding my hand out and reaching for comfort. Answers to why that man who stands alone has nothing, why those children are crying and malnourished and now in a time of despair and impending death to this world, I ask all to remove the mask of ignorance and open your heart to the soul who lies within us.

I heard the shouting and saw the collapse and yet I still didn't believe it would affect me. It would touch me in this year of 2020. It did as it touched all and the ripple effect was deafening. Soon to be numb from all the sadness. Death was a relief. I cover with dirt and walk away only to return someday when the sun shines on the ocean and the trees blow in the wind with all souls walking by our sides.

# REBUILDING YOURSELF AFTER A SUDDEN LOSS

MELISSA BECKER | Medical Assistant, Jefferson Comprehensive Breast Center

This is the story of what an earth-shattering sudden loss, dealing with profound grief, and being in lockdown because of a global pandemic all at once has taught me about myself and what I have taken from it. How I have grown from it and how I have rebuilt from it. This is my story.

If in the last 16 months I have learned anything at all, it is to never take anything or anyone for granted ever again. Not even for a second. Tomorrow is promised to no one. Enjoy every moment with the ones you love for one day the memories will be all you have left. You see, in late January of 2020 my 65-year-old otherwise healthy, vivacious father was complaining of extreme lethargy, body aches, and loss of taste. Everyone was at a loss as to what was going on with him. The flu, a cold, you name it. A few short days later, however, I had to make a decision in a room full of strangers in an ICU consult room to put him on hospice and he passed away late the next evening due to an unknown illness.

Coronavirus was just starting to be spoken about on television, as the world was still reeling from Kobe Bryant's death, and COVID-19 was not even being considered as a diagnosis for anyone yet. But, yet just 6 short weeks later, everyone was now wearing masks, and staying home locked down due to a global pandemic, the first of its kind in over 100 years. At the same time, my world was still reeling from this profound sudden loss of my dad, and now I had to grieve at home, without being able to see or hug my family, whom I desperately needed. I couldn't meet a friend for lunch, I couldn't visit with anyone. In fact, I visited my elderly grandmother by standing on her patio and speaking through glass. All the while watching the news and seeing the panic increase, the death tolls rise, the fear and uncertainty around every corner, and the constant wondering every minute if this is what took my dad, and working in a hospital and hearing the patient counts and the horror stories, all at once it was just too much.

In the next few months, I decided I really needed a break from it all, and I went on a journey to start a comeback, and that is when the rebuilding began. I read so many books on healing, grief, and self-care. I tried meditation, exercise, working diligently at my favorite hobbies, finding new ones, building a memorial garden for my dad, listened to my favorite music, practiced self-care, really anything to numb the pain and help to process all of the grief and stress. I had the time to reflect, ponder, and improve, after all, as we were in lockdown and really couldn't go anywhere anyway. Going in just a few short weeks from doing normal, everyday things you take for granted—like shopping or going out to lunch with a friend or out to dinner with your significant other—to just being in shock and disbelief and being too terrified to go anywhere due to fear of catching coronavirus was too much to bear on top of the extreme anguish of the sudden loss of a parent.

Yet somewhere hidden deep within in that blur of time, the notes of that music, and pages of those books, I found strength, strength I never knew I had. I found new positives, new happy distractions, and through it all I tried to change my outlook from bleak to hopeful. And it worked! I realized I was still incredibly blessed after all, and tried to focus on what I didn't lose, as I have an incredibly supportive fiancé, a close knit, loving family, a safe and secure home life, two amazing dogs, and a healthy mom, who really needed me to be strong for her. So I did that, I was strong for her, let her cry, listened to how she was affected and what she was feeling opposed to thinking about me and my sadness, and our relationship has since strengthened tenfold. I am eternally grateful for that. I appreciated my fiancé more, found a new love of decorating, played more with my dogs, baked new recipes, anything that took my mind off of all the sadness, grief, fear and despair and tried to focus instead on how I could improve myself and be better for the ones I love. I try to make my dad proud every day, even though he is no longer here. The first year of holidays were extremely tough, Father's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas were the worst, and I really tried to find the holiday spirit by seeing my family via the house party app or facetime.

My dad and I always bonded over and shared a love of music, and one of both mine and his favorite songs is Tin Man by America. The lyrics say, "Oz never did give nothing to the tin man, that he didn't already have" and I use that line from that song to remind me that I am stronger than I ever thought I was. I have the strength in me I need to come through this. And I continue to grow every day. I continue to provide empathy and compassion to my patients at the cancer center, by being a dependable teammate to my co-workers, by never failing to show those I care about how much I love and appreciate them, by being a good listener to my two friends and checking in on them, and just recently I enrolled to begin my transition from a Clinical Medical Assistant to an LPN by enrolling in nursing school at the age of 42. My dad always wanted me to be a nurse, and I am determined to make him proud, even if it is in spirit alone.

I feel as though sometimes you have to lose yourself completely in order to truly find yourself and even though you are never the same, as you rebuild yourself you are bound to come back better than before. I feel that overall, despite all the COVID lockdowns, trying to process and understand my dad's death, and trying to hold everything together has made me stronger than before. There was yet another song that would always help me through, where the lyrics were "Rise again, little fighter, and let the world know the reason why" and I was able in fact to rise again and find joy again. Nothing will bring my Dad back home again, and I may never know exactly what took him from me so soon, but knowing that he would be proud of me if he could see me today is comforting to me. I have learned a lot about love and loss, family, and mental health during the last 16 months, and these were very bitter lessons to learn. If I could give someone who may ever be in a similar situation some advice, it would be this: It will be okay. Maybe not today, tomorrow, or even a month from now, but it will get better and "every little thing's gonna be alright"

# A LESSON ON IMPORTANCE

ABIGAIL O'CONNELL | Nurse Practitioner, Surgery

There's an old adage, a saying: "from the mouths of babes." When the youngest and most innocent among us say something seemingly so simple yet so very insightful and poignant that it reflects a wisdom well beyond their years. The stress of this last year, working as a nurse during a global pandemic while being a mom to two small children, ages 4 and 6, who enrolled in 100% full-time virtual learning, started to manifest and show itself as a new onset of anxiety, the likes of which I have never experienced in my life. I had so much on my shoulders, between work and home responsibilities, and no real outlet for the stress that it began seeping out of me in the form of a short temper with my children and a fixation on correcting the chaotic state of my home. Toys everywhere, spilled yogurt on the couch I had *just cleaned* the day before, baths not given, teeth not brushed—every incomplete task a trigger for my anxiety.

I feel the need to backpedal just a bit to make you privy to a series of events that most likely planted the seed for my anxiety. In 2018 I was working two jobs as a nurse while enrolled in a master's program and raising my two young sons (then ages one and three) along with all that goes into managing a household. I practiced as much self-care as possible with my outlet of choice for the daily stressors of life being running. Whether I was able to sneak in a solo run or I was packing both boys into a double jogging stroller, I got my miles in each week. I was happy. Running was my stress relief, my therapy, and it made me feel amazing. I was a better mom when I ran—releasing all of my stress, getting lost in thought, pushing myself to work hard. I took that stress and channeled it into the fuel my body needed to run harder and go farther. I was super-mom!

On November 17, 2018, I had just completed the Philadelphia Half Marathon. It was right before Thanksgiving and I spoke with my dad on the phone as I walked away from the finish line about plans to spend the upcoming holiday at his house with all of my siblings. My dad and I chatted for a bit then I met up with a friend who also ran that day and we walked to a nearby bar for brunch and for celebratory spirits. We were seated for a few minutes when my phone rang, it was dad again. I wonder what he forgot to tell me? I answered the phone. With the bar fairly crowded, I had to press a hand over my right ear as I held the phone to my left, yet I still struggled to hear my father. "Abby, Billy is dead. Your brother is dead. His girlfriend found him at their house." What did he just say?

The room started spinning as I stood from the table. I heard this terrible, animal-like shriek. It took me a full 30-seconds before I realized I was the one shrieking. I couldn't breathe, I didn't know what to do. I felt my heart pounding in my throat. I had to get to my brother. I had to still have a brother. My brother is not dead. I somehow muttered to my dad that I would meet him at my brother's house. Something about the medical examiner and the police. I managed to tell my friend what my dad had just told me. A fellow diner overheard and approached me to hug me and offer to pay my check so I could leave. I pushed her away and screamed, my friend intercepting the woman and thanking her while rushing me

out of the restaurant. Still spinning, I felt like I was someone else, this couldn't be real. This wasn't happening. I called my husband and tried to get the words out in between sobs, trying to catch my breath, overcome with chest-crushing sadness. I somehow relayed the news to my husband, and he dropped our children off with his parents so he could meet me and take me to my brother's house.

On November 17, 2018, just one month shy of his 38<sup>th</sup> birthday, my big brother died of an accidental drug overdose. Heroin laced with fentanyl. I had no idea he was using drugs. Following the death of my brother I threw myself into running, letting my mind escape to simpler times. I would get lost as the miles passed, escaping the sadness that had now consumed me. In April 2019 I was diagnosed with a progressive heart disease and was told I could no longer run. My outlet was gone. I mourned the life I once knew despite being grateful to be alive.

Through it all, when my brother died and when I got diagnosed with heart disease, I continued to function at a high level. I completed my master's program, had a minor heart procedure, kept working two jobs, and one of my two sons was found to have a genetic mutation linked to my heart disease (thankfully his heart is perfect for now). And I just kept mom-ing and running my household. Looking back I don't know how I did it without ending up in the hospital for exhaustion. But somehow, I persevered.

Fast forward to fall of 2020. I walk into the makeshift classroom I put together for my kindergartner to make 100% virtual learning as normal as possible, and we are preparing to do homework when I discover the entire room is overcome with snack wrappers and toys. My heart started racing. I could feel the heat rising from my chest and up my neck, my face flushed. Anxiety presenting itself in the form of anger, I turned to my son (then 5 years old) and I angrily questioned this mess. How dare he. Doesn't he know how hard I work? Is it fair for me to come home to this mess? I leave the room clean each day and come home to find this? At that moment, he looked at me with his beautiful green eyes, a slight scowl on his face and a hand on his hip and said, "What's more important? A clean room or your children being happy?" Completely shook, I gaped at him while he proceeded to explain that following class that day he happily played with his toys in that room which is why it was messy.

At that moment every single one of my fits and short-tempered reactions to my young children hit me in the gut like a ton of bricks and the guilt was unbearable. Sure, I've been through a lot and I am stressed out, but they're little and carefree, and their lives as they knew them were completely changed with stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and 100% virtual learning. They don't know my stress, and they shouldn't know my stress, yet here I was projecting it on my first-born boy.

It was this moment that opened my eyes wider than they've ever been. It was this moment that led me to start waking up at 4:00 am every morning to walk on my treadmill before work, to channel that stress I used to lose in the miles I would run. I started taking care of me so I could take better care of them. Saving their amazing spirits, open hearts, and innocent minds. I want them to be happy and for that to happen, I have to take care of myself.

After all, a wise child once said, "What's more important?"



# A SURGICAL RESIDENT'S PPE

JACLYN HEILMAN | Physician (Resident), General Surgery

I don a surgical mask, tying it over my scrub cap. Standing outside the operating room, I begin washing my hands and arms at the sink. As I prepare myself for the operation ahead, I take a deep breath and blow away the stress of another hectic morning. I am here now, and this is the only thing that matters. Entering the OR with my arms extended, dripping in clean water, I stand tall, alive, and ready. The scrub nurse hands me a blue towel to dry my arms. I step into the sterile gown and thrust my hands into the 6.5-sized sterile gloves held out before me. After thanking each nurse for their help, I spin around and tie my gown.

It begins. Prepping, draping, the time out, marking the incision, injecting local anesthetic, wielding the scalpel. I call out, "Incision." Time stops. The patient before us is our world, the OR our universe. We focus our attention on identifying the pathology and correcting it. Pitfalls and complications prepared for, respected, and evaded. When approaching a large vessel, we call for a silk stitch on a driver ready to go. When nearing the inferior vena cava, we have two sponge sticks and a stitch on the Mayo stand. If we nick the bowel while taking down adhesions, we know the next step. We study and prepare for everything. There are anticipated complications and outcomes. There are known variables that form the algorithm tree. The control, the preparation, the intricacies of surgery, and the beauty of human anatomy are largely the reasons I work 80 hours a week and study surgery textbooks at home. This sacred time under the OR lights is why I wake up at 4:30 a.m. and work for 12 to 14 hours on the floors and in the ICU. Each operation is a dose of the sweet medicine that staves off the constant threat of burnout that is always waiting just around the corner for any general surgery resident.

Then the COVID pandemic took over the world. The hat, the mask, the gown and gloves — the items I once associated with my favorite daily ritual had come to represent the drastic and bleak changes all around us.

This was during my second year of residency, in the spring of 2020. I held onto the highs after each successful operation as a means to offset the lows of nights in the ICU. As the effects of the virus rippled through the planet, the country, the city, my hospital (my world), a sense of uncertainty and fear plagued us all. Elective surgeries were canceled. Hospital resources and ventilators were allocated to COVID patients. The structure of residency was adapted accordingly.

Heavy changes were all around us. We were discouraged from meeting our co-residents face to face, even in the hospital, to limit our exposure to the virus. We were split into different teams. A "central lines" team for the COVID patients that needed secure access for proning. A team for placing chest tubes in patients whose lungs had ruptured from the havoc wreaked by the virus. The PACU, or recovery room, was once a place where I handed off my patients to post-op nurses. It became a makeshift intensive care unit where I worked overnight. The time I previously spent studying for my next operation was spent studying the ins and outs of ventilator settings like APRV, the treatment of ARDs, all new data on COVID, and my hospital's ever-changing guidelines and policies.

As for the operating room, the few cases that proceeded were performed by the chiefs who would soon be graduating.

The days were clouded by so many unknowns. How long would this last? Were we safe as medical professionals? On a more basic level, would we have enough PPE? Would the N-95 mask I carried around in a paper lunch bag for a week actually protect me? My mask was now necessary from the moment I left home in the morning, driving through streets even more deserted at 4:30 a.m. than they were before this all happened. The experts had algorithms for how things could play out, but I certainly was not one of them.

A residency that was grueling to begin with had become compoundingly more so. And, as a consequence of the pandemic, we were denied the chance to operate, the main reason I went to work every day, and left with no light at the end of the tunnel. At least this was how it seemed at the time. Throughout the year 2020, we learned as a residency to rely on one another more than we previously had. We made an effort to emphasize mental health awareness and wellness overall. Though the concept of wellness had been a long-standing initiative in General Surgery, it became acutely more important during this time. Personally, I learned to find more meaning and fulfillment in my interactions with patients by sharing in their joys and in their pain. I sat with families and described surgeries through pictures, discussed options, and sometimes just listened. I found that the most powerful experience was when I sat across from a patient going through the most painful time in their life and I empathized. In some of those situations, all I could do was offer tissues, but somehow it felt like I was making a real difference. Those moments filled in for the lost OR time and helped to keep the burnout at bay.

Looking back, over a year after the onset of the shutdown in my region, it was just another challenge to overcome. We learn from the past, from the good around us and the science and innovation of our colleagues. We decide how to confront what comes our way. There is always hope. There is always good, and if we do not see it around us, then we have the power to create it.

# TRYING TIME

T.J. CAHANAP | Medical Student

When the pandemic swallowed up the globe, I was two grueling years into medical school, a few months shy of 25 years old, exactly 6 weeks away from my very first board exam, and three seconds away from eating the ice cream cone I had just bought from the shop down the street from my apartment when I got a call from my mom. My aunt and uncle—who had been trying for another baby since the birth of their now-one-year-old daughter—were pregnant again!

I specifically note the passage of time here for two reasons.

One: the experience of its passing—the certainty that our precious increments of time hold—is ultimately what we all lost during the pandemic. We all watched, together but physically distanced, as the death of certainty unfolded, and our world plunged into the unknown.

Two: my aunt and uncle had been holding out on us. They were already about 4 or 5 months into the pregnancy when they made their announcement. On May 9, 2020, they welcomed a beautiful baby boy into the world to a symphony of video chats, text messages, and phone conferences brimming with all the virtual love our family could muster. A mere 44 days later on June 22, 2020, their sweet son, my cousin, my mom’s nephew, passed away.

Like all of life’s most tragic stories, the emotion is in the details. When a story is told and retold to the witnesses of a person’s life—best friends, significant others, coworkers, parents—it’s the specifics that feel the most poignant. It feels salient to include in the retelling every last tiny anecdote because it feels like the moments that no one sees are the ones that bear the most witness to the breaking of a heart.

It seems important to note that their firstborn daughter—Blake—had been playing with her baby doll for weeks to “practice being a big sister.” It seems important to note that Baby Gavin had been born into a body that had to fight for his life almost immediately after his delivery. It seems important to note that my grandparents had booked tickets back to the Philippines months before in anticipation of their grandson’s birth. It seems important to note that I was on my very first clinical rotation—pediatrics in the neonatal intensive care unit—when my cousin was born, and on a particularly delivery-heavy shift on my obstetrics and gynecology rotation when I got the call that he had passed.

*It seems important.*

But when the details fade, what we have left—what gives our lives meaning—is how we drew the strength to carry on. When the details fade, the importance lies in love, in resilience, in grit, in hope.

Contained in 44 days was an entire life. In 44 days, my beautiful nephew taught my family how to find new ways to be together across continents and oceans.

He taught us how to draw on our reservoirs of inspiration—religion for my grandmother, meditation for my sister, medicine for me to—to find beauty in our loss.

When we first began to understand the conditions that Baby Gavin would be born into, my sister's partner—whose family had been blessed years before with their own unexpected pregnancy circumstance—spoke words of advice to us that continue to resonate with me today. *"You have to mourn the loss of a future that you thought you were going to have in order to find the strength to move into the future you've been given."*

My family's story of loss is just one of the many that has found its setting in the global pandemic. The pandemic is frightening for many reasons—we fear for our elderly, our healthcare workers, our careers, our loved ones. But what we really fear is the uncertainty of our future. The things that we felt were unconditional have proven to be susceptible to change after all. We are paralyzed to inaction because we don't know how to prepare for the unknown.

I thought that what I feared most was loss. But there is a finality in loss that is comforting. If something is a certainty, we can stand on it, no matter how weak we feel we are. The ground will hold us up. It is the uncertainty of losing that breaks hearts; it is the fight that is frightening. We look to the news to tell us when this will end. We watch the curve rise and await its peak, because despite the loss it signals to us, it is a point from which we can take our first steps forward. We will always mourn the loss of the future we thought 2020 would bring, but within that grief is the strength we all have to absorb tragedy and let the power of hope carry us along.

As I'm writing this, the 1-year anniversary of Baby Gavin's death is, impossibly, only 3 weeks away. In a surprising turn of events, I will be applying to OB/Gyn residencies come the fall and it would be naïve to ignore the influence that this loss has had on this choice. It will be nothing short of an honor to welcome life—however brief it may be—into this beautiful, hopeful, uncertain world.

# WINDOWS AND SUCH

SAMUEL SCHULTZ | Medical Student

*Not too long ago*

*I searched for*

*“Control Z” in an online dictionary.*

*It wasn't there.*

The apartment I spent most of the pandemic in has no windows in the bedroom. To most people, this would seem like a “red flag,” an indication that there may be other aspects of the apartment that are less than ideal. Since you are reading this in the future, I'll describe some features of an overpriced apartment that hopefully doesn't exist anymore: lack of ventilation in a cramped kitchen, a draft coming in from the back door, a neighbor who, in order to avoid smoking in front of their apartment, steps two feet away to smoke in front of yours.

Then again, I suppose I was just more concerned about my lungs during that time. If there was one thing we knew throughout the pandemic, it was the virus's effect on our breath. One article might say it spreads to the brain. Another claims that the virus remains on surfaces and can be found days after contamination. But we all knew about the breath. Breathing, which had always been synonymous with life, was now synonymous with death as well. You can't fake it, well, no, maybe you dear future reader can fake it. But as for us, even with all the talk about ventilators, even they could not keep people alive.

When we signed our lease on the apartment, my wife and I didn't realize we would be spending most of our time in a windowless room. No air in or out, except through an air conditioner that occasionally produced the smells of the subway. Before I started med school I was a consultant. Being a junior level consultant is a lot like being a very well-paid temp, not very interesting or thoughtful work. I was surrounded by buzzwords that continue to haunt me, and for all I know continue to haunt you: AI, machine learning, design thinking, stakeholder, etc.

During the pandemic, my main job was assisting a state with pandemic assistance surge calls. I was hastily trained over a day and a half on how to handle the most basic calls, given tools to help very few people, and then thrown into a queue filled with suicidal and desperate callers. These were people who had never claimed unemployment before and were not used to slogging through government bureaucracy while being threatened with eviction, people forced to file online who only had a smartphone and barely knew how to use it other than to “like” photos on Facebook and follow the president's Twitter account. (Smartphones during my time were not good at helping people get ahead; they helped people spend and consume more in an easy way that primed them to continue pressing, eating up media without actually understanding the functionality of their phone. And yet, I'm told, these phones will be an essential part of our healthcare system.)

I hated it when a caller asked my name. It made me seem human, when really I would have preferred to be a machine. Though by the end of my time on the assignment I could do quite a few things to move the process along, but for many it was too long to bear. This one guy told me he was going to shoot himself if he didn't get his unemployment. I couldn't really help him. But I still had to be on the line. I gave him the number of the suicide prevention hotline, and he thanked me and hung up. He wasn't the only one. And though I didn't lose anyone personally during the pandemic, I was constantly exposed to the loss of others. I wasn't a medical worker on the front lines; my "patients" were hundreds of miles away.

Unfortunately, technology, with its impressive ability to bring people together virtually, did not do much to help. It could not make people breathe. It could not give people jobs. It could not give us confidence in our government or our public health institutions. Technology certainly failed me when I got Hepatitis A. As I scratched my arms raw from the bilirubin in my skin, a teledoc that I was randomly assigned to through my insurance took a look at me and said "I'll prescribe you some steroids for the rash. Maybe that will help. You seem fine." Now that's what I call a bedside manner. Thanks doc, maybe the steroids will give me enough strength to beat back this non-existent rash and help me ace my renal exam. Maybe you could swing around the internet and speak to my caller who was so afraid of debt collectors he told a complete stranger over the phone about his plans to take his life? Perhaps I am being too harsh on the doc. I too was a randomly assigned virtual helper. After all, the past, present, and future of medicine is pay-per-view. I'm just upset that even after my condition was diagnosed there was no magical drug that could cure me. I just had to wait. All of us were waiting. And breathing.

Sitting in my room covered in Gold Bond and taking in the stale air, I thought about how earlier in the year I listened in on a lecture on digital health. A highly accomplished physician was extolling the possibilities of a digital health future, one in which patients could have instantaneous support and proper metrics detected straight from their living room. And I mean, think about it. Perhaps you in the future have a more accessible healthcare system, but for us, we were supposed to be happy knowing that though our healthcare system is unaffordable, sometimes to the point of suffocation, help was on the way in the form of a doctor seeing a patient over Zoom. Forget about your lack of insurance, your closed down workplace, and your fear for the future. Because soon you'll get a text saying "the doctor will see you now" and they'll make it all better. Is this the world you are living in now? Is this really the best we have to hope for?

# MY COVID YEAR IN HOME CARE: A REFLECTION

MARYANN PRICHETT | Physical Therapist, Jefferson Health Home Care and Hospice

New reality... shutdown.

So little traffic... how nice... but no, it's actually eerie at 10 a.m. What am I doing out here? Directives... N95 mask on, make it last, low supplies... I wear it days, weeks... until the odor inside is too much.

The numbers rise... COVID-positive patients on quarantine come to home care, we see only eyes... fear, fatigue, vigilance—are we being careful enough? Are we cleaning everything we use well enough? Are we distancing? Not realistic when helping someone relearn standing, walking, and self-care... we all do our best... listen, teach... reassure.

Another new normal: patients do not go to skilled rehab anymore... Mr. X comes home, bedbound, cannot roll, cannot lift legs from bed, cannot sit up, he is the most immobile debilitated patient I've had... in any setting. Is there hope that he'll ever rise?

A small pleasure discovered—the Philadelphia Pretzel Factory in Wadsworth Ave is open? Eating in car, on the move, is homecare norm. I order 20 pretzels, he sees my badge—he blesses me as a healthcare hero—words I am uncomfortable embracing... it's my job. I thank him and bless him in return... he is essential to his family, his community... and me.

The shortages escalate... supplies, groceries... reason and clarity. We teach and reassure as swirling information and misinformation flies from TVs and devices... rest the groceries in bags for an hour, wipe every item, gloves on for every activity... insidious fear of not having enough of... everything, especially toilet paper. A new challenge, the patient has diarrhea... I share a lead... the Shop Rite in Cheltenham has some! The spouse leaves the house immediately...

Philadelphia summer arrives, hot humid... shields with masks and full PPE for COVID-positive patients, encased in plastic and walking 1 to 2 blocks at times, because with shutdown comes no open parking... blinding in sun with no sunglasses, neighbors with 2 reactions... avoidance or greetings of support... thank you.

The car... is my fortress of solitude... an air-conditioned respite between visits, some days is the only air conditioning I will have... the trunk is half supply locker half landfill. The routine is now normalized... park, sanitize, don gear, walk to the home... easy... except... it's pouring rain... ugh... coat off gear on, not enough hands for an umbrella... wind is worse, head down, gust rips shield off and blows it into street, car runs over it... oh well, back to the trunk.

Then, inevitable, of course the COVID-positive winter would bring crushing snow with unplowed streets, un-shoveled sidewalks and again... no parking... only lawn chairs.

Another new challenge, pandemic fatigue. For home care it means uncontrolled environment of random relatives and others coming in and out of the home, unmasked at all times and feeling invincible... more teaching of epidemiology 101 and safety for us all.

COVID-positive recovery and its lingering side effects... a river of anxiety in many patients... understandable especially with pulmonary compromise... a short walk in a bedroom, suddenly the anxiety becomes panic... he says he must sit down... problem is we're not close enough to the chair... he goes down anyway... and I go too, he lands on me...I'm pinned, no one can move. His wife calls 911, I hear her say... I don't know what they were doing but he's on top of her... EMS and police officer are needed, patient is fine, I am fine... I will laugh after some ibuprofen and wine.

So a year later, after several hospitalizations and surgery, Mr. X now moves from his bed independently, and can finally walk in his home with his walker, his wife is vaccinated and he will be soon... The hope does rise.



# AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

JAMES COPELAND | Library Technician

I was standing in the check-out line at Mom's Organic Market on South 11<sup>th</sup> Street when I noticed a male customer in his mid-20's, dressed appropriately in winter clothing, waiting ahead of me in the queue to pay for his grocery items. This ordinary activity on a cold afternoon in the early weeks of 2020 is unremarkable by itself. What got my attention, though, was the white, cotton surgical mask, with elastic cords looped around both this customer's ears, covering his nose and mouth.

Observing a surgical mask worn on the face of a fellow shopper wasn't a part of my usual experience of seeing people in public, especially at a grocery store. I wasn't alarmed by the customer's exercise of caution—mildly concerned about the meaning, but not alarmed. My attitude changed shortly thereafter when domestic and foreign news media reported on a contagious, novel coronavirus originating from Wuhan, China, that was virulent enough to cause SARS and corollary respiratory distress. Shocking images of doctors and nurses overwhelmed by patients, suffering from the novel coronavirus designated COVID-19, were broadcasted from around the world, especially from Italy, which became identified as the initial European epicenter of the pandemic. Morbid visualizations of being hospitalized and dependent on mechanical ventilation permeate my thoughts.

Uncertainty surrounding the disease's manner of transmission and treatment aroused apprehension in the general public. Panic-buying of dwindling quantities of personal care products contributed to quarrels between shoppers in store aisles as well as shortages of goods available on store shelves. Societal discord was compounded by disclosures that national stockpiles of personal protective equipment had been depleted, and the supply of ventilators, which were desperately needed to assist hospitalized COVID-positive patients' respiratory systems, was insufficient to meet the demand. This supply-and-demand disequilibrium was occurring when the number of infection cases were proliferating. These circumstances put people further on edge.

I don't think I'll ever forget seeing an anxious young woman, in her late 20s or early 30s, driving westbound on Walnut Street in a car. Crossing the intersection at 10<sup>th</sup> Street in the direction of 11<sup>th</sup> Street with all the windows rolled up tightly, she was gripping the steering wheel with both hands. Her nose, lips, cheeks, and chin were concealed behind a surgical face mask even though she was the only person in the vehicle. Her wide, terrified eyes stared out the windshield.

As information about the increasing rate of human infections and the decreasing number of hospital beds spread through mass- and social-media, I noticed more and more people shielding their noses and mouths behind surgical masks, scarves,

bandanas, ostensibly in an effort to prevent exposure to COVID-19. While writing this reflective essay, I remember this quick multiplication of masked faces as a consecutive series of memories similar to a sequence of cinematic transitions that dramatically depict the perceptible transformations happening from one scene to the next one.

It is general knowledge that viral infections cause fever or chills, muscle aches or pains, cough or sore throat in the host. However, this particular pathogen, which put populations on quarantine and lock-down, produced unheard of anosmia or ageusia. The first release of information about sensory impairment didn't specify whether the loss of smell or taste was transient or permanent. Even more alarming were complaints that people infected with COVID-19 might experience shortness of breath that could escalate into a state of compromised breathing that required emergency care.

The elderly, as well as people with underlying health conditions, seemed to be more at risk of dying from COVID-19, but individuals who were otherwise healthy could need critical care and endure protracted recovery if infected with the novel coronavirus.

While preoccupied about my own physical health and safety, the faces and the figures of people I knew entered the theater of my mind and walked across the stage-boards of my memory. I wondered: How were they coping? How long would we be isolated from each other? How many people would get sick or die from this disease? I speculated: When would the pandemic end? How long would it take to develop an effective treatment and when would it be authorized for usage against COVID-19?

I suffered lingering episodes of helplessness and hopelessness, but I tried to keep my spirits high. Optimistic sentiment from an entry in Anne Frank's diary, dated July 15, 1944, and written while she was hidden in Amsterdam, reinvigorated me when I despaired during the first lock-down. She wrote: "It's in difficult times like these: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

Health and government officials had declared a health emergency in March 2020 and ordered the closure of work-sites. Employees abandoned their places of employment and retreated to their residences to work remotely for months. Instant messaging and video-conferencing technology, fortunately, facilitated communication with co-workers and colleagues across the Jefferson enterprise. Researchers and physicians sought information to counteract COVID-19 from the Scott Memorial Library, and they were matched with organized, electronic information resources: (1) A niche database, Coronavirus Research, was created to make the growing body of evidence-based medicine accessible, and (2) a library guide, or "libguide", on COVID-19 literature directed inquirers to notable sources.

The Scott Memorial Library continues to preserve knowledge on the subject of COVID-19. A collection of papers, posters, and presentations based on research performed or written by scientific investigators at Thomas Jefferson University and Hospitals is available in the University library's digital commons repository to anyone in the world.

Historians record accounts of human acts of heroism or villainy that lead to triumphs or tragedies. The history of science, in particular, must examine the course of events from the source of the outbreak of COVID-19 to the development of vaccines. Zora Neale Hurston, a novelist and folklorist who studied anthropology at Barnard College, wrote in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks in a Road*, a passage that is timely and timeless: "Research is a formalized curiosity," she asserted. "It is poking and prying with purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secret of the world and they that dwell therein." Hurston's wisdom could describe the very work of health-care practitioners and researchers who "prevent, alleviate, or cure diseases," especially during the recent pandemic, which does not look like it will have the last word about our adaptability or survival.

# A MOMENT IN TIME

CHRISTINA GRESH | Nurse Care Coordinator, Abington Jefferson Health

It was Friday, March 13, 2020—an ominous sign. Even though coronavirus (COVID-19) was in the United States, it felt like a “typical day” at the office where I was working. I left at the end of the workday thinking about meetings and what was in store come Monday. But Monday at the office never came. My coworkers and I started on a journey of providing care to patients from home—something I had never experienced before.

One of the first items our manager set up for our team that Monday morning was virtual (Zoom) meetings. As I connected to the meeting with my video feature on, I began to see my leaders and coworkers emerge on the screen in front of me. We waved hello, asked how each other were doing, and said that we missed seeing each other already. We were told that even though we would be working from home, we as Jefferson nurses would continue to Improve Lives of the patients that we spoke to each and every day. Even though this was a new and unique situation we were in, our leadership team knew we would accomplish this by continuing to focus on our Jefferson values of putting people first, providing innovative nursing care, and doing the right thing for our patients!

Thus, began the first day of working from home. Little did I know at the time it would be over a year before I would return to my office. During my workday, I continued to focus on discharge phone calls and engaging with a variety of patients. My coworkers and I also provided follow up care for patients who were positive for COVID-19. We talked to patients who were experiencing shortness of breath, fevers, and coughing. We reached out to these patients to provide education, offer support and guidance, and relay any questions to their primary care doctor. We also offered emotional support by listening to our patients and validating what they were saying. In talking to these patients, I experienced a range of emotions in hearing about their struggles, their triumphs, and everything in between. Some patients were experiencing mild symptoms, while other patients we directed to call 911 due to the life-threatening symptoms they were facing while we spoke to them on the phone. One of the recurring themes that resounded in every single COVID-19 positive patient was gratitude. Patients were thankful for our calls and relieved to know that a nurse was looking out for them and was there to help support them through it all—they were not alone. So many of these patients, despite their age, were scared. Scared of when they would recover, scared their health could deteriorate down the road, scared the family members they lived with would contract COVID-19. But I was glad to know that I could be there to listen to, support, and educate these patients through some of their most difficult days. I couldn't have been prouder to call myself a nurse.

Working with COVID-19 positive patients from home helped me discover how strong I was as a nurse and how dedicated my coworkers were. Through Zoom meetings, emails, and phone calls, I quickly realized that even though we could not physically be near each other in offices or at group meetings, we showed our strength in helping each other find needed resources for patients and supporting

each other through these uncertain times. Sadly, some of my coworkers lost family members to COVID-19. There was an outflow of support to these people via cards, gifts of comfort, and phone calls. And while it took time for people to heal, we carried on knowing that we could make a positive difference to so many individuals—disseminating our knowledge and compassion to our community members throughout our local regions. We would continue to improve lives, one person at a time.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I knew there would be difficult and challenging days ahead. Hearing all of the sad stories from patients was challenging for me. I therefore made a conscious effort to find joy, no matter how small, each and every day. It included things like listening to classical music daily, making special meals for dinner, baking tasty desserts on the weekend, and taking in the sunset each evening. I found that daily meditation helped me personally to heal mentally and spiritually. These actions were an outlet for the range of emotions I experienced daily while working through the height of the pandemic. In talking to my coworkers, I found that they too were cultivating joy in similar ways in their life and that it helped them continue to provide compassionate care to patients and their family members. It was through these actions that people were able to help each other and heal through this process.

On the whole, I'm very proud of how our team rose to the occasion to meet the challenges of the pandemic and what we were able to accomplish for our patients. We connected patients with services that helped improve their lives. These services will have a positive impact on their life now and in the future as well. We provided patients with information on how to get the COVID-19 vaccination. Through interpreters, we educated patients and their family members about guidelines and home isolation for COVID-19. For patients that didn't have a primary care doctor, we were able to help them find a Jefferson provider so they could have a follow up appointment. We reached out to patients in a variety of communities throughout the Philadelphia region. Community members came to know that we were here for them – now and in the future. Even though we were apart, not only did our relationships with our communities grow, but we grew ourselves. I became a leader in my own right and discovered how much I had grown both professionally as a nurse and personally. We should all be proud of the care we provided for patients during this pandemic and go forward knowing the lessons we have each learned will make us not only better health care providers, but better human beings overall.

# PERSONALITIES OF COVID

ROSEMARIE CAPORALE | Executive Secretary

I am sure others have far worse results from COVID than mine but my family was affected by it too. Both of my daughters and my sons-in-law had COVID. My younger daughter who is a teacher had it the worst. She is what the doctors call a "long hauler." Watching my vibrant, healthy, and caring daughter become tired and unfocused is hard. She was so worried about her dad and me and now we worry about her. It was months that I was unable to see our granddaughter, the love of our lives. When we did venture to see her, we wore plastic trash bags and masks. She said we looked like aliens. Working with The Women's Association here at Methodist, every time the phone would ring I would hold my breath. I prayed hard that COVID did not hit our ladies' group. I did get the call that one of our ladies lost her son from COVID. Now COVID was getting real. I was so afraid. I am extremely close to my family and friends, and I was so fearful I would lose a loved one. My brother-in-law was now in the hospital. Unfortunately, he died here of COVID. Now trying to be there for my sister during COVID was not an easy task. I am thankful for the area businesses that stayed open for deliveries of food for comfort. I was able to send food for weeks and although that may not be enough, it was my way of comforting her. My takeaway from this past year and reflecting back, I have learned that the more I receive the more I will give. I will not raise my living status, I will raise my giving status.

# A ROOM WITHOUT PEOPLE; ROOMS WITHOUT PEOPLE

MADALYNE ANNE SUNDAY | Medical Student

I know what it's like to be alone. In fact, I know this feeling too well; but in the time spent by myself, I have realized that "being alone" and "truly being alone" can refer to two totally different concepts.

Let me explain.

All my life, I've always had people around me. Those family members that were in their rooms while I was watching TV; the siblings that went to a different school, but I knew they were there. This type of "being alone" never really bothered me. Yes, I was physically alone, but the thought that someone was in a place that was known to me, convinced my tiny brain that I wasn't alone, at least not conceptually. As I grew older, I also enjoyed this state of "aloneness"; it allowed me comfort in my own solidarity, enough to focus on the absolutes in my life: school, learning, and studying. You see, this is another reason why I never truly felt alone. I always had work, school, and the everyday regularities that came with these endeavors. I will agree, however, that this was not the best way to rationalize my "alone time", as I am sure you can guess the path that I was going down. If you pondered that I might become a workaholic who would eventually turn down social invitations for work and studying, well, you are absolutely right. The convincing myself that superficial interactions accounted for human connections did not exactly go as planned. But the story is not over, because what if I told you that I eventually became "completely alone" in the sense that my artificial understanding of closeness was taken away during a global pandemic? Yes, that's right. I ended up very alone for the first time in my life, finishing my first year of medical school; and I am here to tell this story.

I don't think I realized how bad it could be until the adjective "bad" stopped satisfying my description of the situation. In fact, it got to a point where I was merely existing, physically and intellectually alone for the first time in my life. I am not talking about my superficial sense of being alone, in which I knew where my classmates, siblings, and friends were. I am not talking about the physical loneliness that I felt when resorting to my comfort in work and study. Not any of this. I was alone. Alone in a room without people. Alone attempting to virtually finish my first year of medical school, scared for the lives around me, loathing the virtual work in front of me, and contemplating every thought that seemed to dance its way across my brain.

Each day became the same: wake, study, eat, somewhat sleep. Occasionally I would hop on the news or check social media. This, however, was always a bad decision. I would also distract myself. Attempt to recreate my original "normal", trying to force myself to sit through online lectures, contemplate concepts, and find the solace that I previously found in my work. As the days went on, however,

I felt myself forcing my own mind into these places. If I let my thoughts run free though, I was scared where I would end up. There was also this component of guilt to my days. Here I was studying to enter into the medical field, yet I was not actually contributing to the pandemic. I was told many times that by staying home, I was doing my part; but this never felt enough to satisfy my own drive, the drive that pulled me into medicine in the first place. I became a shell of a human. Neglecting what I used to be only to force myself into who I had become.

Days went on, months even, and I started to feel as if the walls in my room knew more about me than myself. The studying got intense, I started talking to myself, as I resorted to measuring my own self-worth by whether I exercised that day, how I performed on a practice test and whether I had eaten my vegetables. I also neglected to reach out to the individuals that had previously given me comfort for so long, scared that if I got too close, held on too tightly, that I would lose them as well. So, I did what every medical student would do, attempt to distance myself from the world of so much pain; relying heavily on my work to satisfy my need for connection, for soul-satisfying encounters that have always kept me alive. One thing that I have learned through my years is that everything is constantly changing. We don't always feel this change, but one day we finally look up and realize that so many things are not the way they used to be. It's like visiting your hometown after months away; the structure is the same, but the people a little bit older and the houses a little bit more worn. Fast-forward a bit and this is how I felt emerging from a year distanced from everything I had once known. It was as if I had lived this whole life without any witnesses to my existence besides the walls of my bedroom; now being told to emerge into a clinical environment having finished my preclinical years online. How on earth would I attempt to accomplish such a task? I had been alone for so long, only now to be placed in many new rooms with many new people.

The first rotation that I began my training on was obstetrics and gynecology. This was to be the first experience I had interacting not only with fellow colleagues but also with patients in the clinical setting. It was sort of surreal, in the best sense of the word. This is what I had been training for, this was to be my time to finally break out of the shell I had resided in for so long. This transition, however, was not so easy. Suddenly, I physically and mentally had to prime myself to emerge into the medical field. For months, I had watched news stories depicting the pandemic through the eyes of hospital admission rates, number of COVID patients, and capacity limits being reached. Now it was my time to experience this world first-hand. This world seemed so scary, yet so beautiful at the same time. I felt like a coward my first day, the very first day that I put on my green scrubs and entered into the hospital. I could feel my confidence melt away as I watched residents and attendings discuss complex pregnancies, manage patients, and place orders for medications that I had never heard of. Who was I, and what was I doing in this environment? I felt like I didn't belong here. I belonged in my room, that place of comfort, distant from the world of this constant interaction. The universe, however, did not let me resort to the familiar world of solitary life, and I soon found myself in deliveries, talking to patients, and slowly breaking out of that shell I had built up for so long.



This was not easy. There were so many days of self-worry and doubt, with constant calls to my mother shedding tears of fret. Through these emotions, however, I had turned to the strength of my patients, these human interactions that I had been so distant from for so long. It was as if my own soul knew that I needed to be in this environment from the very beginning, and I just needed some time to realize this for myself. It was through these interactions that I found my own strength and passion again. When I witnessed my patients continue on despite many treatments and setbacks, it inspired me to work harder, to study longer, and strive to create a better world for my future patients. In totality, I can say that entering into the clinical environment during this pandemic saved me; my patients saved me. They taught me never to forget the humanity in my work, to never forget the underlying human connection that all of our souls crave, and to never stop fighting to improve the lives of those around us. I was finally in rooms with people, not a room without people, and my soul has never been so on fire.

# BEEF STEW SISTERHOOD

ABIGAIL ORENSTEIN ASH | Teaching Assistant Professor, Jefferson East Falls

My daughter Noemie was born in July of 2020. When she first arrived, visits were hot, outdoors and masked, or nonexistent. My mother made us beef stew in an orange pot. Instead of coming in the house, my father passed it to us in the driveway.

My older daughter Neva was nearing 4. I expected that after a lonely year, her baby sister would be a friend and activity. Something to do, a dolly to feed, a tushy to wipe. Looking back, I was mentally coasting on the estrogen and progesterone that permits denial.

No, the challenges of the second child's arrival were not at all what I imagined. I anticipated difficulty interspersed with joy. An everyday trauma that would result in a family of four and the fullness of a life. I felt guilt over Neva's imminent shakeup but knew it would be temporary. What I imagined: two children crying at the same time followed by the jubilation of squeals, chases, snuggles. This happened.

But what also happened was deeply surprising. The relationship with my eldest felt profoundly severed and changed, as if her solid ground was ruptured from beneath her in an unforgivable way. I thought I was gifting her a sister, not ruining her life.

On the second day home from hospital, I began to ruin her life. In the clearest and purest way that only I, as her mother, could witness and understand. Upon being removed from the center of our solar system or "dethroned," as some psychologists say, Neva was jarred and disturbed. Still, my logic was that pain would soon be negated as love was delivered in soft baby form.

My overestimation of Neva's adjustment was in part a result of my childhood desire to have a sister close in age. My siblings are 10 and 12 years ahead, which is fine now, though it was painful for a long time. Like any slightly unconventional family situation, it made me feel different as a child. In third grade I felt terminally alone with my parents. My sisters were off at college, seeing Phish and the Indigo Girls, making beads out of Fimo and cutting the necks of their t-shirts. "I wish I had sisters," my mother used to tell me when I complained. "I only had a brother who died." In spite of this backstory, which in some intergenerational way landed her Noemie, my older daughter was not grateful. Neva was truly not herself. And I was surprised by how surprised I felt.

The anger began at a simmer. The limp thing made Neva feel impatient. "I thought she was going to play with me!" "Why are you always feeding the baby?" "When can she sleep in my bed with me?" Stomping her feet, "Why do I have to be quiet all the time?" On an August trip to Woodstock, New York, I nursed atop pebbles at the shore of a creek. We hiked between tall mossy rocks. Neva ran to be with her cousins, paying no attention to her parents and the floppy baby.

Aggression took hold as the months unfolded, and the baby got slapped, pinched, kicked, dropped (gently, on beds, mostly). In an effort to soothe her while she cried, Neva would scream songs in her face. There was a lot of vocal cacophonies, chaos, and colored pictures spread over the kitchen floor. Neva shoved them in front of me while I stirred at the gas range.

Soon, Noemie began smiling. "Mom! She's smiling at me!" Neva would yell from the next room. Even if it was a gas smile, she need not know. A few moments later Neva would regress so much so she might hit her parents, threaten to "break the whole house," slam her door, refuse her bath, jump on her bed so she could make her chandelier sway. For several weeks she wouldn't sit down for any meals unless it was mac and cheese.

Ever so subtly moments occurred in which I wasn't always losing my steam, strength, or self. I was five months postpartum. It was balmy in November, and we wanted to walk to the Manayunk bridge. Neva rode her scooter. Noemie slept in the stroller or looked at row homes we passed. No one consistently cried or soiled garments with excrement. No one became desperately hangry and we made it four miles. With my children I had vigor. For once, I was full of something.

On another routine outing that seemed an important milestone in my trudging, the girls rode in the double shopping cart together at the Giant. Neva was awarded ice cream and little muffin bites because everyone just sat there and chilled, was responsive to the masked cashiers, and thus vibrated reassurance to moms in grocery stores across the world. I have not accomplished nothing in life. But taking two small children to the Giant without a psychotic break makes me feel strong as hell.

Toward the end of year one, I relearn viscerally, not intellectually, that Mom guilt does not only come from my wrongdoings. It is insidiously coming at us from the outside. There are manifold external forces at play originating first in the preexisting structures in which our daily lives are steeped. Lately, during the pandemic, there are lots of common refrains, but one keeps resounding. For lack of a gentler articulation: America seems to hate moms. Our life here makes the expectations of parenting at times insurmountable, and thus Mom guilt feels unavoidable.

Put another way, I view it as America turns away from the inward power of mothers. Most of us do not have the time or money to stay internally okay. Of course, we are made to feel it is an individual problem, yet we are not strengthened by American life to capitalize upon our inner resources. And these very resources are where our resistance lies.

Our resistance to America turning away surfaces in just those moments in which we are internally skillful. We persist and resist American ignorance toward mothers simply by caring for our own children with (brief) moments of success and seamlessness. They never last. The moments that follow are chaos. Still, when we locate peace inwardly at home for even five minutes; when we have moments when the day just works out, when creatures nap when they should, when we get a moment for solitude in the woods, and when no one defecates on anything important, we embody a kind of resistance. In those moments we push through

pain without giving up the task at hand. And we bask in serendipitous calm without pretending that calm is all our lives contain.

With Neva and Noemie, there are moments they are both listening to the same story, studying an object or project in silence, cuddling together in a sleeping bag, sleeping in the car while jazz music plays. My hidden moments of seamless parenting are pushed back against the invisibility. No one may see these moments of things just going fine - but they give power to getting out of bed when there are humans standing at the bed demanding yogurt.

And the progeny of this thought is just this: what I realized watching Neva and Noemie over the year. Sisterhood does not bloom rapidly. It grows mostly underground and after a lot of waiting.

My sisters and me were not close each year of our lives. I consider the independent struggles in which I didn't lean on them in order to learn they are always there in a tacit, constant way. Now, under star-filled summer skies in mountains, we drink wine on decks. The children play or sleep.

There is so much social media performance of late displaying alliance, solidarity, even sisterhood, perhaps. Maybe it is helpful. But watching Neva grieve her life as an only child and then become her baby sister's admiration and the reason Noemie wiggles all her limbs and baby laughs, I understand now.

Real sisterhood is not instant. It is slow cooked. (Is it beef stew in hot sun!?) It's earn your status and trust with me—over time, through struggle, joy, growth and destruction. Like solidarity, its strength is humbling, silent and invisible.

# SERENDIPITY: HOW WOODSTOCK GAVE ME PEACE IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

EDEN SANTANIELLO | Clinical Documentation Specialist

Most people know Alexander Graham Bell's quote, "when one door closes, another opens." However, most do not know the second half, "but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us." Knowing this truth, I was determined to make peace with the last 16 months of COVID-19, riots, political change, the death of George Floyd, economic turmoil, and isolation. Not that I was depressed or my life lacked meaning; I just needed to find a silver lining for all that I endured. I wanted to close this chapter with a grateful heart. I hoped to speak of this experience with positivity, courage, and compassion to my future grandchildren, but how could I when I was still angry at it?

Since spring started, I've been searching for this internal peace with paddle boarding, yoga, gardening, and hiking without any luck. Finally, on June 4th, Pennsylvania lifted its mask restrictions, and I felt free for the first time. Courageously I agreed to meet my friend at the Woodstock Museum in Bethel, New York. While riding along the beautiful route 611 to get there, I caught a glimpse of a motel named Serendipity out of the corner of my eye. Of course, I immediately thought of John Cusack's movie from the early 2000s and proceeded to pray for a serendipitous day. When I arrived 2 hours later at the museum, I was greeted by gorgeous blue skies and picturesque 360 degrees of panoramic New York mountainous views.

My friend and I entered the museum expecting to learn about the history of the performers at Woodstock. Instead, we left learning about humanity, unity, and peace in a time of tremendous turmoil. Woodstock's platform validated and empowered the countercultures' perspectives on politics, war, and civil rights. One of the museum's 4D exhibits showed an interview with Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. Because it was only their second time performing, they were scared to death. He said that Woodstock's audience was forgiving: they were not there for perfection; they were there to feel connected, heard, and validated. The audience felt that with his quivering voice and connected immediately.

At that moment, I realized a silver lining of the past 16 months as it pertained to healthcare. The silver lining is that no matter what turmoil is going on globally, if we connect, listen, and validate with the people we interact with, they will forgive our mistakes as we seek solutions to improve the circumstance. Even though healthcare workers did not have all the answers for every problem encountered, the community rallied around healthcare institutions with undying support. They rallied

healthcare because we have provided advocacy and the promotion of people in our community for years. Like the grace the audience gave Crosby Stills Nash and Young's second performance, the community gave and continues to give grace to healthcare institutions while we figure things out for a brighter tomorrow.

How does this relate to a time capsule, you ask? When I entered the museum, it was like taking a step back in time. The museum provided a well-preserved 4D story of the US culture between 1960 and 1969. It did not just show Woodstock videos; it educated its visitors on civil rights, war, political agenda, and music. This museum, in essence, acts as a time capsule for future generations to find unity and peace through music because it connects, hears, and validates our personal souls. To ensure future generations would understand what it was like for all of us in the last 16 months, I would like to leave one picture of healthcare workers holding a sign that says, "we are all in this together." Throughout this entire experience, divided or united, we all went through it together.

The greatest thing about ending this 16-month long marathon is that a new door has opened. I'm not sure what is beyond the door yet, but I know it will entail innovative solutions to problems found from the prior door. Sun Tzu said, "in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity." Regarding Serendipity, I found peace not with a silver lining but connecting to those who paved the way for all of us in the 1960s.

# VACCINE AGAINST SELFISHNESS: THE DIARY OF A STUDENT FROM RUSSIA FOR POSTERITY

STANISLAVA NORETS | Undergraduate Student, Fashion Design

Greetings, dear students from the future!

We can only guess how much people's lives have changed over a whole century: how technology has developed, what equality has society achieved, what difficulties our descendants face and what hardships they have endured. Unfortunately, we are not given to know the future, but our present can be a very interesting story about the past for a new generation. In our student years, we have already faced considerable problems and obstacles, gained valuable experience, and even survived a global pandemic. I will not torment my reader for a long time with dreamy speculations about the distant future, but rather I will give you the opportunity to look into the past and immerse yourself in the life of a freshman at Thomas Jefferson University in the form of personal diary.

January 2020. I am the happiest girl in the world!

By the age of sixteen, I knew for sure that in order to achieve what I wanted, I had to work hard. Since the age of four, I have been playing tennis, practicing as hard as possible every single day for many hours. From the first to the eleventh grade, I was the best student in the school with the highest GPA. By the way, I had passed difficult international exams. And of course, my work was rewarded. I entered Jefferson University, where I will obtain a profession, which is rare for my country. Later, I was accepted into the Rams team, my merits were appreciated and awarded a scholarship. I was in a dense cocoon of happiness and euphoria, not noticing anything around and thinking only about myself.

February 2020. It starts.

I began to notice that my parents were discussing something anxiously, watching the news all the time, there was panic in their eyes, and the phrases often repeated the words China, Italy, the virus. Something out of the ordinary was happening in the world, a kind of new disease. But this was so far away from me. At that time, I was still a cheerful and carefree child, who was getting ready for school exams.

March 2020. Birthday!!!

My cocoon of happiness burst suddenly and abruptly like a soap bubble. An avalanche of terrible reality fell on me. The COVID virus imperceptibly, very quickly, captured the whole world, crawled through all borders, to all corners of the globe. It was my birthday in March; I turned seventeen. But everyone did

not care about that, panic was all around and people were rushing to buy food and medicines. Moreover, all sports and entertainment facilities were closed and quarantined. There was terrible news on TV, but people in my country did not believe in the virus and considered it to be someone's conspiracy, there was a lot of controversial information. My parents also had some problems at work. Well, what about me? What about my birthday party with gifts and friends? What's going on around me? It's getting scary...

April 2020. Fear covers.

Now the horror was really near. I felt fear in every cell of my body, because grief entered almost every family. Mortality rates were growing inexorably day after day. Often I heard from friends about the death or hospitalization of their relatives. And here was the call. A close friend of our family was no longer with us, because the disease did not spare anyone: neither the old nor the young. Total madness began: there were not enough beds in hospitals, morgues were overcrowded, people were dying all alone, and relatives were not even given a chance to say goodbye to the dead, the coffins were replaced with cellophane bags. But the worst thing was that I no longer see confidence in the eyes of my parents, they were confused, did not know what to do. The walls of the house no longer seem so much a protected and impenetrable fortress. Watching another frightening reportage, the thought comes to me: "How long have I not visited my grandmother?"

May 2020. Shopping cart with groceries.

An unremarkable iron cart stands at the exit of the department store. The bright sign caught my attention, not only with its color, but also with an interesting slogan: "The cart for good." It was a volunteer action: people put food from their bags into a grocery cart, and all collected food and essential goods were sent to people who lost their jobs during the pandemic. After enthusiastically reading all the conditions of this promotion, without doubts I put some of my products into the "Kindness grocery basket". For some reason, this little cart in a department store touched the strings of my soul, and I could not get it out of my head. I knew for sure that it was a sign urging me to act immediately. And then I came up with an idea...

Summer 2020. New hope.

That's all, the school is officially over, all exams were passed, and the graduates already attended their online graduation. But what to do with the stagnant and boiling energy inside young bodies? Visiting my grandmother once again, I thought for a second: "If I didn't live nearby, who would then carry her groceries?". Indeed, hundreds of thousands of elderly people were forced to put themselves at risk of contracting COVID every day just because there were no children or grandchildren around them. After that thought, I made the decision to direct all my restless energy to goodness and help people in need. First, I called all my friends, and we began to deliver groceries and bring mail to old people in my area, and then throughout the city. At that moment, I felt that I was doing the right thing, moving in the right direction. This activity inspired me and my comrades.



Now we no longer felt helpless and useless! Our ranks were replenished with more and more new guys from different parts of the city, and by the middle of summer we became not just companies of friends, but also a real organization. Seeing the grateful eyes of people, my heart was filled with happiness and joy, as well as responsibility and determination. I no longer stayed, shackled by fear, in my apartment and didn't think only about my problems. With a new kind of activity, hope settled in me!

Autumn 2020. White streak.

Everything that is not done, everything is for the best! The first semester began in an online format and due to the time difference, I had to study at night. Anyway, it was in my favor, since I could continue my volunteer work during the day. Soon, our small and informal organization was noticed by the largest volunteer campaigns and offered cooperation. And then I discovered a new world for myself, a world which is full of help, support, sympathy and kindness. My new acquaintances were not afraid to donate blood, donate clothes and material resources, they were not afraid to go to the front of the fight against a new disease. They saw grateful looks every day and only warmth and sincere kindness emanated from them. I joined their ranks without hesitation and, as a future fashion designer, began to sew face masks for people. Everything was saturated with hope. White streak came in our life in September-the first vaccine against a new disease finally appeared! Happiness has reappeared in our lives. Having been engaged in volunteer activities, I absolutely did not notice how the first semester ended and how I was already holding my passport with a visa in my hands.

January 2021. Hello US!

And there was January again. But I no longer meet the New Year as a small and infantile child who did not care about anything but her own problems. No, this New Year was already met by an adult, caring about people around, a responsible and sensitive person. I would never have thought that the year that was supposed to ruin my plans would change my worldview so much.

March 2021. I am the happiest girl in the world again!

I am already eighteen; all my relatives are alive and well; I am surrounded by new friends from different countries; I study at the university of my dream and play for my favorite team. This is really my birthday, the birth of a new me. This year gave me an opportunity to realize that humanity is able to survive war, and hunger, and a pandemic, only if we, regardless of gender, race, age, can show mercy and not remain indifferent to someone else's misfortune. Thank you, COVID-19, for teaching us such an important lesson. I blow out the candles on the birthday cake with tears of happiness in my eyes...

# THE DRS. THERESA AND CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE: FIRST PLACE

## JUNE

DAVID PETERS | Physician (Resident), Family & Community Medicine

I was looking intently at a sandwich tray when I broke down in tears. The platter was centered on a timeworn table with a faded-pink laminate top, within a windowless locker room repurposed as a provider break room. The tray had arrived earlier that day, much to the delight of the ICU staff. I, in contrast, had spent much of the day trying to avoid it. My aversion to this tray was not because of anything I had against Primo Hoagies, but because it had been sent in by Bill's family. I had spoken on the phone with Bill's wife and son every afternoon since he had entered the Methodist ICU in respiratory distress the week prior, each call meeting their sense of optimism that he might wean off of the ventilator with discouraging news and regrettably reminding them of the COVID-19 visitor restrictions that prevented them from coming in to see him.

Staring at the sandwiches, all neatly arranged in tiers of concentric circles, I envisioned Bill's family; his wife, his siblings, his children, and his grandchildren—sitting around the living room together and sharing hopeful words through their masks. I imagined their mental picture of him: weathering the storm by himself but surrounded by attentive doctors and nurses. Though they knew he was unconscious, I wondered if they could still feel him reaching out for them. The sandwich tray was their refusal to be denied entrance into the ICU. It was both an expression of gratitude for his team and an assertion of love to revitalize Bill in his battle. Perhaps it would give him the warmth that was missing in their absence. I started sobbing, suddenly shivering with icy apprehension that I would soon tell them that he suffered a massive stroke overnight and would have no chance at recovery. I felt the sound of his son's voice quivering over the phone burrow deep inside of me, nesting in the new space where more somber patient memories would soon dwell.

Intern year crawled along, and I watched more people labor through their last breaths alone. These were sobering moments that I struggled to exhale. I could not wholly express them to my partner, family, or friends, separated 300 miles apart from them. My smile withered without their laughter. My feet numbed to the once soothing feeling of my socks pressing on the creaky wooden floor of my apartment. The jovial relationships I had envisioned sharing with co-residents and hospital staff were replaced with transactional conversations held behind masks, face shields, and phone screens. Escaping for a few minutes to the top floor of the hospital where I could silo myself inside of a call room was freeing. Alone, I could feel my lungs scrape my chest as they filled with air and hear the hum of the nearby generator whispering to me while I lay face down in the call room bed, embracing a pillow. I

was nothing but a keyboard and a mouse. I was just white noise walking through the hallway.

"Let me see you without your mask," she pleaded. I lowered my mask. "Oh! You are going to make such beautiful babies," she said. I blushed. Her comment surprised me. It was funny and colorful, gleaming through the silt of a series of identical, dispiriting days. To June, a 67-year-old woman with newly diagnosed pancreatic adenocarcinoma, I was transparent. She knew that I did not understand the complexities of her condition well, and that the vague updates I gave her each day collectively implied her bleak prognosis. Confronting her mortality over the course of her admission was as unpredictable as it was painful for her, an oscillation between emotional extremes, an avalanche to endure without a soul to receive her rescue signal. Her abdomen seared from within. Her red, sunken eyes echoed a depth of suffering beyond what I could conceive. But, through the scrap heap of my annotated handoffs and used gowns, she found something to hold on to, something from which I too had become estranged: ME. She actually appreciated my clinical inexperience and my innocence. I did not have much to say as an intern, but I was someone who could listen, a friend unbound by the COVID visitor restrictions. My visits with her gradually became less medical. At times it seemed as if we were just sipping coffee together, taking time to show each other pictures from our lives beyond the four walls of her patient room on 7 West. With each passing day, I watched a stack of envelopes on June's bedside table grow. The return labels held the names of her children, grandchildren, friends, and members of her church community. I asked her why she had not yet opened them one morning, to which she calmly replied, "I'm not ready yet." I was immediately struck by this, for this statement was not a denial of her illness, but rather an acceptance of her mortality. She knew that she would never get to physically see most of her family ever again as a result of the pandemic. Those letters, thus, contained their presence, and would serve to stand in for the goodbyes that she would never get. They were the light to guide her through her last day of life. The letters were her sandwich tray. June died on the first day after she was discharged to inpatient hospice. I do not know how she spent her last day, but I like to imagine that she opened those letters, and one by one felt the warm touch of all the people whom she loved. I often reflect on that time I spent with her, and I wish that she could read the letter that I would write to her now:

*Dear June,*

*You told me once to not see you as the person who was sick and dying in the hospital. You wanted me to see you the way you lived your days before those final three weeks. You showed me a picture of you with your family, dressed up and standing in a parking lot, with an ear-to-ear smile, your arms around your grandchildren. You showed me a picture of the sun setting from the view of your living room. You showed me a picture of you drinking a ginger ale. Most of this year, I have felt like I'm not supposed to be here in Philadelphia. I have longed for my family, my friends, and my partner every day. I have felt so alone, hidden behind the mask and the face shield that I wear. I have felt overworked but irrelevant, responsible but unfulfilled, and engaged but hollow. The pictures I shared with you of my life in Boston were how I thought I wanted*

*you to see me, but I changed my mind. Please see me as the young doctor who ran out of answers and just sat beside you. Please see me as the friend whose hand held yours when morphine could not alleviate your pain. Please see me as the broken person that was revived when you said, "I love you." You showed me that there is always light in the darkest of places. You showed me that there is always a path to happiness in the present, even when you run out of tomorrows.*

*I love you too.  
David*







# FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY

## Yeo Writing Prize Honorable Mention

DANIEL LEFLER | Physician (Fellow), Medical Oncology

She walked up to me wearing a mask that blinded me in the most pleasant of ways. Spending a year gazing at faces covered by masks, I've become used to looking at a person's eyes and intuiting the rest of the face, but not in this case. All I could see was the bedazzled butterfly, orange and pink and glinting in the fluorescent lights that hung thirty feet above our heads, floating on a sea of black cloth that covered her nose and mouth. "That's one stylish mask," I said. "Thanks," she replied, removing her sunglasses and standing awkwardly at my table. That's why I couldn't concentrate on her eyes before. She wore her sunglasses even into the vaccination center, as if they protected her from more than UV rays.

"How are you doing today?" "Nervous," she said, fiddling with her purse. Even if I wanted to look into her eyes, she wouldn't let me. She looked everywhere else. Anywhere else. "Do you want to have a seat?" I asked, indicating the chair next to me. "What's your name?" She told me, but I couldn't find it on the long list. "What time was your appointment?" "It was at 1:30," she said. "I've been pacing around outside for the last half hour." I didn't move to organize my table like I did before seeing each of the patients before her. I didn't check for the syringe sitting next to the alcohol swab. I didn't ensure there was a bandage with its adhesive pulled half-off like I liked it, so I could apply it with one hand. I didn't pull out the purple latex gloves, inevitably removing one too many, dropping it, then indelicately stuffing it back into the box before fitting the two remaining ones over my Purell-rav fingers. It didn't seem like she'd like any of the fuss, so I just clasped my hands, leaned my elbows into my thighs, and looked at her. "Why are you nervous?" I asked. "Because I want it, but I also don't want it." "So should I give you a pretend vaccine?" I joked, sporting my easiest smile, even though I knew she couldn't see it. "Are you a nurse?" she asked. "A doctor? Or—" "A doctor," I said. "Oh good. Can I ask you about this?" "Sure," I answered. "What are you most concerned about?" She sat down awkwardly, removing her fuzzy pink jacket that perfectly matched the butterfly, which unenthusiastically shifted its wings as she talked. Even though her mouth was covered, the words spilled out with force. "I'm just really nervous getting this vaccine. I don't know what I'm putting into my body. And in my community—I'm Black—there are a lot of people not getting it. Saying not to get it. It's really split. And I'm worried if I get it—I mean, I'm not going to tell people that I got it, because I don't want them judging me. And people at my work aren't getting it, or at least they're not telling people they are. So I'm not either. A lot of people are saying it's just going to go away. But I want to travel, and aren't they determining who can travel based on vaccinations?"

She allowed herself to look at me. Honestly, every country had different rules, and it was hard enough keeping up with the science. Harder still was keeping up with politicians' opinions about the science and the rules they made in turn. But I remembered that France and Iceland had just announced they planned to



admit vaccinated Americans in the near future. I nodded. "There are a couple of countries moving in that direction, and I bet there will be more. If travel is important to you, it's good that you're prioritizing it. And you don't have to tell anyone you got a vaccine, but you shouldn't be afraid if you do. They're right that this is going to go away, you know. It'll happen only when enough people have gotten a vaccine or COVID itself, and that could be a while." "I know," she said slowly. "Can you tell me why you recommend it to people?" "I can't tell you what's right for you," I said. "I can't force anything on you, and I wouldn't want to anyway. But I can tell you why I got it" I told her all of the scientific evidence I knew. It wasn't much, but it was factual and as complete as I could be at that time. I talked about the fatality rates of COVID, trying not to envision the 26-year-old patient I had just seen on ECMO in the surgical ICU whom I knew would die. I quoted data to her, even though the healthcare system that generated it has historically—and even presently—ignored and mistreated people who look like her. I took as much emotion out of it as I could, because that's my job even if it's not my instinct. And then I thought about something else. "I'm a cancer doctor," I said. "When we tell patients we have a new immunotherapy for their cancer, we talk about the phase 3 trial of ten thousand patients in which fifty percent of people responded with minimal side effects. Patients always want that drug. But when we talk about vaccines, it's different. Vaccines are just a type of immunotherapy, and this vaccine has been tested in forty thousand people with minimal side effects, and it's over ninety percent effective. When it comes to vaccines, it's a marketing problem more than anything. And—" That's when I realized I was just like her: nervous and rambling. I wanted so badly for her to know my own reasons for getting vaccinated that I had veered off course. This woman wearing her sequined butterfly didn't need to hear my philosophies about medical controversies. "I'm glad you're putting so much thought into this. Clearly, I did. Maybe too much," I said, laughing at myself. "But we should all put that much thought into our health! Good for you for doing that." She smiled. I could tell, even under the mask. "Okay, I'll do it." "Are you sure? I—" "Just do it," she said, pulling up her sleeve. "Before I change my mind." I knew it wasn't my explanation that convinced her.

It was simply having a conversation at all. She hadn't been able to do that before. "Tell me something you're excited about," I said, to distract her from the needle. "It'll only sting for a second." I went through the motions I had repeated automatically (at much slower speeds) throughout the afternoon. Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, I thought. But I didn't say it aloud. That was only for me. Meanwhile, she talked about how excited she was to start law school and travel overseas, and how the world would open up to her. I was excited for her. And strangely, I was proud of her. When I was done, she swung the fuzzy pink jacket over her shoulders and picked her purse up from the floor. I pointed her to the observation area where she'd have to wait for fifteen minutes before leaving. She said some nice things, and I couldn't help but notice the butterfly's wings were raised a little higher on her cheeks. As she walked away, her sunglasses swung loosely from her fingers.

# SNAPSHOTS

MIA BELOVSKY | Medical Student

8pm; A Shadow

The sound of our heavy wooden door squealing across the cold tile awoke me from a daze. I walked over to the entry way cautiously, like prey watching their predator from afar. But what I saw was no predator. My mother, rather, a shadow, stood in the door, all dressed up in scrubs, wearing a makeshift mask. As the layers of PPE were shed like a second skin, it did not reveal a newer, rejuvenated self, yet it exposed a frame so ravaged with fear, that the light behind her eyes was gone.

1pm; Paralysis

The sound of my cell phone pierced the air. It was the middle of the day...who was calling? My mother at the other end barely greeted me with a breathless whisper. Something was wrong. "Baba and Deda both tested positive for COVID." I immediately crumpled to the ground. Opening my mouth, I wanted to scream, but only tears fell silently down my cheeks and then joined my trembling hands. The air in my lungs left and my brain went numb. This is what a death sentence feels like.

10pm; Explosions BOOM.

A notification lights up my phone. Another ATM explosion. The TV murmurs in the background, telling tales of unrest, looting, injustice, political turmoil. My mind and body in shock- unsure when the generational trauma draws the line. I look out my apartment window, streets empty, lights out, as is my heart. Return to normalcy is the peace that I yearn for.

4pm; Silence The city that never sleeps has gone into hibernation. My home, a shell of what it used to be, lies in a quiet slumber. The streets that once bustled with faces, sights and smells is gray and barren. The symphony of cars, voices, and construction dwindled down to a decrescendo. The bright streetlights remain but reveal a barren concrete space that is occupied with silence.

3pm; Sun

A ray caresses my pale skin, whispering warmth and spring into my ear. Outside is silent. Raw, unchanging, organized chaos, bustling without the touch of human hands. A moment of peace washes over me, a blanket of certainty, that everything will be ok. The birds stay chirping, grass keeps growing, animals run free. I ponder how the forces of nature determine our fate; the miniscule details fade into the background, insignificant in the face of a larger truth.

12pm; Reunion 6 feet felt like a world apart.

The air in between us: thick with tension, mysterious, and isolating. My feet bring me one step closer to the familiar embrace that I have been craving for months, and tears obscure my path to happiness. My arms encircle the ones who brought me up and lifted me up, a hug I waited for years now. Finally, the warmth of touch can be shared among the ones who love the hardest, uninterrupted, and unperturbed by fear.

6pm; Hope

A circle of chairs sit on the driveway. The sun beams down, shedding its light on a few figures, closer together than before. Laughter and smiles connect the space between the families and friends, reverberating throughout the neighborhood. The distance between us seems to slowly dwindle. We hold onto that glimmer of hope, a fleeting image, a snapshot.

# A MEDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

GARRETT LARGOZA | Medical Student

I wonder, many years from now, how I will respond when future generations of medical students ask me where I was and what I was doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. I certainly don't want to say that, while my mother was on the frontlines, I was stuck at home unable to join the fight. Sure, I managed to sew masks and help with contact tracing during that summer, but I felt rather useless in comparison to my mother's experience in intensive care units. Every day, I saw her leave early and come home late as the stress of overwhelmed hospitals began to show on her face along with imprints due to N95 masks and other personal protective equipment. And every day, reports of acute respiratory distress syndrome, acute kidney injury, and blood clots as complications of the virus made me terribly aware of the danger she faced whenever she left the house. I felt stuck in some type of limbo—a liminal space of being a soon-to-be student doctor in a time when doctors, like my mother, were urgently needed.

And yet, there I was in the comfort and safety of my home. As a self-proclaimed triathlete, I think many of my friends would agree when I say that I have trouble sitting still. So, what happens to such a person when their schedule suddenly becomes a blank slate? The mind begins to wander and daydream. In my case, I spent most of my days fantasizing about the start of my journey towards becoming a doctor.

It all begins with orientation week and the White Coat Ceremony where you stand with your fellow classmates in front of family and friends to recite the Hippocratic Oath. This tradition has long been regarded as a rite of passage for medical students and sets the tone for the rest of the medical school experience. Naturally, we are to receive our white coats, which officially mark our representation and affiliation with the school. Most importantly, it's where we are imbued with the symbolism of the white coat by which we are to uphold professional integrity, compassion, empathy, and competence for our communities.

Towards the end of that summer, the number of COVID-19 cases didn't seem to slow down; they were in fact rising, which didn't bode well for our White Coat Ceremony. Our orientation week was packed with a virtual welcome address, plenty of virtual meet and greets, virtual social events, virtual everything. Needless to say, our grand ceremony was postponed indefinitely, and for the time being, picking up our white coats in a socially distanced manner had to suffice. By the end of our first semester, mine had seen very little action, only being used in a handful of simulated clinical examinations. While I like to think I've done my duties in maintaining its symbolism, I failed to physically keep it clean and wrinkle-free as originally intended. It was difficult to justify respectful laundering after a twenty-minute clinical skills session of practicing with a mannequin. Perhaps the state of my white coat reflected my hope that we'd reclaim some semblance of normalcy sooner rather than later.

Time went on and I had resigned myself to the fact that I needed new glasses due to never-ending online lectures and virtual meetings. Days seemingly blended as our schedules became increasingly ordinary and time became tethered to our deadlines. Every day was the same. Run. Lectures. Study. Break. Study again. Repeat the next day. Coincidentally, Stephen King hit the nail on the head when he described hell as repetition. Nonetheless, I held out hope for the day I would feel like a real student doctor—like the prince that was promised. I studied and clung onto the idea that all my future patients are rooting for me.

Near the end of our second semester, vaccination efforts were largely underway and eventually both city-wide and university-wide regulations loosened. The student-run clinic that I'd been enchanted with on interview day was given the green light to resume in-person activities. At long last, I could practice hands-on medicine and most importantly help the underserved using everything I'd learned this past year. For once, I was glad that I had a mask on because my smile probably came off as a little alarming. It was hard to hide my excitement as I discussed history, calculated heart rate, determined blood pressure, and took pulse oximetry on my first real patient. Speaking to our preceptor, I was astonished at my ability to generate a list of differential diagnoses after a brief encounter. It was like watching the culmination of an uncertain year finally piece itself together and take form.

When future students ask me about my medical school experience during the pandemic, I'll tell them that it was a test of patience and conviction. It was a year-long test of making do with what we had and holding out hope. And now, I'm more grateful for the opportunity to provide care for each of my patients.

# EXPECTATIONS

KIM ROBERTS | Vice President, Revenue Cycle, Thomas Jefferson University Hospitals

I'm not a clinical caregiver, not a hero nor healer of body or soul. You won't see my picture on any posters, in any videos, on any YouTube clips related to the global pandemic crisis. No, I'm a Jefferson employee who works behind the scenes. But I believe that I'm still a very key and valuable contributor of the Jefferson family, working with our inter-disciplinary teams to ensure that \$260,000,000 flows monthly into Jefferson banks from insurers and patients to cover the expense of patient services.

The past year, for me, was all about expectations, both new and old. I think back to March 2020, and what was then a normal week of traveling to multiple sites to be in person and present at many meetings... two-hour commute, one-way, to Cherry Hill for New Jersey-based meetings; 90-minute commute, one-way, via train, to Center City, for corporate meetings; 45-minute commute, one-way, to Abington for Northern Division meetings or to my office. That was my day. Be present, not on a conference call and, of course, not via video—didn't even have a camera!

Then, in a matter of days, the world shut down. Laptops, desktop PCs and monitors moved to staff homes. How fantastic—the commute was now 71 steps, from bedroom to kitchen to makeshift office—I live in a small home! No drive, no train. Start the day early with 7:00 AM huddles. Have to keep in touch with staff. Get a camera! Get larger monitors. Download Zoom, Teams, Skype.

Over time, meeting expectations shifted from being in-person to being on camera. No need to wear suits, high heels, stockings (what are those?). Just have a nice top. Who cares if one is wearing jeans, sweatpants, and slippers? Gain ten pounds? – Unfortunately, yes.

How expectations changed. Just a few months prior to the pandemic, we were planning to consolidate over 700+ employees into one physical location. Staff were already saying, "If I have to commute into the city every day, I'm quitting." Other staff were saying, "If I have to commute to the suburbs every day, I'm quitting." Of course, we were also taking into consideration leasing fees, employee concerns, and available buildings capable of accommodating such a large group and laying out a multi-year plan.

Well, guess what? We found out that a centralized relocation wasn't even necessary. We can be just as productive in a virtual, remote environment—who would have thought? Not us. Yes, expectations back then, just a short 15 months ago, were that we need to be physically all in the same space, in one spot, in order to be successful—NOT!

Did we stumble in our transition? Did we struggle with communicating? Did we reach out to our peers and see what they were doing? Did we have to manage our staff in what was a new way for us, as Jefferson managers? Absolutely, YES!

We were all so used to the typical, traditional, and conforming manner of in-person meetings, being physically present with our employees, having that visual and body-language communication. But what came through over the past year was the teamwork among our managers and our staff. Inter-departmental support was key. We actually had much more frequent and relevant, thoughtful communication.

Did staff feel that in some ways we were micro-managing them? Yes, we heard that. But, at the same time, we had to set expectations. At home, how did we know if staff were working or not? Did they take breaks to watch the horrendous news about COVID-19, the lives lost, the rising positivity rates? Were they taking time to help their children do their schoolwork, also adjusting to a remote world? Were they out walking their dogs? Or were they perhaps truly working? Trust became a major make-it-or-break-it connector between employee and supervisor.

We had to be creative and find ways to manage productivity. To be fair to staff, we had to lay out what were our expectations. It was a new work world, a new time of accountability.

We were also dealing with the fact that our old world was overlapping with our new work-from-home world. In reality, we hadn't fully transitioned. We still had to have staff go into the office to handle paper checks, the mail that was delivered in piles every day, the correspondence that had not yet relegated itself to email or electronic fax and the clinical documents that had to be processed. Printing, oh my. No one had printers at home. So, staff often had to go into the office just to print documents that had to be mailed out to insurers or others.

Staff, however, told us that they were afraid to go into the office. Some had personal family members with COVID-19. Some of these very same employees got COVID themselves. Some were even hospitalized, a few never to fully recover. How do we deal with employees who refuse to go to the office? How do we deal with the employee stress and fear, and our own stress and fear? We engaged our Human Resource advisors and tried to emotionally support one another. As we heard of employees losing loved ones, whether to COVID or other causes, the strain of not being able to support them by being there at any funeral services was wearing on us all. And, yet, we had to continue to ensure the financial viability of Jefferson.

So, here we are, 15 months later. Did any of us become the poster child of the front-line worker? Did any of us get to be on TV, on the front page of the newspaper or even get a shout-out via front lawn signs? No, we did not, nor should we have. We all know the heroism of our healthcare peers, those in direct patient care and at highest risk; we salute them. But, too, our world, our working culture, our expectations have forever changed. Before the pandemic, who in the office would have considered saying, "Let's all get on a video call and have our meeting?"? But that's how we do things today. Send an appointment. We actually get better participation and engagement.

Who knows what the future might bring. Asking us in February 2020, if things would resemble anything close to how we are working today, I can guarantee you

that almost anyone would have said, "Well, maybe five years from now." Well, that time is now. I am very proud of the rapid assimilation and response that I and all of my colleagues made in the face of turbulent times and unfamiliar territory.

As we start to come out of the pandemic and positive COVID cases decline, we'll have to again look at expectations. We are now truly in a virtual world, one that should stay and be recognized. But, people will still crave that person-to-person connectivity, and we need to be open to flexibility and find the right balance for the majority, but also consider the impact on the minority. Expectations, oh how they will always linger, become one's beliefs and anticipations for the future – hopefully a bright and happy future that pushes us all toward personal growth and positive reflections. One hundred years from now, I pray that there will be acknowledgement that we got it right!



# STARING AT THE LOOKING GLASS

CHRISTOPHER GARDNER | Medical Student

The wheels shrieked as they collided with the tarmac, bobbing up and down like a buoy before coming to a steady roll. The collective buzzes, rings and vibrations grew louder and louder as our phones came back to life. So much had happened in the seven-hour flight from Amsterdam: Trump had called for all citizens to come home from overseas, COVID-19 cases had reached (at the time) unprecedented levels in New York and SKMC decided to move to a completely virtual curriculum. All in seven hours! I scanned the cabin of my fellow mask-less companions; everyone had the same befuddled look as me. Faint whispers filled the silence between the iPhone beeps, spreading panic quicker than this unknown virus. I drove back to suburban Warren, NJ, and confirmed that we were in a pandemic, a word that I thought was only used in sci-fi movies. Every radio station talked about rising body counts, overflowing and understaffed hospitals, and the lack of food supplies at grocery stores. All horror stories, no answers. \*Ding\* An email from Occupational Health – I had to inform them of my trip to Amsterdam, as cases in Europe were already on the rise in early March. The subject line read in bold, "PLEASE READ". I was ordered to self-isolate for 14 days, not to leave my house and preferably my room. What the heck? Camilla was not going to like this. I shuffled into our baby-blue guest room, and sat under the portrait of seven-year-old Grandma Janet, her brown eyes steadily keeping guard over the chair. I felt most at ease with her looking over me.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"How was the flight back?"

"It was fine. Didn't expect the whole world to blow up."

"I know, people are overreacting. I've been on the subways and hardly anyone is around. Philly is a ghost town. It's creepy."

"Why are you travelling around? Where are you going?"

"I've been meeting up with friends. And I've been exploring Fairmount. I'm not going to let this virus prevent me from living my life. I can make those decisions."

"Haven't you been listening or reading anything? They are saying that the virus most likely spreads by respiratory droplets."

"Yeah, well, I haven't seen or been around anyone who looks sick. I think I'm fine, thank you."

"That's why things are shutting down, Camilla. Because people are coming into contact with people who aren't actively sick. Why are you so impulsive about this?"

"Cuz it's not that big of a deal! This isn't going to last that long. I bet it will be over in a week."

The ignorance. The naivety. I hated these arguments. The same blasé attitude that life was too short to live to worry about what other people thought of you or how current events impacted daily living. She was always so stubborn.

"Yeah, about that 'week', I've been told that I have to self-quarantine at home for two weeks. I'm not coming back to Philly before then."

"What? Why?"

"Because I was travelling in a part of the world that had rising cases, and I might have come into contact with the virus. And I might be a risk to others."

"Well, why don't you come quarantine with me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Why wouldn't you want to do that? Don't you want to see me? Plus, we can just quarantine together."

"Camilla, that defeats the purpose of a quarantine."

"I don't get it. What's the big deal? Why can't we quarantine together?"

"Because I might have the virus and not know about it. I don't want to travel and possibly get you sick."

"Whatever, ya punkass. When will you come back to Philly then?"

"Well, they are saying that if you're not sick within two weeks, you're probably okay. So, I'll probably come back when that time is up?"

"Probably? So maybe not? What, are you planning to just stay at your parents? What if I end up getting sick? Are you going to come help me?"

"No! Why would I especially do that? I don't want to get sick!"

Silence. Logos pushed the words out of my mouth before pathos could reign them back in. I was fed up with Camilla's shenanigans and her impulsivity and her nonchalant interpretation of the new murky reality. She had access to friends studying medicine, who were up to date on the latest COVID-19 research; yet, she turned a blind eye to them, and me! Why should I risk getting sick from taking care of my impulsive partner? In the proceeding silence, my heart dropped. Paralysis seized my vocal cords. The sentiment I harbored against my partner existed long before SARS-CoV-2 announced itself to the world. Just thinking about the tone of our conversation and the anger behind my last sentence confirmed my worst fear:

ambivalence. Our relationship had steadily been picked apart ever since we set out from Missoula to Philly. My relationship with SKMC, and all the new faces and networking and stimuli and studying that came with it, became my priority. When it was time to relax or explore Philly with Camilla, our time together began to feel like a chore, another item to cross off on my to-do list. We shared schedules, blocked out dedicated "hang-out times", picked days of the week we would cook for one another, all in attempts to spend quality time together. But we were just going through the motions. Our attempts at rekindling could not keep the spark we discovered out West lit anymore. A career in medicine and a life with her didn't align and accepting that reality was bittersweet.

It took a pandemic for me to acknowledge that I was not invested in our relationship anymore. We sputtered along for a few more weeks before finally separating, but our relationship really died after those words escaped my tongue. Maybe the real challenge of being a physician is having the desire to continually be present and care for the people that mean the most to us in our personal lives. Once we get a grasp on SARS-CoV-2, it is only a matter of time before another entity rears its head to upend our way of life. I wonder if I'll be ready to take care of someone I love in the face of uncertainty.

# MEETING IN A TIME OF GREAT LONELINESS

ROBERT WHITEHEAD | Assistant Director, Strategic Writing

I'll bring dark pearls of chocolate.  
You'll bring out the light in the blushing wine.  
I'll bring the first memory I have of you  
and this brick briefcase of a heart I keep it in.  
You'll bring a question we can't answer  
and I'll tend the cactus garden of our guesses  
next to you. While the wind brings the neighbor's  
white curtains to a boil on the laundry line—  
while the wind plays the power lines  
like the skin of a drum—let's bring  
something else, anything else, to say  
each time we think *this is it, this is*  
*how it ends*. Bring me through the house  
carefully, at a distance, to the backyard,  
where I will bring my hand to pinch  
the bridge of my nose every time I feel  
the mask slip. Between the pots of fern, the fences,  
between our private annotations for the silence,  
let's bring every loneliness we've ever felt,  
and the knowledge that one day it ended.

# ARMISTEAD

## YEO WRITING PRIZE HONORABLE MENTION

ANDREW MONICK | Medical Student

The reality of COVID-19 sank in when the battery of my Prius died. I'd been reading at Fort Armistead Park, near Baltimore. The US had begun to socially distance three weeks prior, and I was adjusting to the reality of being apart from family, friends, and romantic partners. I'd driven to the fort with a novel in the pursuit of finding activities enjoyed alone.

The day was chilly and misty. I'd come to sit because the waves from the bay were always rough. It was a place to listen and absorb and think; rather than being imposed by crisis, loneliness felt natural here. I finished my chapter and went to leave but found that the car wouldn't turn on. I called for a jump and, newly apprised of a three-hour wait, threw on a jacket and mask and wandered into the woods toward the old fort.

Before dating apps rose to prominence, Fort Armistead was a cruising spot for gay men. In the secrecy of the abandoned grounds, people who were just like me would find a moment of comfort in one another while the water raged outside. Now deep in the forest, I gazed at the concrete walls and thought about all the specters of intimacy past the lay within.

The time since 2016 had evoked a reckoning with my identity as a gay man. As populism rose, so did regressive social stances. The Obama years seemed like a hazy, carefree memory. I'd spent the next four between shades of anger, hopelessness, and despair as the federal government delivered slight upon slight to minority groups, including my queer brethren – my chosen family.

As I imagined the men who had wandered the grounds of the fort decades ago, it struck me that they had a plague of their own to contend with – one that, at first, seemed to affect them alone. I wondered how they felt when every scrap of pleasure came at the price of so much risk; if, when they felt a spark of romance, it was tempered by dread and the terror of being struck down together by AIDS.

It crossed my mind that then, as now, the virus in question was downplayed and mismanaged by those in power. I felt bitterness in my chest for those men then, and I felt it deeply.

I walked forward and leaned against a bastion. I'd be starting medical school in the fall, leaving Baltimore and beginning another journey. I mulled over what doctors practicing during the first wave of HIV must have been feeling, how it must have paralleled the emotions of those providers on the COVID frontlines. Helplessness, hands tied by lack of funding. Frustration with a general public that refused to commit to managing a global pandemic. Anguish over being unable to provide their patients with an effective remedy.

My vision of a physician had thus far been archetypal – the healer, they who made things right. As the mist of the day continued to settle on my skin, I thought about how wrongs can't always be made right by one person, by one team. Those in power who propagated falsehoods and distrust of science were working in direct opposition to those who wanted nothing more than to help. If anything, it seemed in that moment that we had regressed on this front between 1981 and 2020. I wondered what those lost to AIDS would be thinking, saying, yelling; whether they would be screaming themselves raw at those of us alive, watching us repeat the same mistakes forty years later.

After the world is overturned, how do we remain upright? The past year divided us by how we answered that question. Some of us reckoned with the change. We advocated for equity, we donned masks, we got a shot, we spent a quiet year protecting ourselves and our loved ones. For some, though, the answer was to deny that the world had changed at all.

When we pivot our heads, a level object continues to appear level. The vestibular system tells our visual cortex that our orientation is skewed, and we correct for the imbalance. But what if you told yourself that your head couldn't possibly be tilted, for the object had remained upright? And what if you were barraged with messaging that this was true?

The consequences of misinformation are insidious and far-reaching; our losses from this pandemic were compounded dramatically because of it. We failed to learn this lesson at least once before. Will we learn it now?

# NEW NORMAL

ALEXANDRA CIUCIU | PhD Student, Cell Biology & Regenerative Medicine

The lockdown announcement was sudden and surreal. Being so preoccupied with classwork and research in the lab, I was angry about a lockdown. All my planned experiments were cancelled. All my classes were a lot more difficult as students and professors alike adjusted to a new learning format. All my goals for my second year of my PhD were put on pause. It seemed as if the world was holding its breath, waiting to see if this was as serious as it sounded, or just a small blip in the rhythm of things.

Initially, we were told the lockdown would probably last about two weeks. I decided to channel my frustration with the lockdown into those two weeks and make the most of them. I started an “Abs in 2 weeks” challenge workout so that something productive would come out of my time at home. Two weeks came and went, but I still didn’t have abs, and we were still in lockdown. I got drastically different opinions from people in my life about how long this would go on. At work, people were optimistic that we’d go back to normal soon, so we prepped for our experiments. At home, my mom, a nurse who works first-hand with COVID patients, had a bleaker perspective. The news was all over the place. Clearly no one knew what was going on. So, I dedicated myself to going back to normal, and worked on improving my health, telling myself it’s almost over. I got into body combat workouts, began to go on more walks, and changed my eating habits. Each day in front of the mirror, I could see the progress I was making, but it still felt as if I was in a liminal space, just waiting for the world to exhale and my life to go back to rush, stress, and crowds. But as the pandemic progressed, I began to enjoy my self-made routine, and feared returning to what was before. And with rising COVID cases, it seemed as if my hope of “almost over”, seemed less and less possible. How could anything return to normal after this?

Eventually work opened back up and just as I was adjusting to work life again, Black Lives Matter rose to the forefront of social justice issues. Protestors preached the horrific truth of police brutality and violent targeting of minorities. Part of the first protest reacting to the murder of George Floyd centered around City Hall, just down the street from my apartment. That night, smoke filled the sky and the sour smell of burnt rubber from cop cars set aflame permeated through our closed windows. On the street below, I saw citizens and police lined up on opposite ends, daring the other to act first. I let out a loud gasp at the unknown flash and bang of stun grenades that police used to disperse crowds, scaring myself and my boyfriend. Racial inequality became the topic of news and conversations everywhere. I learned more about the horrific history of police brutality and racism in our nation and the misinformation spread by our government.

As the months progressed, we witnessed further violence against minorities, rising COVID deaths and new variants, and shocking political misconduct. I no longer wanted to return to normal, I wanted to work on myself and with others to create a better normal. I started therapy. I reached out to friends and family more.

I donated to different causes. With each effort, I hoped to be doing my part to shape myself and the world to be different after all of this.

A year later, we have COVID vaccines, precautions are slowly being lifted, and I've been back at work full-time for many months. Police officers guilty of murdering George Floyd are being charged and there is an overt movement for reform in our criminal justice system. We have a new president, and the hopes of change and progress from millions of Americans rest on his shoulders. I've realized that this is not almost over, but just the beginning.

I hope for a new normal. A normal where we are encouraged to discuss our mental health. Where the criminal justice system works for the people, not against them. Where we may be able to not only overcome a pandemic, but also use vaccine research technology to treat cancers and other debilitating diseases. I hope that the trials we've gone through as a people have laid the groundwork for significant societal change, and that a century from now, these issues are long resolved.

And who knows, maybe by 2121, I might even have abs.



# GETTING THROUGH THE UNEXPECTED YEAR

SWAPNIL SHARMA | Research Associate, Medical Oncology

*June 7, 2021*

To the person reading this letter, I am writing it to tell you what a strange year 2020 was. It was the year of the COVID-19 pandemic which came with a shock that the world was not prepared for. It caused everything to shut down and everything became chaotic. No one knew what to expect or do.

I was moving into a new chapter of my life. I was living by myself in a completely different country, thousands of miles away from my family. It had been only a year in Philly, and I did not know a lot of people. It was supposed to be like any other year. Like everyone else I had many plans for the year: travel to different places, to do well in my career, to learn a musical instrument, make new friends, and stuff like that. What could go wrong? But all the sudden, we were in the middle of a pandemic. A pandemic, no one had experienced before. The world was going into a state of shock and panic and so was I. I had important questions to think about: what do I do now? Should I leave the life here that I just started building and move back or stay put and face the unknown? I decided to stay to see what the future brings.

When something out of the ordinary happens, it changes your perspective of life. 2020 was something like that. Suddenly all the plans had changed; the routine was different, and I was trying to adapt to this new life—a work-from-home life. It was difficult to separate work from home life, and I missed going to work. Like everyone else in my situation, I desperately started searching for hobbies to fill my routine outside of work. I started to read about how other people were dealing with this new normal. It gave me a sense of belonging as everyone was facing similar struggles. It warmed my heart to read these stories, but I missed my family. I was facing this struggle of surviving being alone without any family and with no option to travel back.

There was a COVID scare in the family, and I felt helpless in that moment. I could not do anything from so far away, but my parents always kept strong and cheered me up. In a way, the pandemic changed things and made me appreciate my friends and family more than ever. They were constantly checking on me to make sure I was doing fine. It made me feel loved and appreciated. I realized that even though I was by myself in a different country, I had people who care about me.

This pandemic was a blessing in disguise for me. It made me reassess the choices I made and the dreams I had in life. I realized I wanted to do so much more in life to make a difference and there was still a lot to learn. They say once you let go of the past and negativity, the healing begins. This is what happened to me. I had a clearer picture of what I wanted in life, but it wasn't easy to stay positive all the time.

Thankfully, I had some help during this journey from my little furry friend. I had my cat for two years before the COVID-19 pandemic happened. The song "Better Place" by Rachel Platten made more sense to our relationship than ever before. My apartment and life were a little less empty with him in it. He would constantly stay by my side while I was working. Hugging him made me feel at peace in stressful times. His tiny paws on my hands assured me that everything would be okay. Sometimes assurance is all you need to keep going in life.

Another person that kept me going during the pandemic was my partner. We met a short time before the pandemic, but our relationship got stronger during it. We got to know each other better as we were spending a lot of time together. In a way, we became each other's confidants and support pillars. Together we survived through difficult times. My partner and my cat became my family away from home and got me through this last year. Even when you think all hope is lost, life surprises you. This last year was an experience and a journey through different emotions for me, from the stress and panic to healing and self-improvement. It brought me closer to my family and friends more than ever. It changed my perspective about life.

Life is to live, laugh, and love. It is too short to worry about stuff that will not matter a month or a year from now. During this time, I saw people from different backgrounds coming together, being kind and supportive to each other, and the world became a little better. I hope this letter gives you a perspective of life during the year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,  
A Jeffersonian from 2021

# HIGHWAY HILL

ELI STEIKER-GINZBERG | Graduate Student

For the past year I have lived with the memory of being tear gassed by law enforcement on the I-676 highway in downtown Philadelphia. One of hundreds of peaceful protestors that day, I was herded onto a steep hill with a high fence at the end with no escape from the choking smoke. The people in law enforcement, the ones shooting the tear gas from the road below, were supposed to protect people like me. I was simply using my political voice to fight for justice for people who have suffered and died at the hands of a racist system. And how was that message received? With even more violence. Whenever I drive by that portion of the road I am transported back in time. I am taken back to the screams of confusion all around me as people tripped over roots and abandoned bicycles, the feeling of imminent vomit in my throat, the burning in my eyes, on my skin, the strangers' hands pushing and pulling me to safety, up and over the fence. Once on the other side, clear of the smoke and the mass of people following behind me, more gas canisters were dropped right next to me from a low-flying helicopter above. I grabbed my partner's hand and ran upwind, weaving between the twin plumes. On a sunny day in my hometown of Philadelphia, chemical weapons were being dropped from aircraft funded by my tax dollars. Go figure. The police later officially apologized for their actions that day but what felt like an eternity on that hill alongside I-676 will be seared into my mind until the day I die. Can I ever forgive those people in uniform for doing that to me? To countless others? It is my sincerest wish that in 100 years this event is seen as a turning point that proves we do not want or need police, that there are no more people being shot and gassed and imprisoned by them. My story from that day, hardly unique, will serve as a reminder to future readers, students of history, that our most sacred right is the right to think and to speak up when we know something is wrong. When we march, shoulder to shoulder with strangers who see it the same way, we manifest the ideal America where change and justice is possible—even if we have to wait 100 years to see it.

# MY BARELY TRAGIC LIFE IN 2021

CHANA BAILA AIDMAN | Undergraduate Student, Textile Design

Hello people of the future! I hope you are reading this in a time in which the impending doom that loomed in the air in the 21st Century has settled. I hope you live in a time when you can live in luxury beyond what a Medieval king could dream of. Even if life is better than it was in the past, I bet there are still individuals who dream of a better future. A major dream for me is to be a polyglot (multilingual), but I am hopelessly dyslexic. Despite my struggle with spelling, I hope to have managed to write something that is worth reading in the year 2121. Thank G-d for spell check.

Jokes aside, I live in a serious time. Despite the Coronavirus Pandemic causing major changes globally, I decided to focus on myself more than anyone else. I care about the effect on my life the most. I know people died and others are suffering from side effects of the virus months after it passed through their system. Despite that my experience was not as tragic as others, I still personally felt the Pandemic's influence in shifting the storyline of my life.

Being alone with myself for hours on end changed me as an individual. My bedroom became my self-imposed prison, also known as my bedroom-studio. Despite living at home and having plenty of room, it was most convenient for me to do my art assignments in one room without my siblings interrupting my process. I will forever treasure the lock on my door for giving me privacy.

My only true solace was Saturdays. Saturday is the day of rest. Since I am a religious Jew, I take Shabbos (the Sabbath) as a day to cut myself off from the rest of the world and connect with my community. This means no electronics, no work, and no social media. I cannot even pick up a pencil without feeling guilty. The people of the future must be laughing at me right now thinking how primitive I am. Hey you! People of the future! How about you take a day of rest once and a while! Pull out the wires from your walls, and possibly even from your heads (if you guys went wild with tech), so you can disconnect to reconnect.

Connecting with my religious community was vital for me, since I could not connect traditionally with my school community for the majority of the year. I instead relied on my neighborhood friends to satisfy my need to socialize. Despite not being able to go inside their houses, I found a measure of peace when I was able to meet up with them outside. Luckily for me, my best friend is my next-door neighbor. Since I was about seven, I would consistently go over to her house on Friday nights and then the next day, during Shabbos afternoons. I am basically her long lost sister. Since I am at her house so often her mother is comfortable in telling me when I have outlived my stay. This usually happens when my real big sister and I start verbally throwing rocks at each other, which prompts my friend's mom to cordially escort us out of her house.

This past year we did not have the luxury of invading people's spaces. This caused me to feel a bit isolated. Yeah, I was not dying or anything, but I just felt an intense yearning created from my inability to physically reach out and be close to those who I am deeply bonded with. Quite often six feet apart with masks did not give me the satisfaction I used to have when meeting up with friends.

I always considered myself to be more of an introvert, but now being close and talking to my friends seems obviously important to my mental health. Although I have not made many friends in college this year, I kept in contact with two of my friends from high school. Recently I made a bit of a mess out of a rather rash decision. At the time it seemed fine, but it completely wrecked my plans I made with my friend. We planned for months to meet up after we both finished our first year of college. The choice I made that ruined our plans was when I went to New York. I went to assist in dragging my big sister's luggage to our minivan, and then I ate out at a restaurant. When I saw my sister's dorm room, I was grateful for the size of my own room. The living spaces and general feel of the City is similar to sardine cans stacked on top of each other. Absolutely no elbow room and it smells funky wherever you go.

Despite the reminder of how fortunate I am, I am still furious at myself for going. Going to New York caused me to miss out on meeting my friend who I had not seen since high school! I let her know I was in New York, not thinking anything of it. I sent her a video of a store that sold K-pop merch thinking she would enjoy it. She did enjoy the video, but she was alarmed that I was in New York. She decided to cancel our plans for the safety of her family even though I was fully vaccinated. I understand that it was the responsible decision to cancel the meet-up, but people of the future, am I right to believe that this seems unfair? Even though it was the right decision to cancel our plans, why should I suffer as a result of doing a good deed? Oh my goodness, I should be more selfish so I do not ruin my plans in the future. I should not have gone to Sardine City!

Despite me wallowing in self-pity, I think I did pretty well this year. My parents are proud of me for doing well in school, and I managed not to make a complete fool of myself in class (emphasis on complete). I think the isolation that encompassed my life this past school year was actually quite helpful for my studies. I pushed myself as hard as I could, because my only option was to work if I wanted to escape an overwhelming feeling of guilt. I am slightly addicted to online comics and K-dramas (Korean dramas), but since my work table was in my room, there was no time when I could escape the view of my unfinished work.

Although I limited my distractions, I still wasted time on my phone. I watched Instagram and I saw people having fun. I unfortunately still see a past friend act in self destructive ways, but I lack the desire and ability to help her. I learned over the Pandemic that this person was not worth my time. I learned the hard way, that it is unhealthy to help "friends" who actively tear you down to build themselves up.

Enough about toxic people! This Summer I plan to work on my art which means my work table is still in my room. Despite my room becoming a self-imposed prison, it is also my refuge. It is my refuge from my siblings who shake my doorknob till it loosens and I need to screw it on again. Despite my determination to complete my work, I still hear the siren's call of my bed which is less than four feet behind me.

# IMPERMANENCE

KAITLIN SIDDONS | Physician Assistant Student, Jefferson East Falls

The year of 2020 was filled with lessons, unexpected events, and for a lack of better words: chaos. The initial belief that I was being granted a two week break from school my senior year was far from the actual outcome of never stepping foot in high school again, and graduating from my front yard. I spent my first year of college in my bedroom attending classes on zoom, and reliving what felt like the same day on a continuous loop. At first glance, a recap of the past year could have been defined by loss and anxiety, which are very real aspects of many of our experiences during this time. But for me, this year felt like a “checkpoint” in life; like finally reaching a sense of understanding that I didn’t know existed.

Life in quarantine presented me with the blessing and curse of plenty of extra time. I took up yoga, online guitar lessons, and Netflix binging. However, I also took up the hobby of thinking for hours on end. Thoughts during a global pandemic can become daunting, especially when they have surrounded the plethora of uncertainties about my future. For most of my life, I’ve struggled with not knowing what’s going to happen next. I park in the same spot every time I go to the store, I order the same appetizers at every Applebee’s trip, and I avoid unfamiliar places that I could get lost in. I’ve made a habit of holding on for dear life to my reality, hoping a piece of the puzzle doesn’t suddenly go missing, even though it is inevitable that they end up somewhere under the couch. If there’s one guarantee in life, it is things falling apart or morphing into something entirely different.

During quarantine, I found myself struggling to let go of moments; the last time I laughed with my friends, the last time I was in a classroom in person, or the last time I felt excited and optimistic. I believed that those really were the last times; that I’d never feel that way again. I’d replay favorite conversations or old memories over and over in my head, like a movie or book I didn’t want to finish because I loved it so much. Friendships changed, and I don’t talk to people that I used to talk to every day. I changed, and the parts of me that used to seem so hopeful weren’t as easy to identify with anymore. Change and unpredictability have always been frightening to me. Not knowing seemed dangerous, and during quarantine I realized that I really didn’t know who I was, and I think that scared me the most. People say you go to college to figure out who you are, and I had felt so eager to reach the finish line; reach certainty. But the truth is that who we are is constantly changing, just like life around us. I’m not the same person I was a year ago, or even a day ago.

Grappling with this new realization was eye-opening and confusing at the same time because I didn’t know how to move forward with this new concept of allowing myself to accept the new and let go of the past. I first started to understand this philosophy this past April, when my aunt gifted me “affirmation cards” for my birthday. My new daily practice is to recklessly shuffle them in the morning and see which ones fly out the deck. These cards are the ones I choose to focus on for the day. However, every day the same one jumps out at me: Impermanence. The

affirmation says, "Life is always changing, and I drift easily through those changes, good and bad.

As I drift through hard times, I can take comfort in knowing that I will leave them behind. As I drift away from good times, I can take comfort in knowing that more will come my way. Impermanence is an equal-opportunity nonentity." I feel as if this perfectly describes what 2020 has shown me about life. It is inevitable to lose the puzzle pieces. You lose people that you thought would be in your life forever, when they were only meant to stay for a season of it. Goals change, dreams change, and this doesn't have to be a negative event. You lose pieces of yourself that you don't think will ever return, but ultimately you find new people, and new people find you. You dream to do things that you never thought possible and accomplish goals that you didn't foresee before. Those pieces of yourself that you thought were gone always find their way back. The picture on the puzzle box may change, but it's changing into something better. Staying the same person for the entirety of your life would be counter intuitive, and most importantly extremely sad. I've realized that staying stagnant is much more frightening than change: because change is growth. Change is a new beginning. Change is beautiful. This finish line that I used to sprint towards doesn't actually exist, but that's something that I've become okay with. I find myself parking in a variety of spots in the lot, broadening my horizons at restaurants, and venturing to new places in East Falls and beyond, no longer afraid of getting lost, because that's how you find what you were really looking for in the first place. The radical changes within my own life and the world itself this past year have shown me that I can handle change, and even embrace it, and for that I am extremely grateful.





# THE DRS. THERESA AND CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE: SECOND PLACE

## *THE ELEVATOR CRISIS*

ELLEN SOLOMON | Medical Student

On my first day of third year clerkships, I spent 2 hours in an elevator. That elevator in June 2020 in the middle of a global pandemic provided the most profound learning experience of my third year of medical school.

I walked into clinic that morning with my white coat draped over my arm, a symbol of my much-anticipated admittance to the world of hands-on learning. I carried with me, too, the excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty that comes with translating knowledge into practice. I was rotating in a clinic that focused on caring for patients with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD). That morning I watched with amazement as my Attending cared for her patients and their caregivers in a way that so clearly communicated empathy and understanding of their specific challenges. These challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic; routines were disrupted, day centers were closed down, and caregiver exhaustion was at its peak.

Around 1pm, my Attending and I were called out of a patient room mid-visit with a request for help. We learned that one of the morning patients was refusing to leave the clinic. It caught us by surprise, as this 19-year-old gentleman with autism was remarkably calm, cooperative, and interactive during our visit. Now, in the discharge area, he was hunched over in a chair, hands clenched around a clinic toy, eyes fixed on the floor. It was clear that he had been in this position for nearly an hour. Finally, after thirty minutes of coaxing and help from various team members, his rigid posture relaxed, his furrowed brow softened, and he hesitantly stood from the chair. As we took careful steps towards the elevator, I saw relief bloom on his mother's face.

This relief was short-lived. As the patient crossed the threshold of the elevator, his demeanor shifted. In a moment, he was curled in a ball on the floor of the elevator, head in hands, and unwilling to move. We tried everything: toys, snacks, a call from his father, fewer people, more people, a water bottle, his favorite song. He wouldn't budge. He was frozen in time, scared, beyond our reach.

An hour later, my patience started wearing thin. The constant, irritating buzz of the elevator, angry that we'd been holding the doors open longer than its programmed time, was a nagging reminder that this moment of crisis defied the limits of any plan, schedule, or timetable. The whispers and glances of curiosity from onlookers frustrated me. The patient's meltdown was on display while we seemed to be making no progress, adding to my feelings of helplessness. As my

mind wandered, I looked to the mother and saw patience, love, and resilience—strength I couldn't comprehend.

Ninety minutes later and out of options, we decided to physically remove the patient from the elevator. We knew that the use of force would only escalate his fear and resistance, but there was no alternative. It was physically difficult, as he was a well-built, strong 19-year-old, but even more, it was emotionally jarring. As his mother and a security guard carefully carried him over the elevator threshold, his body tensed and his agitation grew. As he lay on the lobby floor, he grabbed his mother's shirt, all his fear channeled into his desperate grip, pulling her closer in panic.

After nearly 2 hours of patience with no visible frustration, his mother broke down. Bent over his body, her tears flowed onto the son whom she loved but could not rescue from this moment of fear. My face shield began to fog as my eyes teared. I saw the exhaustion on my Attending's face. One of the Medical Assistants who had been helping for the past hour began to cry, thinking of her own son with autism. The patient's father soon arrived, having left work to help physically get his son into the car. We could hear the fits of screaming and agitation even from the second-floor clinic.

I walked into clinic that morning excited to learn, to feel like a doctor, to move towards certainty in diagnosing and treating diseases. In the span a few hours, I felt farther from certainty than ever. I felt like I bore witness to a collision of the pain, uncertainty, and fear of this moment in history with the lives of this patient and his mother.

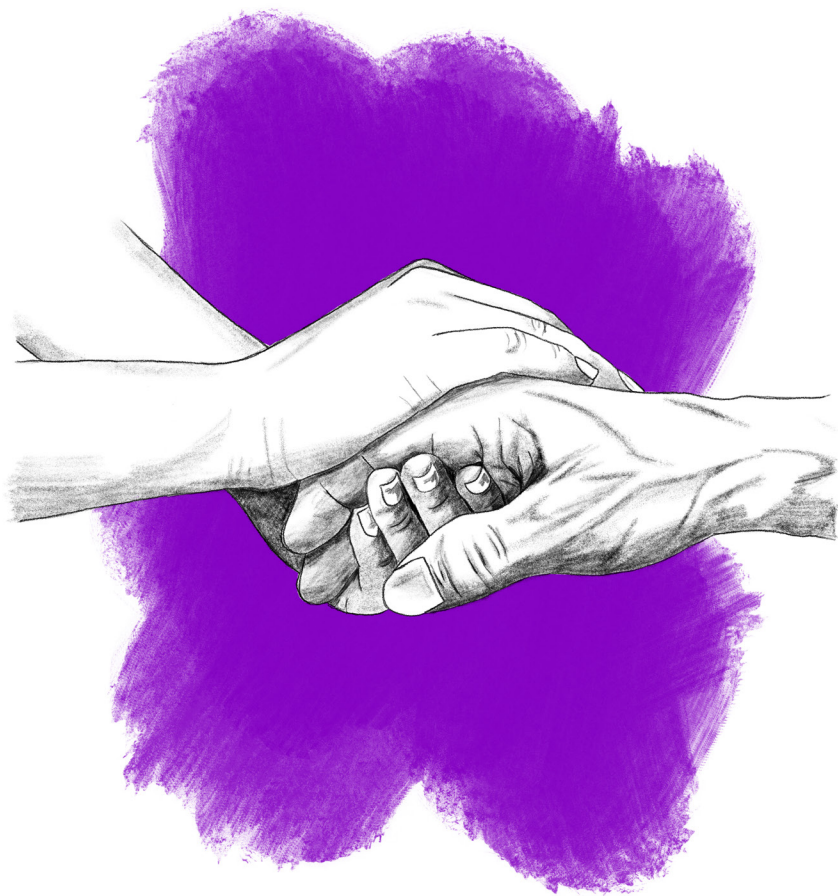
The disruption of routines, which everyone felt in the height of COVID-19, is more visceral for those with autism who rely heavily on routines to calm anxiety. COVID-19 has also exacerbated caretaker burnout as daycares, family members, and other sources of support can't operate in the ways they normally would. Particularly poignant, in light of George Floyd's death just a few weeks prior, this moment of crisis could have ended tragically for the patient and his mother, who are Black. George Floyd's death has brought to front of mind the history of police violence towards Black Americans and the deadly consequences of racist presumptions of danger associated with Black men. It was all too easy to imagine how this patient, agitated and unyielding, could become a victim of police violence. If this same crisis happened in a different location, without the support of the clinic staff and understanding of the context, it could have ended very differently.

In healthcare, we can't avoid the messiness of humanity—family stress, broken systems, physical suffering, collective grief, historically-rooted racism, one young man's meltdown, a mother's exhaustion. And for all these problems, we don't have easy answers. The elevator crisis continues to remind me that there are so many problems that a prescription or vaccine can't fix, no matter how many years of clinical training and experience I complete.

The elevator crisis also reminds me that as a doctor and as a human being, there is more I can offer when answers and solutions run out. When I think back to the elevator crisis, I remember not the absence of certainty, but the presence of my

Attending's compassion that extended far beyond the walls of the exam room, the presence of an interdisciplinary team that dropped everything to respond, and the presence of a mother's resilience and love for her son.





# I THINK ABOUT THEIR SON

## Yeo Writing Prize Honorable Mention

GLENN COOPER | Physician, Cardiology

Mr. R was amazing. He was diagnosed with kidney cancer. A huge tumor. Over 10 cm, I believe. As a man well into his 80s, he was at significant risk for surgery to remove the kidney. On top of that was the aortic valve disease. He had severe aortic stenosis. Of all the issues a patient can have that put them at high risk for surgery, severe aortic stenosis is top of the list. We had talked about that valve. Mr. R made it crystal clear that he wanted no part of aortic valve surgery. He was a bit of a cantankerous guy. Old school. World War II generation. The “Greatest Generation.” Little things (like kidney cancer) don’t bother me, and, if they do, I certainly won’t complain about them!

So, he went for the robotic nephrectomy. His kidney was removed. It was FLAWLESS. Mr. R. didn’t bat an eye. You would never know he was an octogenarian. You would never know that he had severe aortic stenosis. Discharged a few days later. Kidney out. Cancer out. Like swatting away a mosquito. Nuthin! Shortly thereafter, I heard that Mr. R had COVID. I assumed that he would be fine. After all that he had been through, this was another mosquito. He was admitted to the 10th floor Pavilion building. Hmm. I wasn’t anxious to go see Mr. R. I am in my 50s and am at high risk myself for complications from COVID. Frankly, at that time, I was scared. I did not want to put myself at risk unless it was absolutely necessary. I was not asked to see Mr. R—there was no cardiology consult. He was stable from a cardiac perspective. I would follow him on EPIC.

A few days later, however, I was anxious. Given my relationship with Mr. R and his wife who generally accompanied him to office visits, I thought I should go up there and see what was happening. Perhaps I could reassure them both. Perhaps a familiar face would aid in his healing. His wife had always been pleasant and warm (certainly warmer than her husband!). I’m sure they would both be happy to know that I was around. I went up to the floor and found his room. “Enhanced Respiratory Isolation.” This was routine. I went to find his nurse to see if I could get some information. As I walked past the room, I glanced at the name on the room next door. It was the same last name. How odd! When I found Mr. R’s nurse, I asked if the patient in the next room over was a relative. “His wife”, she said. I gasped. “The son was just here and made them both DNR. They are both unresponsive, and both dying from COVID.”

I think about their son quite often. I have never met him, and I have not spoken to him. I knew both of his parents quite well. I loved them. I appreciated them for the human beings they were. I think about my parents, whom I lost in the last 5 years. They died about 2 years apart. I cannot imagine what it was like on that day to say goodbye to both of the people that gave him life, nurtured him, raised him, and created his home. Both suddenly, unexpectedly, and simultaneously. How

devastating that must have been. How unsettling. How hard it must have been for him to make the decision to let them both go.

None of us will ever be the same after this pandemic. Life will never be the same. For some of us, it is more personal, more tragic, more directly impactful on our day-to-day living. I am grateful to be alive. I am grateful for the vaccines. I am grateful for the opportunity to visit with friends and take off my damn mask! I am grateful that I was able to limit my exposure to infection. And I am grateful for the people who stared this monster in the face...day after day...and did their work without flinching. Hospitalists, nurses, residents, therapists, food service workers, transport, housekeeping, technologists of all sorts, and on and on. They faced this menace with courage and served without concern for themselves. This is another "Greatest Generation." And I will not forget those who lost loved ones. I will not forget Mr. and Mrs. R's son—another Mr. R. He will never get his parents back. Millions are feeling that aching, unquenchable pain. I am filled with gratitude. I am filled with sorrow. I am filled with awe in the face of the sacrifice and loss of others. I am going to call Mr. R Jr. this week and see how he is doing...

# THE NIGHTMARE OF BEING A HERO

LAURA O'MARA | Nurse, Medical Telemetry; Population Health Student

I woke up on the couch and grabbed my phone immediately texted Kim, "Did he pass?"

A wave of pre-emptive grief rushed over me as I saw those three dots pending her reply.

"Yes"

I threw my head back on the throw pillow and let the early afternoon sun wash over me and began to sob. I thought about the nightmare the past night's shift had been and the relief I felt to know he was finally at peace. It is not in my heart to ever wish for a person's death, but it is soul crushing to stand by helplessly as someone's final hours are spent spiraling down a drain of hypoxia and confusion.

"Joe", as I think of him now, was a COVID patient in his nineties. He was a family man with a smile that showed his partial dentures but revealed a genuinely happy spirit. Like other COVID patients, the course of the virus demanded an increased need for supplemental oxygen with even the smallest of movements. Normally a very independent man, Joe was unfamiliar with using a nasal cannula to help him breath. However, over the past few days he went from a minimal 2 liters to the highest settings of optiflow.

His worsening condition was known to his family; his wife had passed years prior, which left his children in charge of his care. It had been decided by his sons the previous day to change his code-status to DNR/DNI, which felt like a relief. It would be unlikely that his already frail body would survive the physical trauma of CPR. I met Joe at change of shift, and assured him I'd take good care of him overnight.

At four in the morning Joe went from bad to worse. We had been continuously monitoring vitals when suddenly his oxygen saturations dropped. Peering into his hospital room window, we could see Joe holding his nasal cannula—his lifeline—in his hands. As quickly as I could, I donned a gown and face shield, secured the seal on my N95, and ran into the room. He was unable to follow directions and was restless in bed, batting his hands around like swatting flies.

With his nasal cannula back on, we increased oxygen to assist in his recovery, but it wasn't working. His saturations still remained low at 78%. I shouted into the hallway for someone to call the night float doctor to come to the bedside. The plan had been to hold a family meeting the next morning to decide whether or not to put him on comfort care. In this moment, I knew this meeting would never happen. We stood there helplessly watching the monitor, remembering his wishes that we not resuscitate



or intubate him. Joe's oxygen saturations were lingering low, his heart rate dropping, 50, 40, 30, 20.

In a quick pinch another nurse grabbed the non-rebreather mask and put it over his optiflow. The bag inflated quickly, expanding under the pressure of the high flow cannula as his oxygen saturation and heart rate came back up. Our efforts didn't last long. Joe was restless as the lack of oxygen to his brain impaired his level of consciousness and his ability to make sound decisions. He continued to reach up to his face to remove all of the oxygen-delivering devices. Although his oxygen was improving, his mental status was not.

An order for bilateral mitts sat unacknowledged in the computer and the pair were sitting at the foot of Joe's bed waiting to be applied. Although their intended purpose is to prevent harm and promote healing, it felt inhumane to use restraints in a person's possible final moments. On the flip side, not putting them on would only expedite these final moments; left alone, a restless, hypoxic person would pull out every tube and IV no matter how securely you thought you placed them. Instead of mitts, a nurse extern Paul and I sat in the room with Joe, holding his hands.

Those moments at his bedside could have been hours. I couldn't bring myself to restrain him or leave him alone to die. So I stayed, and Paul stayed, and we just sat with Joe and talked about staying right there with him and him staying with us. I looked across the bed at my coworker and swallowed back the tears. We stayed at his bedside like that until day shift arrived. Joe was sleeping but his lingering confusion felt like a ticking time bomb. I prayed that he would pass as I clocked out, prayed that in my 10-minute walk home he would pass.

When I walked into my apartment, I dropped my belongings and stripped down, throwing my scrubs in the hamper that had sat next to my doorway since March. I let the hot water pour over me and sat on floor of my shower and cried. Two months of COVID patients and this pattern felt almost routine at this point. I opened the fridge, took out leftover pizza—ate one bite then threw it down, collapsing into tears again. I turned on the television, then turned it off again almost immediately. The denial, the patronizing use of the word hero—those words buzz in my head every day, and no one has any idea what a war zone it truly is like. I took two Benadryl and laid on the couch, wishing that sleep would come and, with it, relief from the inescapable sadness.

# REFLECTING ON THE PAST YEAR

BRENDAN O'NEIL | Marketing Coordinator, Jefferson Health

I'm not one to panic. Most people would describe me as a calm, easygoing individual, and I pride myself as a man who stays cool in stressful situations. This past year, however, planted within me a nagging feeling that I didn't recognize and couldn't describe. As I sit here today reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic, I realize now that I had been experiencing panic and anxiety.

In February 2020, I had just started a new job at Jefferson Health, and the stress and excitement of that transition was constant. I was excited to begin my career with a company that I had long admired. I could have never guessed that just one month later, everyone's life would be changed forever. When the news hit that the Sars-CoV-2 virus was going to present a risk to the United States, it felt surreal. I wasn't sure how to feel, but I knew that I was uncomfortable and worried. As the days went by, the nagging feeling in my chest became worse. Every day we were listening to the news about COVID-19, with all the worries that stemmed from those conversations and the "unknown" of what would happen tomorrow, the next week and the next few months. I was sleep deprived, I couldn't focus at work, and I found myself hiding in the bathroom multiple times a day just to try and calm myself down. The stress began to affect my personal life, too, and I found myself getting upset at the smaller things in life that wouldn't usually upset me. I had difficulty breathing, and a lingering pain in my chest, and I began to think that there was something wrong with my body physically.

The feeling worsened over the next few weeks, and finally I went to the emergency room, thinking that there was something wrong with my heart. While on my way to the hospital, there was a little sense of relief. I was thinking, "There is something wrong with my body and I'm about to go get it fixed. FINALLY."

When I got to the hospital, the kind nurses and doctors gave me an EKG, and I was relieved that they were finally going to figure out what was wrong with my heart. Well, it may not be surprising to hear that all the tests came back normal. Everything. The nurse explained to me that I was having anxiety and panic attacks, likely as a result of the stress from the COVID-19 pandemic. I was surprised to learn this, because it was something I had never experienced before, and I never thought I struggled with my mental health. At first, I felt like I was maybe incapable of handling the situation, and was frustrated with myself for feeling this way.

However, looking back I am very grateful for this scary period of my life—I learned that anxiety and panic attacks can happen to anyone. I also learned that it's okay to feel scared and vulnerable in any situation, whether it be COVID-19 or daily struggles. Most of all, I learned that anxiety doesn't make people weak, and it's not a character flaw, which admittedly I may have thought in the past. Instead, I've

learned that anxiety allows us to be aware, feel deeper empathy for those around us, and look inward to improve ourselves every day.

All of us are stronger for having lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. We all experienced loss, whether it be the loss of routine, loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one. I handled all three when I started working from home, my girlfriend lost her job, and my family lost our grandpa. I knew that in order for me to be there for my loved ones, I had to take the necessary steps to get back to that place where I felt comfortable and healthy in order to do so.

I wanted to share my personal story of reflection with everyone because it is something that I wouldn't usually do—I am usually pretty quiet and keep to myself (you can ask my family, girlfriend and friends, and they would all say the same thing). However, now looking back, I think it is extremely important to share these specific experiences because I realized that there is always someone who is going through something similar, and it's comforting to know someone understands what you're going through. I am sure my experience is similar to thousands of others, and by reading this I hope they know they're not alone.

# ONE DAY AT A TIME WITH PRAYER?

CORALEEN BAYLIS MALLARD | Environmental Services

I'm writing my story on how the pandemic hit my household, and the emotional anxiety of working in a major hospital on the forefront of helping to contain the major pandemic from spreading from room to room. My name is Coraleen Baylis Mallard and I have worked in the Environmental Services Department for the past 19 years. I've seen a lot of situations happen here but nothing compared to this last storm: THE CORONAVIRUS. In an instant, our city was in an uproar. School closing, city shut down, job loss. You name it we went through it. Working in the hospital sure wasn't easy. It was very, very SCARY TO SAY THE LEAST. Just the not knowing every day was the SCARIEST, BUT WE ALL PREVAILED AND DID OUR JOBS THE BEST WAY POSSIBLE. With schools and daycares closing I also ran into another problem: NO ONE TO CARE FOR MY 8-year-old. I scrambled to find childcare, which wasn't easy because everyone was scared to be around anyone else. Staying home for the first week, trying to come up with a plan, was a lot. But it's working out.

Having my son just as scared, keeping him calm not only through the pandemic but also through all the other violence and corruption going on in the world that an 8-year-old doesn't understand is a lot. My daughter is a police officer, so I always worry about her. But I WORRIED EVEN MORE WITH ALL THE CORRUPTION AND POLICE BLAME that was going on. I didn't take my son to any protests, but we walked through some and he saw THE NATIONAL GUARD ON STANDBY. I told him not all police officers are bad. Just look at your Aunt Nay and her Squad. I take these days just as many others. ONE DAY AT A TIME WITH PRAYER.

# NEW YEAR'S PRAYER

LYNN REBER | Surgical Scheduler

As I do every New Year's Eve, I watch the ball drop from Times Square...2019 into 2020, same routine. After I see the celebration, I say a silent prayer to myself hoping for everyone to have a great, healthy, prosperous year. Did that prayer fall on deaf ears!

So as everyone went through a year no one could ever imagine, I stopped and realized the simple things in life WE all missed dearly. I lost my mom in 2020, not to COVID, but to another health issue. Due to limited medical staff, and not wanting to take her to a hospital, her health declined, and she was placed on home hospice. However, I did lose a high school classmate to COVID. This woman in the prime of her life lost her battle very quickly to COVID. The medical team at Jefferson Northeast tried with all their knowledge and expertise—too late. Her kidneys stopped working. If that was not enough, she had just become a grandmother for the first time.

I cry a lot thinking of not just my sadness but for all the others who had a loss of a job, closing of a favorite store, and the loss of a friend or loved one. In my current silent New Year's Prayer, besides the usual good things life has to offer, I wish for strength when the unexpected comes our way.

# COVID: A BRIEF ENCOUNTER

STEPHEN J PURCELL | Administrative Assistant

I saw her from half a block away, on the sidewalk, hugging the wall of a permanently shuttered nail salon with the obligatory COVID-19 statement taped to the inside of a glass door. Draped in a grimy red blanket, skinny butt to the chilly pavement, hunched over slightly as if attempting a yoga pose beyond her ken. For all I knew she could be dead, or asleep, or two seconds from a volcanic, virus-spewing coughing fit. Instinctively, I dug into my jeans' pocket, extracted a few bills and checked to see if they were all singles. Reaching her, I maintained distance, but still able to hand her the cash, folded in half (a mistake I won't make again). I didn't say anything. Given the incipient plague and her lack of accommodations, I couldn't bring myself to say, "Have a nice day." We were a block from the hotel where I live in a top-floor studio. It's not the Rittenhouse, but it's still a high-end building in a scenic Philly spot, smack on the Parkway. Two blocks east are Love Park and City Hall. Facing west, there's the Cathedral, Logan Square, with its iconic sculpted fountain, the main branch of the Library, the Franklin Institute, and the Barnes and Rodin museums. Past those, there's a tree-lined boulevard stretching half a mile to the Philadelphia Art Museum known to the world for its well-trodden Rocky steps (cue the Rocky theme, please), and to the side on a grassy knoll a larger-than-you-and-me statue of the man himself.

My point being, despite my issues (and I've got a few), at 72, I've got it good compared to this lost soul, hunched in despair, or God only knows in what hellish limbo she might currently reside. For sure, wherever it is, there's no pool on the roof and gym in the basement. I had half a mind to spot her a twenty, but I nixed that idea quickly enough, not that I couldn't afford it. The sight of her was something out of Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, perhaps. Her eyes were moist and filmy. She had the thousand-yard stare of a veteran who's seen one too many firefights. She scratched her head from lice and her teeth were rotted and black. Her voice was high and childlike, but she had the wherewithal to say, "Thank you. God bless." I've been told that God can be known as much by his absence as his presence. If God's anywhere near the corner where that woman lives, he might want to knock and say hello. Because she's long past help in any human form. Anyway, before she reached for my paltry offering, she'd been sucking on her fingers (yes, I saw it), out of delirium, or maybe for sustenance, and when she took the folded-in-half bills from me her saliva-moist fingers grazed mine. I recoiled in horror and took a step back. If she noticed, she didn't let on.

She returned to her yoga hunch and sucking on her fingers, and I rounded the corner for Wawa, where I laid down two bucks for Saturday's *New York Post*. The young woman who rang my purchase wore rubber gloves. The security guard made sure there were no more than 15 customers in the store at a time. Outside Wawa, two malingerers, one of them large enough to play line for the Eagles, half asked-half demanded a donation. I showed them my empty palms and walked briskly past. One mumbled something that on another day might have elicited a response that could easily escalate to me getting my butt kicked and no weekday crowds on the street to break it up or call 9-1-1.

I forgot the corner boys soon enough, as I scurried through the glass canyon formed by the two Comcast towers to the market for shelter-in-place supplies. I'd been touched too intimately by an unclean beggar, someone, or something, the stuff of nightmares. And, forgive me for saying it, I calculated how long before I'd accomplish my errand and arrive home and scrub my hands raw. A week later, after having been sent home from work with the sniffles and a fever, and quite enjoyed the three-day sabbatical, watching life as we've known it morph into something still yet to be defined. I think occasionally of that bedraggled and forlorn woman on the street... and that's it, just think and wonder. Everything I write past that seems trite, and best left unsaid. She's there, I'm not, and God only knows why. Amen, or something.

# WE GOT THIS

JIM HAZLETT | Nurse Manager, Medical Intensive Care Unit

March 15, 2020, is a date that I will never forget. It was just another Sunday morning of sipping coffee, reading papers, and watching the talking heads argue about those from the political party other than theirs being complete idiots, criminals, and such. For weeks we had been hearing about this new virus that was sweeping across the world but had not really hit home yet. Well, that was about to change.

I am the Nurse Manager of a 25 bed Medical Intensive Care Unit at a university level quaternary care center in Center City Philadelphia, PA. We are used to dealing with the sickest of the sick in our region. We are well prepared and well-funded. Thank God. We had personal protective equipment (PPE). We had enough powered air-purifying respirators (PAPR) and hoods for each staff member working the shift. We had a plan to deal with a potential onslaught of these patients. Our motto has always been "We got this".

March 15, 2020, is the day that my charge nurse called me. This nurse can handle ANYTHING. She had orchestrated the evacuation of the unit for a major flood within it. She had been instrumental in assisting and caring for patients when the institution had a catastrophic system failure that required the evacuation of an entire patient tower. In the 10 years we had worked together, she had NEVER called me at home. When my phone rang, I knew something was up.

I was on the unit within an hour. We had taken 6 patients in respiratory failure of various states and there were 5 more names on the board, waiting for a bed. They were all exhibiting the symptoms of this new virus. By the time I left 12 hours later, we had intubated, medically paralyzed, proned, or lost all but one of them. They were 80-year-old nursing home patients, 60-year-old active individuals, 40-year-old marathon runners, and a 35-year-old woman who was 28 weeks pregnant. The enemy was inside the wire. We couldn't see him and he was winning.

As I drove home that night, exhausted, I cried. I was not crying because of a patient this time. I have done that a few times in my 22-year nursing career and my 30-year emergency services career. I did not cry out of fear. I have been in real life-threatening positions before. I have been well-trained to think through them. I cried in utter awe of the staff that I lead. They were scared to death. You could see it in their eyes. You could hear it in their voices. They were scared for themselves, their families, and their patients. I witnessed these nurses don all of their garb, stand in front of a patient's door, take a good deep breath to steel themselves, and go to work. Their knowledge that their skill and ability was the only thing that gave the human being on the other side of that door a shot at surviving was the force that pushed them in. It was absolutely incredible.

As I write this, we are 229 days into this feces pageant caused initially by COVID -19. I say it this way because in that same time, the world has seemed to come apart at the seams. No one can seem to turn off a news stream long enough to really think for themselves or analyze real data. Even the most trusted sources



have been subject to real scrutiny for their positions. For those at the bedside, there is no escape from stress and anxiety. We have feared for our lives as protests converged on our hospital. They blocked staff from entering or exiting. The staff have suffered verbal and physical attacks from the “peaceful” protesters in this city. They are on eggshells over their beliefs, questions, and opinions. Wondering if the next comment they make will result in the termination of their jobs if it doesn’t fit the script of the cancel culture. All while maintaining their PPE and social distancing at work so they are not the source of their family’s potential COVID infections. To put this into perspective, the average WWII combat veteran only saw 10 days of combat per year. My staff have seen an average of 98 days in the last 229. We are tired.

If this was a combat troop, as the leader I would know that our time off the line would be coming soon. The next troop would be on the way to allow my troops some physical and mental rest. As a leader, I would have time to consider the decisions made and learn from them. You can envision the movie scene where the grizzled and battered troops are walking down the hill with their thousand-yard stares and cigarettes just hanging from their lips burning as the new troops look on in horror wondering what is before them. Well, there are no new troops coming. For most of America’s hospitals, they barely have enough nursing resources to care for what we have under normal conditions. There are no reservists to call up. We are all we got.

Compounding the troubles of our situation is the realization that hospitals are businesses. Businesses need to make money. COVID-19 does not make money for hospitals, procedures do. Our system carefully weighed their options and slowly brought procedures back into the hospital. Thankfully, the procedures came back as the number of inpatient COVID patients dropped rather significantly. We have gotten much better at understanding the PPE needed to stay safe and how to care for this patient population. Now we need to deal with the families and visitors that are so needed for our patients. Who, when, how many and for how long were all real questions for the staff that just got used to keeping each other on track with PPE. Now we need to teach the visitors and pray they follow the instructions. This was not going to be a democracy either. Wear the mask or get out. No debate.

As businesses, many of the hospitals are now making business decisions on how to keep their doors open. Their revenue streams that rely heavily on the reimbursement of elective procedures were completely cut off for almost a full quarter. They are making decisions that are difficult to many in this trying economic time for all. They are not offering raises. They are cutting benefits. They are cutting pension contributions. These men and women who were hailed as heroes just a short two hundred days ago are now being told that their total compensation is being cut for the coming year. I would call it a gut punch, but I think that is aiming too high.

The threat of the next wave has become overwhelming. The number of COVID-positive inpatients has remained low, but when we get a blip, you can see the staff begin to brace themselves. Not all of them can continue. There is a reason that those troops were pulled off the line every so often. We are cracking. The constant threat to not just ourselves, but all of our loved ones is too much for some to take.

The sustained removal of support systems in these nurses' lives by not being able to be with family and friends for extended periods of time is affecting their ability to cope and to care. Many have felt like the village leper. Friends and family are afraid to be with you. Some have had older family afraid to answer phone calls from them in fear of getting the virus. Like so many veterans have said, you just won't understand.

As a leader of nurses, I know I am not alone in this battle. So, what can we do to protect and preserve this precious resource of nursing talent that we all have? What can we do when staff just want to scream from the pressures described above or the countless other stresses that life brings? What if I am the one that just needs to scream?

I can only tell you what I have done so far and listen to hear what others may have done or are doing:

- Start with being as present as possible. I was on the floor as much as humanly possible those first few months. I was in the rooms. I was lucky enough to have access to Zoom rather quickly. This allowed me to hold staff meetings weekly at a time when the greatest number of staff were likely awake, available, or working. Where has this been all my life? Staff were able to hear each other's concerns and ask questions that all could hear or answer. I was certainly not the guy with all the answers since the answers kept changing daily.
- Be honest. I had more staff relay to me how much they appreciated my honesty over the situation. If I did not know something or was wrong on something, I admitted it. I looked for the staff's ideas on situations or I admitted that some enterprise decisions may not fit perfectly for our situations. This communication created a space for more questions and comments on being fearful. This in turn spurred other staff to confirm that they were feeling similarly. As this became our norm, it allowed for the non-clinical conversations to occur. We need to listen to each other try to understand respect others' positions. I don't know if this is the right approach or it makes me a horrible person. It's where I am going to start from though.
- Scream when you have to and dance whenever you can. I put on the COVID-15. I became very good friends with Mr. Daniels, Mr. Jameson, and Mr. Yuengling. I started smoking again. I am still scared to death that one of the staff members will die from being exposed to this horrible virus. I know I would feel responsible for it. How would I deal with that? How could I lead after a perceived failure like that? It is one of the many deep dark rabbit holes that my mind went down while trying to deal with all of this. My new best friends were not helping me and I needed to find a center. I found it in my wife and family at home. I found it in my staff at work. We had to laugh. As dark as the days were, we had to find a way to laugh at this crazy situation we were in. Staff meetings had their serious times, but we also loosened up on the protocol. Viewing staff in their homes with kids running by, dogs barking, or seeing them sip a glass of wine during the meeting allowed

the meetings to take that different tone. It was incredible! I found that the information that I passed during those meetings was heard so much more than the stuffy quick hit staff meetings that typically happened. We could all see the humanity in each other's lives and it helped.

- Get out of here! Throughout this pandemic response, I never once cancelled one vacation shift that was previously granted. I did not decrease the number of vacation shifts that were granted every schedule. I knew that the staff needed their time to recharge now more than ever and they totally responded. The staff covered each other, pulled some extra shifts, and appreciated the fact that they each would have their opportunity. We had some tough shifts, but we got through.
- Keep an eye on each other and get them off the line! There are many opportunities within the healthcare and nursing communities to find someone with whom to speak. It's not a failure of anyone to say they need help. We all probably could use a few sessions to get out some of the demons that have been with us since March. You can't help others until you get yourself right. Some staff fought it. Some nearly collapsed in my arms. Some still have not returned. Some may never.

I don't know what wave we are on in this pandemic, but I hope that the lessons I have learned will prepare me for what is next to come. As any leader does, I think my staff is the absolute best in the world and we will be ready. What I know is that nurses across this globe will be the ones that will make or break the response to whatever is coming. I also know we got this.

# LIFE ALWAYS CHANGES; AND THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO BUT CHANGE

JACOB J. HAILEY | Staff Chaplain

As 2020 approached, I was eagerly anticipating the arrival of the countdown to the “New Year”. 2020 represented something unique - the clear vision signified by 2020 vision on the Eye Chart and the excitement of that year in the calendar. Little did we know as we celebrated the beginning of 2020 and the hope for a special new year for all of us that the world that we would soon face the unimaginable.

By the spring, the season that offers new growth and revitalization, we were faced with the suffering and deaths of millions of people in the world from the COVID pandemic - something no one on earth had ever faced before. The disease stunned the world. It changed us all. Our lives and our sense of safety and security just in living and breathing the air were gone! The pandemic presented itself in such a way that, as the days of 2020 went by, it was absolutely clear that all humanity was aware that our planet—far and wide—was actually much smaller than we knew: A sneeze on the other side of the planet could generate an illness right in our own backyard. For me, it was more evident than ever that all the people of the world are so much more interconnected than we had ever considered before. Truly, the pandemic could have signaled the near extinction of everyone if it were not for the resilience and the cooperation of humankind.

At Jefferson, I saw the fear in the faces of our co-workers as our interdisciplinary team worked, under the greatest of stress, to care for the patients under our care. The care for our patients, their families, and each other was extraordinary - and truly a testament to what we as individuals in a community of shared caring can do.

The 2020 that I had anticipated so much was surely an unprecedented and a difficult year. But, looking back, the pandemic brought out the best in us. For me, the pandemic changed my way of seeing the world, others, and myself. So I guess 2020 did give me 2020 vision.

# IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

MOHAMED ELMASRY | Undergraduate Student

*The trials you encounter will introduce you to your strengths.—Epictetus*

Although we all like to think that 2020 was “the year that everything changed forever,” my story starts a few months before January 1, 2020—5 months and 27 days to be exact.

July 5, 2020, is a day that is permanently etched into my memory. This was the day I almost lost my father. I remember getting a phone call from my sister while I was waiting at the doctor’s office for a physical. She sounded frantic, yet calm. The words she uttered brought goosebumps to my skin and chills down my spine as I felt my heart immediately sink to the floor. “Get home QUICKLY, Dad had a seizure, I called the ambulance.”

The world went silent, nothing mattered but getting home as fast as I could to be with my father. Every moment we have shared, good and bad, raced through my mind as I left the doctor’s office running home in the July heat. Hyperventilating and teary-eyed, after what seemed like an eternity, I made it home by the time the ambulance arrived. Seeing my father, who I see as a strong and inspiring person, in a helpless state on a gurney broke me. I told my sister to go with him in the ambulance while I waited for our mother to come and take my younger sister and me to the Emergency Room. At the moment, nothing made sense anymore, the world became a mirage in the desert. In the emergency room, the physician told my family and I that our father had an AVM (arteriovenous malformation) which caused him to have a seizure, he was in a medically-induced coma, and that he would be transferred to the neuro-intensive care unit for further treatment.

The nights were sleepless and the days were uncertain as we waited for the sedative to wear off. Three days later he began to wake up, as if he never went anywhere. The feeling was beyond anything I could explain, but at that moment I truly felt blessed to be around my family, all one unit again. This experience taught me to never take anything for granted, anything can be taken from you faster than the blink of an eye. It has also shown me that without my family, I am nothing. Like a sturdy skyscraper, they are my support beams that keep me standing tall with my head high. Life is a gift that some of us forget is not a forever thing. If this scenario has taught me anything, it is to live life to the fullest and take risks that are worth taking; tomorrow is not a given and none of us are immortal, not even one hundred years from now.

# HONOR WALK

## Yeo Writing Prize Honorable Mention

KATHLEEN FURIN | Writing Tutor, Academic Success Center; Adjunct Professor

The hospital lobby at 3 am is a desolate place, manned by a guard who waved us into the COVID screening pod. This seemed useless—after a year of no contact we’ve spent the last few days in the ICU, crying into shoulders and holding each other tight as we absorbed the news: traumatic brain injury, irreversible coma, no chance of revival. When I’d clasped my fingers around my dear friend Xavier’s algid hand earlier that week my heart confirmed what my mind had been trying to process—X was already gone. We stood in the lobby, a circle of ravaged faces—wife, son, mother, best friends. X’s baby grandson wavered between playfulness and fitful sleep as we waited to be escorted to the ICU. I followed the group blindly, still in the process of translating my friend into something to be harvested, a word that made me think of my grandfather’s hands, tilling fertile earth. What’s kept us going this past week is the thought of the people receiving happy calls, our tragedy another family’s treasure. I recite the organs like a prayer—heart, kidney, kidney, liver, lung—just one. We’ve come for an honor walk, a ritual celebrating organ donors, allowing mourning families a rite of passage. After the organs have been extracted, a process which can take several days, hospital staff line up to pay respects to the loved one’s body on its final journey. It sounds poetic, but no ritual can alleviate the nightmare of a loss like ours. But at least there was a ritual.

Over the past year millions of bereft families have grieved losses due to the pandemic and not been honored at all. Even our most crucial grieving rituals were disrupted. In addition, medical staff were overwhelmed, and throughout all of this horror the magnitude of the pandemic was downplayed by many. There may be no good way to process grief, but in a year in which so many people died that overall life expectancy dropped by 1.3 years, it felt like grief abounded, a grief bullied and kicked about by selfishness and outright lies. It’s hard to imagine future history students reading about this era and drawing any conclusions other than a general understanding of Americans as dishonorable.

Yet in the midst of all of this, staff showed up to honor X. We’d been told to create a playlist and bring a picture of him to place on his bed. We dug up pictures that tantalized us into believing they could draw the focus to the loving man he’d been, beyond the outline of his broken form under the thin blue blanket.

His mother shares a story—when he was a child X came home from preschool and said he needed to learn every language so he could talk to everyone. That anecdote perfectly captures the man he was, a loving man who always sought to help. One brownish-yellow photo shows him as a baby, reaching for his dog. In my favorite photo you see his profile as he raises a glass, toasting us at our wedding. We look so happy, this devastating day so far in our future as to be unimaginable.

Organ donation is brutally complicated. We'd had conversations about it with X in the past, over many years of best-friend conversations about everything, sobering up over pancakes at 4 am, wringing meaning out of every moment. We laughed through hard conversations. What would you do if you only had a month to live? As we aged and our dogs got sick, we talked occasionally, about "pulling the plug," such a simple euphemism for such a complex process. The decision wasn't hard, but the logistics were, and we were reluctant students of anything which interfered with the geometry of our grief, held captive, at first, by the still-beating heart of X's hull. As nurses and social workers meandered into his room the agonizing reality sunk in. At first it seemed kindest to just let him go, not worry about his organs. But X was a connector; what better way to connect than to literally mend himself into people, cell by cell, a viscous patchwork of flesh, nucleus, heartbreak, and hope? We took deep breaths and braced ourselves.

The night of the walk we were shepherded to the ICU, where we waited for his body that magically, grotesquely still breathed, an autumn field empty of anything that mattered. We cried as we waited, laughed a bit, at old stories, joked about the organ recipients— would they suddenly be more hilarious? Would they feel an urge to dance bachata? When they wheeled him back into the room he still wasn't completely disconnected, and the comforting whoosh-wheeze of his breath was disconcerting. An announcement trilled over the loudspeaker. "An honor walk is starting. All who can please line up." People began to line the halls, standing respectfully. As the technician disconnected him, alarms beeped violently. I knew intellectually that he'd been gone for over 5 days now, but the sound of that alarm shook me anyway.

The playlist was a good idea because a silent walk would have been brutal. Still, it felt incongruous to be listening to upbeat rhythms of salsa music while we made our tragic procession down hallways lined with solemn staff. I don't know if the hospital staff looked at the nice picture or kept their eyes averted; I was near the back of the procession, and what I noticed when I walked by was that everyone had their eyes down. That bothered me even as I understood it. Eye contact would not have offered palliation to the ocean of our grief, yet still I craved it. Many of us in our group sobbed; those who didn't walked woodenly, every step a contraction of death's womb, a labor into another dimension, an afterlife, perhaps, if there is one. Sometimes there is nothing to do but look away even as you show up, arms folded across your chest, chin tipped towards your own heartbeat of grief, the things you've lost and will never get over. But the staff showed up, and their presence alone was a comfort as we made our way to the final door. I couldn't hear anything but our playlist, but I felt certain that even if they didn't look at us surely people were whispering a blessing, saying a kind word, or perhaps offering a silent prayer to whatever god they prayed to as we said our final goodbyes.

My husband and I hugged everyone one last time and separated from the group, staggering out into a blue dawn, seeking sleep, forgetfulness, just as so many of us likely want to forget so many aspects of the year that was. And yet. In what felt so often like a year of dishonor it gives me comfort to know that students of history may also learn that in the midst of all the divisiveness, lack of care, and chaos, there were honorable people like my friend Xavier, there were honorable people like the medical teams and other hospital staff who worked nonstop, there

were kind people who sent food, cards and prayers to strangers... just like there were strangers willing to line the brooding halls in the middle of a dark spring night to say goodbye to someone they'd never known outside of the outlines of his generosity, his last gifts borne out of his final breath.



# PANDEMIC TIMES: NO MATCH FOR UNITY

OBINNA OKORIE | Nursing Student

Amidst the beginning of COVID-19, the United States was fighting not only one pandemic, but also another that has plagued this nation for hundreds of years: racism. The COVID-19 pandemic halted any and all in-person activities for the safety of each community member and to mitigate the spread of this infectious disease. Almost everyone was stuck inside, forced to quarantine and divert their method of performing their daily activities, like work or school. I was ending my senior year of high school when my school district decided to cancel all in-person classes, and it left me devastated. I had not known it then, but that was the last time I saw many people from high school. A much more pressing event also occurred during this time: the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the resurfacing of the events leading to the death of Ahmaud Arbery. These events left the nation in uproar with consecutive nights of violence, looting, and unfortunately, even more acts of racism and death. How was it that the United States was dealing with a virus so easily spread by being in close proximity with someone, yet also dealing with racism from the hands of those sworn under oath to protect and serve?

I had been a member and a leader of the African American Culture Club (AACC) for the four years of attending my high school, Cherry Hill High School East in Cherry Hill New Jersey. I had become less active in the club when schools shut down because it was my senior year, and all of the fun events were taken away; it left a lot of us in a state of depression. However, seeing the events that took place and the consecutive days of violence, I knew that I had to do something to advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement. It had to be done in a way that would alleviate the tension held between the black community and law enforcement, all while conforming to the CDC guidelines for protection. One can imagine the difficulty of organizing a safe event to spread awareness. It was a task too strenuous for one person to do alone, so I messaged the other leaders of the AACC, who were all rising seniors at the time, to get their help in organizing our event. I credit them so much for stepping up to organize the event when I was still feeling discontent from the remainder of my senior year being taken away.

In June of 2020, the AACC organized a peaceful, student-led march from a market square to the Cherry Hill Public Library. We chose that location as the center of knowledge in Cherry Hill; a symbolic place for people to welcome new ideas and understand each other. In order to actually organize this community event, we had to receive aid from the law enforcement for them to close down some roads and provide protection, if needed. They were more than happy to assist us, and I felt it would be beneficial for the community to see the AACC working together with law enforcement to peacefully protest police brutality and racism.

We spread the message of the protest as much as we could, given the circumstances of not being in-person at school anymore. Some teachers played their part and

posted the flyers on social media pages for other community members to see. We did not expect a large turnout because people were still stuck inside, but we were still hoping for the best.

On the day of the protest, everyone met at the market square. When I first turned into the parking lot, I thought there was a concert going on because of the number of people who showed up. The law enforcement told us that the crowd amassed to over 200 people. It was extremely shocking and exciting to see all of the support we gathered from the community for this protest. It was even more joyous to see everyone doing so while wearing their masks and distancing themselves as much as they could. The club leaders held a large banner and commenced the walk to the library chanting "Black lives matter!" and "Say her name: Breonna Taylor!" all while passersby were honking their horns and raising their fists in sign of support.

Once we arrived at the library, each of the leaders gave their own short speech on different topics like police brutality, lack of diversity in the school district, lack of education on black history, etc. All in all, the protest had an amazing turnout, with an even better outcome.

Shortly after, we received word that the superintendent would mandate an African American history course for graduation at the high schools in that school district. The Cherry Hill School District would become the first in New Jersey to mandate that course. We received news coverage and commemorations from peers, but also denouncement from others. We did not let the hate deter us from pursuing this goal. The support we received from the hundreds of community members who took the time out of their day to publicly support the Black Lives Matter movement significantly outweighed the opposition we've received from others.

Even though I didn't get the other high school amenities like senior trip, prom, or an actual graduation, I still partook in an event that has made a significant change and provided a stepping stone for many more projects to come. Going to Disney or having senior prom would have been nice, but I ended my time in high school with lasting effect, one that will affect many students in the near future.

# AWAKENING

ADRIENNE LEE | Medical Student

In March 2020, I was in my last third-year clerkship in medical school when the pandemic ended the rotation three weeks early. I bought a last-minute plane ticket to California to visit my family for the first time in five years. Most of my classmates in the class of 2021 definitively moved into fourth year as much as they could, given the great uncertainty about what their final year would look like during a pandemic. I joined them in the fourth-year orientation course, but I knew that I would stay behind to repeat three rotations from third year that I received a conditional pass or fail in.

These academic struggles were not new. I had muddled through the first two years, barely passing quizzes and exams (at least it felt like that; I didn't look at my exam grades out of anxious fear) and failing one exam. I barely passed Step 1. I moved to Delaware in April 2019 for my third-year rotations; the entire year was difficult emotionally as I lacked a support system (and a car for the first two months). Many of my clerkship evaluations commented on a lack of interest or focus, and I felt that in myself. Like some of my attending physicians, I began to question whether medicine was right for me.

During third-year, my personal issues that I had intermittently buried and hid away for years bubbled to the surface: the weight of years of aimless wandering in my 20s from one career idea to the next; desperately desiring yet lacking a feeling of true connection with others; uncertainty about who I am and what are my values; and mounting school loans. I was also maladaptively numbing myself from my feelings by avoiding or binging on food. As hard as it was to admit that I could not do things alone, I realized I needed to find help.

With the encouragement of a therapist and a registered dietician, I began to try to open myself up to the idea of a more vibrant life. I started to do things that would help me become my true self: use flash cards (own the knowledge to help others with their health), spend money on food and clothes (delight in life), bake (infuse my soul with love and share it with others), exercise less (move for the love of moving and aim for physical longevity through sustainable exercise).

In summer 2020, I successfully made up two rotations. In November, I returned to Philadelphia for my internal medicine remediation course. This would be the big one, the test of whether I was "good enough" to enter fourth year. I threw my heart and soul into that month, and I surprisingly even began to enjoy medicine. It helped me do well on Step 2. In the end, however, I did not pass internal medicine.

Before Christmas, the Committee on Student Promotions recommended that I repeat my third year. This felt like rock-bottom. I cried. I felt humiliated, ashamed, numb. My parents remained supportive, but risking losing their approval and love pained me. For the next 4 months, I hid, ignored my friends, fell back into unhelpful coping mechanisms, and did not think about medicine at all.

Those next 4 months were also a period of reflection and rebuilding. Through therapy, long solitary walks, and listening to hundreds of moving podcast episodes about life and relationships, I gradually realized that my issues were interconnected and were, at their core, issues of self-worth. I had been afraid to dare to set high standards for myself in case I did not reach those goals. I was consumed with a narrow and impossible-to-achieve definition of perfection. I equated being wrong with failure, which I defined in a very serious, frightening way. I inaccurately saw this failure as a representation of my self-worth, which kept me from opportunities to learn and grow. Within medicine, this meant that I was afraid to show my attendings, residents, and fellow students that I was imperfect.

I also dared not treat myself kindly by spending money on food or clothing that made me feel good. I dared not allow myself to view my body as a vessel in which I could do happy things, including eating delicious food and moving my body in ways that moved my soul, rather than something to please others with. I dared not speak my mind, feel my feelings, or be my true self because I wanted to please other people and live for them before I lived for myself. For years, I had been stuffing everything inside an extremely tiny receptacle. Living in such a very small, restricted, suffocating way made it hard to breathe and created anxiety in my head, heart, and soul.

During this time, I also began to know my family for the first time as an adult and grew closer to them. For the first time in five years, we ate meals together, and I baked and cooked for them nearly every day. I learned their stories. Observing my parents in their daily lives helped me begin to understand that they are flawed people who tried their best to raise me as well as they knew how. My sister and I ate good food, went to the beach, loved on the cat, and created snack and clothing review videos. I took care of my grandmother who had suffered a stroke that left her dependent for all her activities of daily living. It was difficult to leave California in April 2021. I had grown accustomed to a quiet, calm life with my family and did not want to leave the relationships I developed with them, especially my grandmother. I did not want to reenter the maelstrom of third-year. But I had to, regardless of whether I wanted to.

Two months into my second third-year, I feel very different from a year or two ago. I have a greater sense of purpose. I feel more settled in myself because I know myself better. Things make more sense; I feel less lost. And when I do, I want to speak up and ask for help because I no longer want to miss out on things or set myself back. I'm grateful for my days and my life, mostly because the various relationships I experience with people around me, even if they are momentary, help me thrive. I realize that everyone is just figuring it out. Also importantly, I made a deliberate decision to devote myself to the work of becoming the best doctor I can.

I continue to work on these things. I still struggle to treat myself with the kindness I would treat a friend, or even a stranger. However, greater self-awareness helps me practice adjusting my daily habits in order to lead a more balanced, contented life. Therapeutic work, reflection, and writing have accelerated my growth in the last year; I have come to love spending time with and reflecting on my thoughts and those of others.

My therapist once said, "Feel your feelings and be vulnerable." I wish this attitude of contemplation and reflection were more normalized and prevalent in our lives and cultures. I firmly believe that the most important thing in life is quality communion and relationships with others. We truly cannot be vibrantly alive by ourselves.

I am awakening, and I sense that there is still a large part of me that is yet to come alive.

# THE LONG GOODBYE

KARL G. BAUER | Audio/Visual Technician

My mom passed early in the AM of March 26, 2020. It happened in slow motion. My mom was in a home where she was suffering from dementia. Her journey through this wretched disease started in 2018 on her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday. When the pandemic appeared, my mom had been a resident for a little over three years. Throughout those years I saw her slow decline. We visited often and tried taking her out on our daily trips. We took her to restaurants, malls, parks, and even family gatherings. That slowly came to an end due to her illness, but throughout it, my family and I met other residents, and we all sort of looked out for each other. A sort of familiarity took shape, and we became each other's caregivers.

When March came around, I was told my family and I could not visit due to an illness on the ward. It started as a gastric ailment, but then the calls came about organ failure and that Mom was not doing well. They wanted to know if I would allow her to have meds so she would be comfortable. Long ago we all planned for this; Mom did not want us to make the hard decisions. As the pandemic became more and more prevalent, we became concerned, and yet our not seeing her probably was what exacerbated her decline. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, I requested to see her, and my wife and I saw her for the last time. She was semi-conscious and looked very tired. For several hours I sat and talked to her. I hugged her and told her of all the great things she did and that I was so happy to call her my mom. This one thing made her passing bearable. In the months to come there would be more deaths, only this time from COVID. I was told her entire floor was devastated by it.

It was as if my mom knew something bad was coming. Her life was her family and if she could not see them she wanted no more of it. We buried Mom in New York City at a time when deaths were skyrocketing. We saw many funerals that day and the restrictions of only having the immediate family at the funeral and cemetery made it feel surreal. We were in and out of the city within a few hours. It was April 1<sup>st</sup> and it felt like a very bad April Fools' joke. The hearses lined up at cemeteries and the cemetery workers were doing overtime to help bury many loved ones.

The funeral home got in touch with a pastor who called me the night before to talk about my mom and learn about her. It was this conversation that was most cathartic for me. I told him about my mom and how she lost her parents at an early age; how she grew up during World War 2 in the heart of darkness in Nazi Germany; how she struggled to get back there and make a life for herself in the country where she was born. It felt good to tell the pastor, and when we finally met at the gravesite, he had the nicest of words and was very comforting even though we wore masks and remained 6 feet apart. It wasn't COVID that felled my mom. It was loneliness and heartbreak that brought us to that cemetery, yet COVID was an accomplice in her death. I wondered how many more deaths not attributed to COVID would be inseparable from the effects of the pandemic.

In the following days there would be more and more deaths. Moms, dads, grandparents, and loved ones were ripped from us, and as the days progressed

it all felt like a bad dream. I began to miss the conversations Mom and I would have. I filmed my mom as I interviewed her way back in 1995. It was a project that I started when my dad passed away that year. I asked the questions that I was curious about. Back then she was not ill, and she gave me an account of how it all started. How she and my dad met. How she and her brother struggled to get by on their own, and how she struggled to even conceive me. It was a project I shot on film, and I wanted to preserve it for future generations, even though at the time my sons were not yet born. During the following years I would also take photo albums that my mom made and go through them with her and ask her questions. I'd record these sessions on video for future reference. My idea came from when I was a student at Brooklyn College, and we had an assignment to record survivors of the Holocaust for the "Shoah Project". It was only after my mom passed that I began compiling the elements I had into a short film that I entitled simply "Irene".

I still miss our talks and taking her on drives. She loved going out with her boy for a drive, and maybe a bite to eat. She loved her brother and sister-in-law who lived nearby. They visited her often in the home where they brought some snacks from Dunkin Donuts. But the conversations were the thing I missed. Even through the dementia there was clarity—how we talked and shared each other's stories.

It's all silent now, and I'm afraid of all the missed stories we'll never hear. This pandemic has shown us how vulnerable we all are and how dependent we are on each other. I only hear the silence yet making the short film for my mom helped me come to terms with her death. At 93 she gave a lot, but there was more, and she fought until the very end. As I talked to her on her deathbed, I told her how much she meant to me, and I realized I was given a gift then. A gift of saying good-bye. So many did not have that gift, and for that we will continue to suffer.

We must overcome and never forget how dependent on one another we are. Let us never take that for granted again. For if we don't, we have learned nothing. Irene means "peace", and ironically it is that which she gave me—just that peace. I hope we all find peace in the coming years.

# THE DRS. THERESA AND CHARLES YEO WRITING PRIZE: THIRD PLACE

## *BEING A BLACK NURSE DURING TWO PANDEMICS*

CHANEL HART | Clinical Nurse Coordinator, Family & Community Medicine

Who knew that, in the year 2020, “I can’t breathe” would change the world forever? At first, it was the cry of the people, mainly African American or Black like me. It was a cry of injustice at the hands of the police but later turned to the cries of the people regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation. “I can’t breathe” was but an ignored whisper from the lips of George Floyd, but there was no ignoring the screams of “I can’t breathe” that came from the millions of men and women who gasped for air after being infected with COVID-19. In the midst of it all stood me, the black nurse in a predominately white profession who had to help the sick both physically and mentally while being heartbroken at the loss of another black man at the hands of the police.

I listened to colleagues say, “don’t treat him like a martyr.” Yet, he was not a martyr by choice but a man murdered by chance. His death started a movement that started a rage, that began to burn so hot and so bright that the pandemic of racism that has plagued this country for centuries no longer would be ignored. At the same time, the arrogance of man proved itself again too much and the universe answered in kind. It felt almost biblical. When Mr. Floyd cried out for his mother, every mother cried to the heavens on behalf of their sons. It was like God answered by taking the breaths of so many. I noticed the louder hateful voices rang promoting hate, the louder the cries of “I can’t breathe” rose until you could not decipher whether it was a chant for anti-racism or fear from those afraid to die.

In the midst of it all was me, a little black nurse who works in a predominantly white profession, put in a position to educate the oppressors on why their actions are oppressive—while also taking control of the fear to treat the sick that surrounded everyone. How I did both and kept my sanity still amazes me to this day. Being a nurse during parallel pandemics did not afford me the time to be afraid, but I was. It didn’t allow me to second guess myself, but I did. I was not allowed to show weakness, yet I felt broken every day. It was to the point that I, too, could not breathe. What choice did I have? None—I am a black woman with a son, I am a black nurse in a white world. More importantly, I could change the world if given an opportunity. So, since no one gave me one, I took one.

When I had to be a nurse, I gave 100%. I treated my patients with respect and dignity. It did not matter whether they tested positive or negative; they were afraid and my job was to be there for them. I listened to the fear, educated the ignorant,



mourned those that could no longer fight, and cheered those that survived. All the while, I was afraid to catch the virus because I am immunocompromised. I was afraid to take it home to my family. Above all, I was afraid of dying and my family having to say goodbye over a tablet. But, in the words of Maya Angelou, "Still I rise." So, each morning, I got up, took a deep breath and breathed.

More than a year has gone by and I have learned true resilience through faith. I have always been spiritual even when I was not religious, but 2020 taught me grace, renewed hope, humility, and recharged my humanity. The most important lesson I learned is knowing one's value. Not all value is monetary, but rather what you bring to an organization, community, or group. During this year, I have joined Jefferson Community and Family Medicine's Social Justice committee; the value that I bring to this group is being unapologetically me. I will not allow the past culture to ignore its cultural bias or microaggressive behaviors any longer. I am not afraid to be shunned or ostracized because I have right and wrong on my side. If we have seen nothing else during these pandemics, we see the cries of the righteous will no longer be silent.

Taking off the mask of oppressive behavior does not mean belittling or attacking a person's character; it means putting the spotlight on the behavior and charging those that claim to want change to address it. Removing the mask and seeing people for who they are opens a conversation, hopefully a truthful conversation, about behavior they may not even know they are demonstrating. I have learned not everyone that acts in a racist manner is racist, just ignorant. It is left up to people like me to educate and inform so that they can choose whether to continue the offensive behavior. It also allows me to make informed decisions if this is someone I want to know. After all, tolerance and acceptance go both ways.

Also, through faith, I have started to heal. The very idea that none of us would come out of these pandemics without some form of PTSD is laughable. But accepting our biases and fears is a start. I know that we live in a world that judges based on the color of one's skin. My future in health care may very well be limited because of someone's belief that I am less than my white peer or afraid that I may outshine them. I have to teach my children how to interact with the police just to get home safely. I have to pray daily thanking God that my family is whole, but this is all okay.

I have survived a pandemic that stole the breaths of millions. I have survived a pandemic of hate that stole the breaths of black men and women throughout the country. For so many who have been silenced, I have gained a voice so strong and so clear on behalf of my patients and my race that my mere whisper will shake foundations.





# COMPANION PLANTING DURING A PANDEMIC

ANDY ZEIGER | Medical Student

Growing alongside other people, I will argue, is how we humans are designed to spend our lives. We are mirrors from our earliest moments. Not only do we reflect others' behaviors and values, but also we internalize them ourselves and incorporate them into our own lives. We also do not always think to choose who we will reflect and who we will internalize.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 to 2021 fundamentally altered the reflections in all of our lives. The pandemic quieted some reflections; it strengthened others. And in my case, the pandemic resulted in a completely new reflection that permanently changed me.

March 2020 was when the vernal freshness of spring was beginning to descend upon my first year of medical school at Sidney Kimmel Medical College. The crucible that was my first year was in its waning months, and yet, the pandemic grew in seriousness each week. Shutdowns were starting, and we were glued to the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard.

We all had the moment when the pandemic became real. For me, it was during a March 5th meeting between students and faculty. Academic Affairs Dean Dr. Herrine communicated that there were already weeks of preparations. He said that a contingency plan was being built in case the situation worsened. The meeting was in-person, held in a large classroom with numerous attendees.

A few days later, Spring Break started and I went to the Philadelphia Flower Show with my brother. People were starting to wear masks and the crowds were thinning. On March 11th, the NBA announced the suspension of the 2019-2020 season and sports leagues everywhere soon followed. The world was shutting down. The entire academic curricula started shifting overnight and medical practice was being tested.

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, we received an email from our school president and our medical college dean. Dr. Klasko and Dr. Tykocinski wrote:

"While we have not had any COVID-19 cases at Thomas Jefferson University to date, we are faced with making difficult decisions related to what has become a global pandemic. Our number-one priority is what is best for you. We also need to do what is best socially, including mitigating any spread of COVID-19 and minimizing exposure for our campus community, your families and the broader community. Therefore, we have made the difficult decision, as have many other colleges and universities, to suspend in-person classes and transition to online classes for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester".

Phrases like “exponential growth” and “worst in a century” were being thrown around by our leaders. The hope was that we were taking measured individual and institutional actions, such as social distancing and business closings, to halt the progress of the pandemic.

Messaging we received from our administration can be best summarized by Dr. Majdan, our clinical skills Professor, who said on March 13th: “I’m an old army major—I want to be on the ramparts!” For many around the world, the pandemic instead would be an isolating experience. But for me, it would be the least isolated I have felt in my entire life.

I met Sarah early in first year during a Case Base Learning small group (*note: the name Sarah has been fabricated by the author to maintain anonymity*). We sat on opposite ends of the table on the first day and everyone knows that you sign a contract with the seat you take on the first day of a new class. From November to February, we were acquaintances passing each other unknowingly, like ships in the night. In late February, Jefferson hosted its annual JeffHope Ball to raise money for the SKMC student-led clinic. There, Sarah made a move on me, and we immediately folded into each other’s lives as if we were always meant to.

We spent the next few weeks seeing each other nearly every day and staying in constant communication. We were buzzing with excitement as Spring Break approached. Businesses were shuttering, restaurants were dark, streets were empty, but, truthfully, we were in our own enchanted world. As the pandemic intensity grew, traveling to each other’s apartments felt like we were unnecessarily exposing people to the virus. So, we had to make a decision: move in together or temporarily stop seeing each other.

After just three weeks of being together, we made the obvious choice. She moved into my 300-square-foot studio apartment. For the remaining 2 months of the semester, we studied hard, tended to our indoor garden, ate well, basked in the golden-hour light, drank plenty, laughed to tears, stayed up late, and slept in whenever we could. We built a bench and painted it with acrylic we found on the street. We took remote exams; me at my desk, her in the bathroom. Over Zoom we celebrated my birthday, played drinking games with friends, and attended Passover seders hosted by both of our families at the same time. It was such light, easy fun. Our relationship, although embryonic, felt like a 3000-year-old tree with innumerable branches.

While spring, summer, fall, and winter came and went, the pandemic never truly softened. As Sarah and I spent more time together, essentially sequestered from the world, I noticed that I was changing. I was singing more than I ever had before. I was exposing and addressing my vulnerabilities. I was enjoying life more than I ever had. In effect, I was becoming a fuller expression of myself. I felt like a flower in full bloom.

Sarah and I were like two seeds sowed in one raised garden bed. We were planted together during the pandemic and we developed cooperatively. Companion planting, one of the oldest gardening traditions, is the idea that different species of plant may thrive more when paired together. For instance, planting a fragrant

basil or a bright flower close to a tomato vine may confuse or repel insects that are looking to munch on the fruit. There is also the “Three Sisters Method”, developed by indigenous groups of North America, of planting corn, beans, and squash together. The corn provided a natural trellis for the beans, the beans fixed nitrogen in the soil, and the squash’s great leaves prevented weeds from growing.

Companion planting teaches us that we exist in many ecosystems; nobody exists in a vacuum. The pandemic passed through unknown millions of families like a wildfire, leaving destruction in its path. But for me, thankfully, the pandemic carried multiple blessings. It helped me find my companion and it revealed a wonderful truth. Our individual growth is intrinsically tied to the people around us. But as humans, we have some control over whom we choose to grow with. There are people out there who can help us grow better and be the fullest expression of ourselves—we just have to find them. So, we must ask ourselves: what do I need from others to be the fullest expression of myself? And further, what can I offer others to help create the best environment for their growth?

# COVID PERSPECTIVES

DAVID NEY | Medical Student

In March of 2020, a medical student was confined to his home due to new restrictions put in place meant to minimize the deadly spread of the COVID-19 virus. During those first days, weeks, and months living within the pandemic, his perspective changed. The world that he had grown familiar with had changed. The once crowded streets he walked along were now deserted. There were subtle, but unmistakable differences: his pockets were now stuffed with small vials of hand sanitizer and multiple masks he used while biking in the winter. These were the tools, he was told, with which he could preserve his life. He now noticed danger where there previously had been only groceries, packages, doorknobs, strangers. The spread of the virus changed his perspective: routine things sprouted life-threatening particles that infected the elements of his life.

We all have this experience from time to time, when the familiar becomes unfamiliar, like a traveler appreciating a foreign train-car or a child examining a new toy. We all know the experience of discovering new things that are familiar to others. The pandemic forced that unfamiliarity into our homes and disrupted the familiarity with our day-to-day lives. We moved out, changed cities, reorganized furniture, cleaned, cried, and coughed if we had to. There are only so many things to notice every day, but life at the start of the pandemic was like looking at the world from outer space because it showed us that our lives could become startlingly plain, frighteningly precarious, and all at once threatened by forces too small to see but impossible to ignore.

A change in perspective can completely change the way we look at the world. The world from outer space, for example, looks completely different from the world from an airplane or a skyscraper. A microscope turned onto your skin might make your cheeks appear lunar. A virus, too small to appreciate with the human eye, can shift the balance between life and death. Life can be short, the world can be small, and as the pandemic's curtain shrouded so many of life's distractions, I focused on the virus. Perhaps because death appeared in a new way all at once, I forgot old grudges and forged new friendships. Or maybe it's because when I was forced to stay in my house, I looked inwards and outwards and noticed things in myself and others I had missed. I did not realize how many people and things I interacted with every day until, suddenly, each of those interactions became a risky transmissible event. When the pedestrian becomes extra-terrestrial, you take note. When safe became scary, I noticed all the things I could lose.

As a medical student, this change in perspective led to quite a few new experiences. The most curious: celebrating my dog's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday over Zoom. We invited family and friends to a virtual party to trade stories first about the dog's wonderful life and then to swap perspectives about the day's latest COVID news. In between light-hearted stories about the dog's favorite chew toy, formerly intact flip-flops, and the lifelong arc from puppy to Ol' Man Tucker (the dog's current pet name of choice) we talked about what was new. We talked about how bizarre it was to virtually gather—nobody mentioned how bizarre it was that we were

hosting a doggy celebration with choreographed videos, montages, entrance music, celebrity cameos, and toasts—we were all too grateful to see each other's faces and reassure each other that we were alive, we could cope, we still laughed. We tried out words we never knew we would need, like Social Distancing, Masks, Zoom, Backgrounds, Testing, Fauci, COVID-19, N95's, Quarantine, Normalcy, Unprecedented, Pandemic.

I write this one year after the 13<sup>th</sup> birthday of my dog. He is largely unchanged but the same cannot be said of our world. I still walk around with masks jammed into my pockets, but having had a vaccine injected into my arm, I generally move without fear. I still carry the scars of social isolation, the scars of fearing for my family, the scars of learning my loved ones were infected, the scars of learning who had died. Time heals wounds. Everything that was new is now old. We adjust to virtual meetings and masks because we are creatures of habit; or because we are resilient; or because we created and deployed a brilliant vaccine that meant we could change the world.

A virus, too small to see, is hugely meaningful in one moment and maybe hopefully rendered meaningless in the next moment by a vaccine designed by other particles that elude the human eye. Our observations of what is arbitrary and what matters stretch as far as we are willing to look. At the beginning of the pandemic, it took time and energy to notice so many things for the first time. It was exhausting and maybe refreshing to be extra-habitual about who and what we encountered because the virus made those connections life-and-death-important. The distribution of the vaccine has brought the deadliest stage of the pandemic in sight. Finding silver linings in such a tragic crisis can feel both reductive and frivolous, but we reflect so that we do not forget and so that we might keep growing. For a brief and scary moment, we looked at each other in new ways and upended our lives to protect each other. We asserted a new way of seeing the world—a way defined by viral transmission—and it had real consequences in the present moment that saved real lives. Notice something new in something that is old and surprise yourself with what you can learn about what is already in front of you. The way we look at our world is real; it is not fixed and it is in our control.



# IF IT CAN BE BROKE

ANAHID MODREK | Assistant Professor of Psychology

When we fall, something is likely to break. A pandemic threw many off their comfortable pedestals, leaving people alone, fragile, and fractured. Isolation is a form of separation—not just from others—but from our own, usual self that we are no longer able to embody on a daily basis. We, as a people, were detached through distance and uncertainty, with no study guide to navigate what this unknown, broken state is. Indeed, as a people, we broke.

Like most injuries preceded by a fall, a bone will break causing pieces of its cartilage to separate. As a former athlete, I was well-versed in injuries and recovery. The process of a bone breaking is pretty standard—once cartilage separates, stem cells from the bone's thin vascular membrane create flexible tissues to help the broken pieces reconnect. Gradually, over time, this matrix unites the opposite ends of the fracture into an internal callus, creating an area of thickened tissue to begin the healing process.

Separated pieces want to come back together. This is the first step of being broken. This new pain, however, stemming from social separation and isolation was unclear and unbearable. I did not understand what stage of recovery we were in at any point of the pandemic. There were no steps and no predictable phases. Our bodies know what to do when a bone separates, but as a species we had no 'next-steps' on what to do when we separated. The anatomy of split bones, though, continues its course clearly: after its initial healing process begins, cells tasked with creating the matrix for new bone formation next create an external callus of cartilage and bone around the outside of the break. Together, these temporary soft calluses stabilize the fracture. At this point, it is deemed that the bone is likely to never be the same.

The complexity of human biology goes far past its skeleton of bones. Many couldn't handle the psychological, neural changes accompanied with loneliness, depression, and ongoing grief. The pandemic left individuals with no such matrix or protocol on how to recover from sudden symptoms of severe separation. "We" broke into "you" and "I" with no possibility to bring the words back together to what they meant. Unable to connect two people—two pieces—back together, death of family and loved ones was unrepairable, with acceptance as the only available remedy.

We would never be the same. You and I were on our own and we couldn't handle it. We broke. I broke, twice. This unknown virus first attacked our bodies, directly infecting cells and attacking the respiratory system. Analogous to the virus attacking the lungs, it forced the chest to feel heavier than normal. Strangers' shoulders were collapsing forward when walking on streets, a place where we could no longer be together. We could no longer walk together. You were a few feet away, and I had to keep my distance.

We stayed separated. Each breath grew more tense, with a resentment exacerbated by a mask covering the freshness of oxygen we could once taste. With a deep breath, lungs would not fill the way they used to – a K95 separated the fresh air from each inhale. Taste buds separated from the flavor of a fresh breeze. I felt it in my bones. Separated, broken bones do not simply sit still. In time, cells become active, divide, and differentiate to create matrices that pull pieces back together. This fills the broken, empty space between the cracks. The cartilage in the calluses is replaced by new bone via destruction of the old cartilage and replacement by bone. This creates a new, bony kind of callus.

I tried to create a new regimen, to fill up the hours of empty time, and space surrounding me when I just wanted to stroll on the streets. I failed. I looked to you, to see if you would appear and create some kind of glue between us. It was not the same. No one was the same.

As a species, humans are capable of so much. Our bodies are capable of so much. The body knows what to do when it breaks. I, however, did not know what to do when I broke. Over several months, compact bone replaces spongy bone at the outer margins of the broken, fractured area and the bone is remodeled in response to strain. Once healing and remodeling are complete, a slight swelling may remain on the outer surface of the bone, but quite often, no external evidence of the fracture remains. This is why bone is said to be a regenerative tissue that can completely replace itself without scars.

But we are all scarred from separation. Bones heal, yet we remain fragile from the fatigued months of breathing through a mask. I have forgotten how to breathe freely. What makes us human is not just our anatomy, it is our ability to communicate like no other species. I forgot how to hug. I lost my sense of connection and community. Unlike my bones that have once broken, I could not go back to where I was, and I could not see myself without any scarring.

The vicious virus met its vaccine, putting pause on this pain. City doors started to open, but not to exit; now we can enter. Communities reduced to individuals now return to whole. Stepping out onto the streets, I thrust my chest open towards the sky to feel warmth of the sunny sky. A breeze tickles my tongue. I inhale, relaxing my shoulders. My back bones crackle in relief. I remember the bone fractures I endured during my years as an athlete. From break, to brace, to being back at it. As a competitor, we knew if a tournament can be lost, it can also be won. I may no longer be an athlete, but I am still human. We all are. Then you appeared, unafraid to grasp me in your arms. We might not be the same, but we can be us. If it can be broke, then it (we?) can be fixed.

# A WILL TO LIVE

KERRY-ANN WONG | Secretary, Abington-Jefferson Health

Dear reader, if you find this letter and are about to read this, you are stepping backward into the past, into the memory of 2020-2021; the year of the great COVID-19 Pandemic. 2020 started out like any other year, there were rumors of this virus in faraway Wuhan, China, and then we brushed it off as something that would soon die, only to be faced the reality that this virus was rapidly spreading and cases had begun to show up in the United States.

Take a seat and let me tell you the story of tears, fears, uncertainty, hope and triumph. You see reader, humans have a will to live, we all make plans for life, we plan weddings, birthdays, yearly vacations or simply regular weekend activities. When this virus hit, we were left powerless. As our eyes glued to the TV, we saw day after day the numbers of cases and fatalities rising, you begin to think is this the end for me.

You see reader, the only pandemic anyone of us knew was the Spanish Flu... none of us was born then. This was our worst nightmare... this, to us, was the end of the world. Hospital workers scrambled to save lives from something they didn't know how to treat, one day it was this suggestion, then next day it was another. People were separated, we were forced to hide our face, covered behind a mask, strangers to our own family members.

The word "quarantine" was no longer what we watched in a post-apocalyptic movie, we were living it. It was the scariest time in modern day history. WILL I CATCH THIS DEADLY VIRUS, WILL I LIVE? With our eyes glued to social media, we saw this virus was impartial: the young, the old, the rich, the poor: the grim reaper did not have a preference. Hospital workers, some resigning under pressure, were at the forefront of this war with an invisible enemy. Social media became health care workers' voices. Images of New York City, among the hardest hit showed bodies piling up and morgues full to capacity, a flu-like virus suffocating your very life in only a few days.

You began to think, will I live, will I die? The world shut down and many lost their jobs, millions died worldwide, toilet tissue became the most precious of commodity... yes!!! Who would think? HOPE IS COMING? The race had begun for the vaccine. You see, reader, I lost a family member to this virus, and this person didn't even go outside. How did this happen? What was the virus doing? Was it airborne? how do I protect myself? How do I protect my loved ones?

As the number of deaths climbed and the fear increased, we all crossed our fingers in hope for the vaccine. We washed, we social distanced, we masked our faces, we cleaned, we sprayed, we disinfected, we stayed home and we prayed. A VACCINE IS COMING. Late in 2020 we got the news that a vaccine was ready to be issued and hospital workers like myself were the first on the list and so we took the vaccine.

You see, reader, we had a will to live, we wanted our lives back, we wanted to graduate from college, we wanted to celebrated our birthdays, we wanted to see our family members, WE HAD A WILL TO LIVE. We are the survivors.

# SHIH TZUS AND HYDRANGEAS— WHAT REALLY MATTERS

MARY STEPHENS | Physician, Family & Community Medicine

Last week I inched along I-95 wondering if this was a sign that the world was getting back to “normal” after more than a year of COVID-19 and little traffic. As my GPS told me it would be faster to head south on I-95 and then take back roads to go north to the Navy Yard, I realized I was going to be really late, and not just my typical race-in-10-or-15-minutes-behind-schedule-as-the-morning-to-do-list-and-being-a-mom-moments-spillover-into-being-a-doctor late, so I called my medical assistant.

There was silence and then a sigh from Janet, “Well, Timothy is waiting and brought you flowers and has paperwork to fill out and you’re due on telehealth in 20 for Maeve and her mom has a to-do list for you.” She sighed again, “What would you do without me? OK, I’ll let Timothy and his mom know you’ll be here as soon as you can and get Maeve rescheduled so she is not any later for virtual school and see what we can do on her mom’s to-do list. Now, put down your phone and just get here.”

As a family doctor, my practice at Jefferson is focused on caring for teens and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and other complex childhood-onset conditions. It’s a new practice, launched about a year before the pandemic. The pandemic has hit many of my already medically fragile patients especially hard as they have lost critical social supports in the form of school, day programs, direct support personnel, family and friends. Last year, I was asked to join a group looking at data on how COVID-19 impacted people with intellectual disabilities (ID). The bottom line: patients with ID were 2.5 times more likely to get COVID and almost 6 times more likely to die from it. If COVID was not enough, stories of racial injustice filled the news and my patients of color faced additional worry and danger. As healthcare workers on the front lines in primary care, we celebrated when we were given masks to wear to protect ourselves, our team, and our families, yet heard endless debates on the news about how being forced to wear a mask was so unfair... and saw too many people in the grocery store with their nose sticking out in protest. For my patients with complex conditions, autism and ID, wearing a mask was a true struggle, however, and patients and families worked hard to adapt and figure it out – or just stayed home and out of harm’s way.

Timothy had a really rough year. As a young man in his 20s with autism, he typically spends his day in a day program. He has friends and trained support staff. He has a few words and signs but the people who spend every day with him, know him and get what he is communicating. He goes home at the end of the day to a family who loves him very much. COVID-19 took much of that

structure and support away overnight. He became agitated, bored and lonely. His family had to balance working from home and caring for him at the same time. When he started hurting himself and striking out at others, we worked to find the right combination of medications and behavioral supports to help him. When he developed an ingrown toenail that got infected and caused his behavior to deteriorate again, it was clear this was not something we could fix via telehealth. But how could we get him in the office? Janet cleared the way as none of us were sure if he could keep a mask on. She met Timothy and his mom at the side door and brought them right into an exam room. The mask stayed on long enough! As I borrowed equipment from the dermatology suite next door to take care of the nail and infection, he worked hard to stay calm.

On the day I kept Timothy waiting, he waited patiently in an exam room with a mask on with hydrangeas he picked from his garden that morning. He met me at the door and greeted me with beautiful flowers, their stems wrapped in foil to make a bouquet. He signed, spoke a few words and smiled – making it clear to me he had not come out on the other side of the pandemic “just okay” but had grown. Vaccinated and delighted to be back at his day program for a few days a week, he left the office beaming with his papers in hand.

Maeve was in for a telehealth visit yesterday and I made sure I was on time. She had turned 21 during the pandemic and established care with me a few months prior to that via telehealth as she faced aging out of her long-time primary care practice on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I learned she loves school and her friends and hates being in the hospital. A young woman with cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, and a complicated medical history, she got plenty of the latter and not enough of the former during the pandemic and came to see me the first time, virtually, with significant anxiety in addition to her chronic medical problems. She and her mother are a fierce duo (in a good way!) and despite only meeting them in person once, I feel as if I’ve gotten to know them well between hours spent reviewing her chart and multiple telehealth visits. In many ways, the in-person visit was anticlimactic as the mom forgot to charge the communication device and Maeve was left speechless, except for the glare from her eyes and the nod of her head.

After I started the visit with apologies for missing her visit the week before, we got to work. Near the end of the visit, a text came from my husband with a joke he found for my 10-year-old. I apologized once again as it ended up disrupting the video feed but Maeve was not phased and asked me to tell her the joke. “How do you throw an outer space party? You planet!” Maeve smiled and then said then said she had one for me. . . Out from her communication device came, “I went to the zoo to see the big animals and all they had was a little dog... It was a Shi Tzu!” I threw my head back and laughed as her mom blushed. I asked her if I should tell my daughter that one, and she said she was probably too little—but that her joke was way funnier than the dad joke!

Two patients who have found a way to thrive despite the odds of the year. Hydrangeas in a “Shi Tzu” storm kind of year! To finding joy, telehealth, and having great expectations and never giving up! To having a team to work through the challenges with and digging deep and finding resilience and laughter.

# FIGHTING THE ODDS

## Yeo Writing Prize Honorable Mention

PAMELA WALTER | Research Writing Specialist; Adjunct Professor

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Madeline, my mother, had for two years been battling follicular lymphoma that had presented in her parotid and the base of her brain. Treated with Rituxan—sometimes called “Vitamin R” by oncologists—she had experienced miraculous reduction of her cancer, but also an unfortunate side effect known as dropped head syndrome. One morning in the summer of 2019, she sat up and could not lift her head from her chest. Her quality of life declined even as she sought specialists and physical therapy to reverse this condition. Although we learned it was irreversible, she refused to believe it. An adventurous spirit who had overcome obstacles before, piloted airplanes, and buried two husbands, she would not stop driving or living life her own way, despite her dropped head.

She was diagnosed as positive for COVID-19 in June of 2020. For eight days, she stayed at her home in Florida with my sister, Allison, and rested, hoping to weather a mild case. I prayed that her luck would hold, but I knew that she had used a lot of it already. When Madeline was six months old, the child of Irish immigrants living in Manhattan during the Great Depression, her appendix had ruptured, yet she survived. Once when she was a flight attendant for Eastern Airlines, a co-worker had asked to trade shifts with her, and the flight had crashed, killing everyone on board. When she was a young mother with four small children, she was in a car accident that sent her headfirst through the windshield of the car and killed her best friend. In a coma for nine days, she somehow survived. When I was in college, I received a call that a tractor-trailer had crushed her car against a concrete barrier on the interstate. The list goes on.

On the eighth day after the COVID-19 diagnosis, Allison called to say Mom was not herself. While the three of us chatted via teleconference, I could see she was weak. My brother's wife had shipped an oximeter to the house, so Mom held up her hand to assure me she was wearing it. The oximeter had measured her oxygen level at 94% when we first began talking, but after a few minutes it dropped to 91% and then to 89%. Allison and I agreed it was time to call for an ambulance.

Very quickly Mom's condition declined. She gasped for air and we cautioned her to stop talking. Her oxygen level dropped to 84%. Her breath became labored and there were long pauses between breaths. She sounded like a toddler with croup. I told her I loved her. I was there. I reminded her that Allison was with her. We both loved her. She said nothing, unable to muster the breath. For fifteen long minutes as we waited for the ambulance, I watched my mother dying before my eyes, and I prayed for her to be held and comforted by her Creator. Her breaths came farther and farther apart. Over and over, I said, “I'm with you. I'm here.”

When the ambulance arrived, two young men in masks came into the room where she was barely breathing and fitted a mask over her face. Not an oxygen mask, as I'd imagined, but an N95 mask, to protect them from COVID-19. Frantically I told them she needed oxygen. Fixated only on my mother, I had no thought for the safety of these healthy emergency medical technicians who walked into COVID-infected houses every day and saved people. They told me they'd take care of her. They told me she needed to go. I said, "Mom, I'll be with you. I'll be with you."

When the ambulance left, my sister and I prayed aloud together, something we did not generally do. I kept saying, "We're with you. We're still here." It all happened very fast. Too fast. She was gone.

What went through my mind at the time were the stories of COVID patients in New York City who had died in hospitals alone, with no human contact, their family members locked down elsewhere and unable to be present. I was in Philadelphia, my mother in Florida. We didn't know how we would stay connected to her, and all we could do was plague the floor nurse in the hospital with phone calls to get updates on her condition, which was grave.

Five days later, I saw my mother's face again as a nurse held up the phone for her in the hospital bed. She was weak, but alive. Her voice was breathy. She was frowning as I cried with relief at the sight of her.

"What's that ... on your forehead?" she croaked.

I touched my face and looked at my own tiny image on the screen. "I don't see anything."

"Higher."

I touched my hairline, where white hair had begun to blossom during the pandemic. "This?"

"Promise me..."

"Anything."

"Get rid... of that white hair."

"What?"

"Today. Promise me."

"Mom, how old does a woman have to be before she can have white hair?"

"Never," my mother said, her white roots just starting to show against the blonde.

We in the family know her as the master of distraction, able to shift attention artfully away from anything she wants to avoid. Because I was laughing, I had stopped crying.

Unlike so many stories about the COVID-19 pandemic, this story has a happy ending and a silver lining. Madeline has escaped death once again and recovered. She gave up her car after all, but replaced it immediately with—what else?—a fire-engine red golf cart. Not an electric one either, but gas-powered to give it that “umph.”

Despite having had COVID-19, she turned 90 years old in 2021 and has had a clear PET scan. She is more fragile than she was before the virus, but grateful for each day. Fittingly, she is not just a survivor of COVID-19, but a walking medical mystery. On the day she walked out of the hospital center three weeks after COVID-19, her chin was up, her head held high.



# LIFE, A MIND OF ITS OWN

PREYA JOHN | Community & Trauma Counseling Student

There are moments in life where we become grounded and reminded of our existence as humans. These are the experiences that take our breath away while encountering something beautiful, or leave us gasping for air in the face of tragedy or deep sorrow. The reality is that we are indeed human, especially when we are face to face with the truths that life has to offer. Whether we place our beliefs on chance, or call out to the Creator, we are brought to our knees at the very moments that challenge our existence and purpose in life. This past year has been one of those many moments. A collection of breaths that are now considered memories will forever change our “normal”; more specifically MY normal.

If you were to ask me what normal was before this year, I would describe it as predictable. A feeling that I had control of the trajectory of my life, my future. But how true was this belief, when events that have transpired in the last year have brought me to appreciate the significance of the here-and-now. Let's talk about the monster itself, COVID-19. When I first heard of the lives that were being affected in March of 2020, I remember praying for the safety and wellbeing of my family. I knew my parents were a little older and this disease was unpredictable in nature. I went through the months thinking as most people do. This wasn't going to affect me. This wasn't going to come into MY family. This wasn't going to change MY life. I guess I was thinking selfishly because it did. On December 11, 2020, my mother was one of the casualties of COVID-19. Sometimes I wish I could think as simply as my niece, who said “she is just playing” or “kidding”. But this was no longer just a game; it was now my new reality; she was now no longer here.

So how do I cope? I still haven't come to grasp that she is really gone from this physical earth. My mother was the glue to our family; our worlds revolved around her. I find comfort that her spirit is immortalized within me; like a seed ready to grow and blossom after being nurtured for many years. I write her sweet letters of words that I wish I had spoken to her while she was here. There is guilt for not having been the “perfect daughter” but I know she did not think that; rather I was her rainbow baby. A child born after a loss of another; the promise of hope after the storm. But what hope was I now bringing? My education? My support or my joy? My talents or my advice? This was my moment to decide, would I let this experience cause me to crumble, or would I have a new outlook on life?

I decided to give myself permission. Permission to feel all the feelings associated with her passing as they come. Some days I miss her dearly, and others I feel at peace that she is in a better place. This is what I saw many people do as they went through the motions of experiencing pain in the last year. In addition to me experiencing loss, there were many people who were also experiencing their own traumatizing realities. It was as if, in this time period, the mask that obscured the oppression of people of color was being removed after many years. The experiences of racism that have made it harder for many communities of color to thrive and meet their full potential in this country were brought to light on a global scale. These communities are the roots of our foundational beginnings.

They are comprised of our brothers and sisters who were being reminded that we have not truly found a way to live and let live in equality. Ultimately, we just want to feel like we have a hand in, or ownership of, our own lives. Whether it is the good, the bad or the ugly.

I wrote a letter to myself in March of 2020 to be opened a year later. In this letter I voiced my uncertainty about this pandemic. I listed simple reminders to pray daily and stay close to friends. As I write this new letter that will be opened one hundred years from now, I want to remind the reader that one thing will never change: the power of love. Yes, there have been overwhelming challenges and issues that will continue to persist as time goes on. But all we truly have is the choice to choose love for ourselves and for others. I wish to leave a message to spread this love as high and low as you can so that, although time may pass, we will never forget what is truly important in this world.

What I saw this last year was a cry to be received unconditionally. What my mother taught me was to spread a love so infectious that people in your presence will feel the repercussions of its warmth. No, the journey will never be perfect, and I hope we never try to be. Rather, may we find peace in the reminders that, yes, we are in fact human, meant to feel life at its fullest.

# ONCE IN A CENTURY

MARGARET RYAN-ATKINSON | Executive Assistant, Office of Faculty Affairs

Flop, flop, flop! The sole of my black patented leather shoe dangled between the arch and the spiked heel. I froze about 20 feet from the banquet hall where my nephew's reception was underway. Bill turned back. "My sole is falling apart," I said desperately.

"There's a pair of flip flops in the trunk," my husband offered. Flip flops? Full disclosure: Although I reluctantly agreed to attend the wedding during a pandemic, I had not yet reached the comfort level of having my nails professionally done. So, on this mid-May morning, I had unprofessionally dabbed some color on my toes and covered them with tan hosiery to give the appearance of being kind-a put together.

On the short walk back to the car, my mind raced from: "Maybe there's tape or a rubber band" to thinking, "I'll just go home." I had been wavering since the invitation arrived. Then, we were wearing masks and COVID-19 cases tallied about 60,000 per day. Two days before the wedding the CDC announced that fully vaccinated people did not have to wear masks indoors.

Disappointed, Bill pulled once-white flip-flops from the trunk. I shrugged, leaned into the car, and rummaged through the glove box. Then I spied it! Hanging from the rearview mirror was a face mask with one loop broken; Bill had dangled it as a reminder to wear a mask. During the pandemic, drivers hung masks next to air fresheners, despite the laws in many states that allowed police to pull over drivers for having an air freshener suspended from their rearview mirror.

In Minnesota, that law contributed to the death of a young black father, Daunte Wright. He was shot by a police officer during a traffic stop. Mr. Wright died just a few miles from a courthouse where another officer was on trial for the murder of George Floyd. The pandemic did not cause systemic racist violence, it just made it more discernible and revolting to people who had the time and opportunity to be first-hand witnesses to the unjust treatment of members of underrepresented communities.

I grabbed the torn end of the mask, wrapped it across the top of the shoe, around the sole to the other loop end, and knotted them. Even compromised, the mask saved the day!

While I celebrated the newlyweds' joy, I was reminded of a paternal cousin who is a long-haul COVID survivor. An injured Vietnam vet, Brian has battled the scars of that war only to be infected at a veteran's hospital with this new enemy. We prayed for him and hoped with him, still he suffers long-term effects from both wars. I share grandparents with nearly one-third of the wedding guests. Only three of us wore masks inside. I wondered what my grandparents would have thought of this mask-less merriment. Would they shake their heads and wonder why we learned nothing from their perils?

My paternal grandfather and eldest aunt nearly died during the 1918 flu pandemic. Last spring, my father told me that. In the fall of 1918, Philadelphia was hit hard during the second and most deadly wave of that pandemic. Much of that was attributed to a super spreader event, the Liberty Bond Parade, held in September. My grandfather never talked to his grandchildren about that pandemic. I think it may have been a generational thing. They did not speak of the past and if they alluded to it, we did not engage.

At the beginning of this pandemic, I was reminded of a conversation with my mom about her father, who died of tuberculosis (TB) when my mom was three years old. We were sitting in her kitchen, discussing the tension that builds as Celie sharpens the razor blade to give Mister a shave in the movie, "The Color Purple." My mom leaned back in her chair, wrapped a few fingers in the coils of the extra-long telephone cord and whimsically turned it like a child with a jump rope.

"I have very few memories of my dad," she said, "but I remember standing at the bathroom door watching him as he sharpened the razor blade with a strap like that," her face beamed at the memory, "And he smiled at me." She eased her grip on the cord as the memory faded from her face.

My mom was a funny, optimistic woman; still I knew that the loss of her father always laid just beneath the surface. I did not want to scratch that. After a brief, silent moment she straightened in her chair as if to say, "go on" so I continued talking about the movie. In retrospect, I wish I had let her continue. Just as I wish I had asked my grandmother more questions about her husband. She often spoke of him with fondness, sometimes with regret, and other times with sadness. It was that sorrow in her soft brown eyes that hindered me from asking harder questions. Once, her eyes filled as she talked about visiting the sanitarium where my grandfather went in the last days of his life. "I could only see him through a window. I had to lift your mother up to wave to him," she said.

It was the Great Depression and my grandparents had already lost their bakery business and home. On a cold January day in 1934, the family patriarch was laid to rest in an unmarked grave. More than a half of a million people in our country felt that same profound loss in the past year. Their stories are real and distinctive.

As the hospitalizations and death rates climbed last winter, the stories of people saying "Goodbye" to loved ones on FaceTime and reports about dying husbands, fathers, mothers, wives, sons, and daughters texting those they were leaving behind, reminded me of my maternal grandparents. I imagined what they may have said to each other the night before he went to the sanitarium. Maybe the following morning, while he was shaving, his daughter stood in the doorway playing peek-a-boo as he sharpened his straight-edge razor. Her auburn curls bounced with abandon as she bobbed her head and then disappeared, then giggling she bobbed her head back. It must have made him smile.

After their father's death, my mom and her three brothers endured a house quarantine and the readjustment of their family structure. Routinely, they had chest x-rays to monitor their risk of developing TB. Although Robert Koch identified the bacteria that causes TB in 1882, it took 60 years before antibiotics were developed

to give people a fighting chance. Still, his discovery led to lifestyle changes that mitigated the risk. Good hygiene, fines for spitting in public, school recess, public parks, and even ice cream in an edible cone became everyday norms for those who survived; for those born after, they are our way of life.

It took less than a year to develop a vaccine to battle the SARS-CoV-2 virus and we have yet to see what lifestyle changes will define the devastation of the last year. As the decades roll forward, for so many of us the joyful moments in our lives—birthdays, graduations, weddings, childbirth—will have a trace of sadness infused with both the desire for a lost loved one's presence and the tender acceptance of that unrealized desire. I hope that we all find the resilience to recognize the void, smile, and then put on our dancing shoes.

# WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

JORDAN BETHEA | Undergraduate Student, Pre-Nursing Studies

It is an understatement to say, “2020 was rough.” It was traumatic—especially for the Black community. Here we are, one year after George Floyd’s death. Has America learned its lesson yet? Has anything changed? Racism was woven into the historical fabric of this country, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that re-emerged over the summer of 2020 following Floyd’s death tugged at its seams. The whole world was on its feet, as people rose to the occasion to fight for the justice of Black lives and racial equality.

Floyd’s death returned light to the fact that there still exists so much hate and racism in the world: a fact people constantly challenge or excuse. It seems like history just keeps on repeating itself. And as a young Black woman, people like me know this story all too well. During this time, I struggled with my mental health. I felt myself becoming desensitized to the racism against my own community. By people saying that Black lives do not matter—by creating a protest to my protest; a protest to argue the significance of my life as a human being.

The value of my life should not be controversial or political. And it is embarrassing that the morality or justification of racism in this country is still being argued. I did not feel safe in my own country, like I was a walking target. Seeing viral videos of Black bodies being brutalized, everywhere on the internet, was extremely traumatizing. I felt myself also becoming desensitized to the violence against my own community. Seeing the video of George Floyd and other graphic media of Black bodies suffering—being beaten to death or lynched—even so in films, is horrifying. Who will become the next hashtag? My anxiety also just makes things worse. It makes me feel like I’m next. Or my brothers. Or my father. Or my mother.

Sharing trauma is not activism, and Black people deserve dignity in death. I want to see structural changes, like dismantling systems and infrastructures that oppress my community and addressing racial inequities that disproportionately affect my community. And during this time, I also felt like I could not trust anyone. There tended to be fake-woke or performative allies heated in the moment; who saw racism as a trend and wanted to hop on the bandwagon. Fortunately, I lost some “friends” who I thought cared about the injustices my community and I face. I started having this negative view of the world—that humans are just inherently evil beings.

It’s sad how society takes away your innocence in this way. Black mothers and fathers have to teach their kids about what to do during a police encounter; because it means you might not make it home again. And apart from people denying your right to existence, to the luxuries and pleasures of life, you’ve got people tearing down Afrocentric features, treating Black people like a monolith: demonizing us, telling us we’re criminals, uneducated, undesirable, inferior. You’ve got racism in healthcare, in the criminal justice system, in employment, and more. It crawls under your skin. It gets to your head. It’s very psychologically

damaging (as if my community didn't already suffer enough of that, and continues so). If my life does not matter, if I am not valued, then what am I? If I should not be afforded the delights of life, then what should I have?

Indeed, during this time, I did feel unsafe, scared, and distrusting. But never once did I feel inferior or insecure as a Black person—I never have and never will. I will always be proud of who I am. This, among other things, allowed me to reclaim power over the noise that is racism. The national and global response following George Floyd's death was electrifying. It gave me faith in humanity. It showed me that it did not just concern my community, but others too. Allyship and unity from across the world, across different races and ethnicities and cultures, was truly groundbreaking. There was strength in those numbers. There was passion in the eyes of my community and our true allies who wanted to make real change. I also felt hopeful seeing some progress being made, such as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, the removal of racist historical statues and names from buildings, Black businesses being supported, conversations about racism being had, and the officers responsible for George Floyd's death being held accountable. Yes, there's still a lot of work to be done. But this is just the beginning. After all that has happened, I have witnessed my community come together in beautiful ways. I have witnessed my community, once again, stand up against a country that oppressed us for centuries, and continues to. And I was able to witness my community heal despite the challenges. I was able to see others fight against the injustices my community faces. And I also found ways to ground myself and take care of my mental health during these hard times.

One hundred years from now, when this time capsule is open, I won't be on this Earth anymore. But I hope this note I leave behind meets a changed world. Racism is omnipresent. It's as common as the air we breathe. And it will always exist. One hundred years ago there was racism, and one hundred years later, today, it exists. Things have progressed and somewhat gotten better, but it will always be there. No, we will never achieve a "post-racial" society. No, racism will never be "a thing of the past." But I am hoping future generations, akin to the likes of mine, will rise up to the occasion when challenges are made. I can dream as a naive 20-year-old, but hopefully, one hundred years in the future, there will be more love. More equality. More equity. More acceptance. More compassion. Humans will be more humane. There will have been some real change. Hopefully, one hundred years from now, society won't look around and ask themselves, "What have we done?"







# THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE

KEZIA JOSEPH | Life Sciences Student– East Falls

When I was a little kid, I had an unquenchable thirst for reading. I would read every book that I could possibly get my hands on, including a certain series written for children to educate about climate disasters. There were books about natural disasters, how they worked, and the destruction that they could wreak, and in my craze to read, I unconsciously adopted a fear of natural disasters. Despite the fact that I grew up in a suburb in Pennsylvania, I somehow had a terrible fear for most of my life of events that really only occurred in places far away: tsunamis, tornadoes, wildfires, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes. Of all of these, hurricanes hit closest to home. Every hurricane season, with news alerts for flood warnings flashing on the TV and darkened skies blooming above, I used to gather water bottles, blankets, and snacks to place in “survival packs” around corners of my house without anyone else knowing, just to assuage my own fears. While this fear largely receded as I grew up without ever really having to face these horrifying natural events, I still do sometimes feel my heart race when I see storm clouds gathering above my neighborhood.

It was similar to the feeling that I experienced in the early weeks of 2020. As news alerts became more urgent about a distant virus, as my hopes for my senior year of high school were slowly crushed, and as death toll numbers grew, I would often wring my hands nervously and quietly, the same way I did when I was a little kid anxiously gazing at the sky, and as you can probably guess, those fears did not melt away quite as quickly. Although I consider myself to be an introvert, being restricted to my home during lockdown was a different situation altogether. Time didn’t feel real, and every day felt the same. I would try to be productive and optimistic, and I would try to use the time for hobbies or for self-care or relaxation or even to spend time with my family at home. But there was such a sense of disconnect as the headlines flashing on my devices grew ever darker. The last week of high school for me felt like a complete blur because I was completely glued to my phone following the events of the protests against police brutality. I would share posts and information on my social media, wanting to participate and feeling so strongly about the issues at hand, but feeling too feeble in my efforts to do anything about it. Summer came and went, and Americans got used to the new normal (a term I despised as it graced every possible form of communication from schools, businesses, public figures and the government). Still, that clenched feeling in my chest was always there, waiting for the ball to drop, waiting for the next 2020 *thing* to occur, waiting for the numb shock that I had felt in the beginning of the year to give way to pain or grief or anger. But it never seemed to reach that step.

Something that I learned from those natural disaster nonfiction books is that the eye of the hurricane is calm. It’s sort of like a circle of peace while the vortex surrounding it destroys and rages. It is such a strange phenomenon; you would think that the center of such a force of nature would be the most destructive. And yet, in the middle of that swirling, powerful whirlwind of terror is just a little circle of quiet. That is where I was: suspended in a little circle of quiet, surrounded by what felt like every terror imaginable. And I felt safe. But deep down, it felt like the eye of the

hurricane that I was in grew a little smaller each day, growing ever closer to closing around my throat and sucking me into the storm that I had managed to avoid for so long. However, I knew I wasn't alone in it. I knew that among all the people who had suffered this year or dealt with pain and loss and grief, some felt like they were still in the eye of a hurricane. Survivorship made brothers and sisters of us all, even though sometimes it doesn't feel like there's much unity in our society anymore. Some of us clutched to hobbies to wait out the storm. Others held on to God, and still others held on to loved ones. Some held on to their loss, vowing to make what they had lost worth it by surviving, and others used their negative feelings to rally for positive change. Some people, like me, held onto a combination of all these factors, and the eye of the hurricane grew a little wider.

Autumn came. The gears of society that had been struggling to move for so many months began slowly to turn once again as I began the now sort of underwhelming process of starting a new chapter in my life: college. As I walked onto campus and into my dorm, seeing all the faces of students that were filled with the light of optimism and even a little excitement as we began to move our boxes in, the clenched feeling grew a touch looser. Over the next few months, I threw myself into study as the work from classes piled up. The headlines didn't get much better, but at least now there was distraction. It has been over a year since our lives turned upside down. It doesn't feel like the hurricane has ended, not yet. But that clinching rock of fear that once thought was settled into my throat permanently has declared vacancy and only occasionally returns.

The hurricane doesn't feel as claustrophobic anymore. Instead, there seems to be a protective barrier on the edge of it made up of a chant in my heart, simultaneously a prayer of thanks and a cheer of victory: We survived so far. We survived so far. We survived so far.

# IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNEW IT

MARY JANE LOVETT | Social Worker

The popular R.E.M. song, of a very similar title, back in 1987 did not even come close to what we all experienced in 2020. Who could have imagined what would come to pass, as the entire world seemingly shut down – almost simultaneously? Many of us had been entertained in the past with songs, books, and movies that spoke of fictional apocalypse type tales...Then seemingly, overnight, we all were faced with what could only be described as one of our worst fears – a global pandemic that shook us to our very core. For those of us on the front lines at Jefferson Health, it was truly like living in a nightmare from which we could not wake.

I had the honor and privilege of serving alongside our incredibly brave doctors, nurses, support staff, and other essential workers who faced the pandemic each day. Looking back now, we were like small warriors, each of us battling a huge, fierce, fiery dragon of uncertainty that often felt relentless and overwhelming. We were warriors who wore scrubs, N-95 masks, face shields, gowns, gloves. Some of us even wore respirators. PPE became our suit of armor, while medications, oxygen tanks, and ventilators became our daggers. I often felt like some type of soldier going into battle when driving to work each day, scared but fiercely determined and bound by a brother/sisterhood to show up for my colleagues no matter what. To quote one of my lifelong favorite songwriters, Billy Joel, “We dug in deep” and many of us prayed “With all of our might” because “We would all go down together.” We stuck together, as a team at Jeff. No one ran away from this battle. We ran toward it every single day to give care, compassion, and hope.

The final line of the R.E.M song is “...and I feel fine”. At Jefferson, in my humble opinion, we did so much more than “fine.” We were all individually and collectively AMAZING. Many fine storytellers, songbirds, and visionaries have spoken in the past about “rising up”, finding strength and courage in the face of adversity. Bruce Springsteen, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou, Katy Perry, Langston Hughes and Billy Joel are a few of my personal favorites. Music definitely helped those of us on the frontlines at Jefferson. We listened, sang, danced, and were uplifted even during the dark days. Some of us even made or participated in creative, fun videos of team members dancing their way through the pandemic, which went viral on social media and YouTube. Some were featured on local and national news. We not only overcame the adversity we faced each day due to COVID-19, but Jeff team members were able to inspire countless others. We were able to show the world our “Fight Song” and we never lost the “Eye of the Tiger” through it all. Kudos to all of my Jefferson Health colleagues! We did it!

# SILVER LININGS BOOK CLUB

LYENA BIRKENSTOCK | Medical Student

2020 started off like any other year, and I had been looking forward to this particular year for several reasons. For me, 2020 meant finishing up my preclinical studies in medical school. I was looking forward to completing Step 1 of the national medical board exams and afterwards, finally getting the chance to visit my grandmother in Shanxi, China. I hadn't seen her since the last time I had visited in 2013, and since then she'd been suffering from severe coronary artery disease and its complications, including a stroke. I was eager to see and care for my grandmother, as well as take a much-needed break from medical school before starting my clinical rotations, which promised to be a thrilling next step in my education that year.

With these plans in mind, I began a self-imposed isolation of dedicated study in February, encouraging myself that there were so many things to look forward to after the exam. When the world first began to panic at the emergence of a novel and deadly coronavirus, I paid little attention, focused as I was on all of the other microbiology I needed to know for the exam.

As the pandemic grew more dire, however, I was forced to face 2020's new and unexpected reality. My post-exam flight to China was cancelled.

As I tried to continue studying through my disappointment and sadness, my exam itself was postponed indefinitely when all testing centers closed. The world had suddenly plunged into deep uncertainty and fear. Life was reduced to watching the news for updates on the numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths, trying to track how deadly the virus was and predict how best to protect ourselves from its spread. There was chaos over purchasing cleaning products, hand sanitizer, and face masks. I remember Googling how to sew cloth masks for myself only to find that the fabric stores were also sold out of everything. My first cloth mask was a bizarre combination of bright orange fabric and Christmas patterning, as that was all I could find at the time. Grocery store trips were limited, and food was left to quarantine in the foyer before coming to the kitchen. I recall panicked uncertainty and discouraging thoughts that the world might never return to normal. I was in disbelief that everything had changed so entirely and so quickly.

On top of all the pandemic stress, the United States was also experiencing enormous upheaval. The horrific deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others had sparked protests and riots across the country. Our President often exacerbated and escalated the situation, and 2020 forced people to make the difficult choice between marching for their beliefs and risking exposure to a deadly virus. Through all of this, the social isolation from my friends and people closest to me hit me hard. I felt lonely, lost, and unable to connect with those who might otherwise have helped me process the weight of every way in which 2020 had deteriorated for me.

In this devastating time of uncertainty and chaos, I developed an idea to reduce the burden of social distancing. I reached out to friends from my hometown in New Hampshire, many of whom I had not talked to or seen in years, to ask if they'd be interested in a weekly book club. These were friends I had grown up with, some of whom I had met on the very first day of first grade. We had grown up together and helped each other through the successes, trials, and tribulations of elementary, middle, and high school, but we had lost touch after scattering to colleges across the U.S. Maybe, just maybe, I thought, we could help each other again, as we'd done for years in childhood.

To my surprise, many of the friends I contacted were willing and excited to give this a try. I had never organized a book club before, and at our first meeting I had come prepared, in nervous anticipation, with a list of discussion questions for our first book, *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. I needn't have worried, however. Seeing everyone's faces on that first Zoom call, we were ecstatic to hear about where life had taken each of us since we'd gone our separate ways. Time flew by as we reconnected and fell easily into our old familiarity with each other.

As we found our rhythm, other high school friends joined in. We are scattered across the United States, from Boston to Philadelphia to Chicago. We are comprised of MIT bioengineering students, an elementary school teacher, an AmeriCorp member, a writer working at Penguin Random House publishing, a computer science whiz at Google, and an active member of the Coast Guard, to name just some of us. We are Black, white, Asian, and multiracial. With all of our diverse backgrounds and experiences since leaving high school, we each contribute a different lens to the books we read and their implications on our reflections of current events.

We grappled with *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson during the peak of the Black Lives Matter protests, learning and recognizing together how centuries of racial injustice and discrimination contributed to the racially charged months of 2020. We empowered each other to attend marches and continue the fight for racial equality in every way we could. Those difficult conversations were followed by *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune, a lighthearted, queer-friendly novel of family and self-worth. We cried and laughed together about the importance of being confident and proud of ourselves and our identities.

My favorite part of every book club meeting is in the first half, where we share highlights of our week. Amidst the anxiety of 2020, we got to cheer on and support each other through the successes and challenges we've faced, from job applications during a pandemic to virtual thesis dissertations to getting those first shots of the COVID vaccine. We've consoled each other through break-ups and COVID exposure scares. During the holidays, we threw together a virtual celebration of 2020 coming to an end at last. We called it the "first annual book club holiday party" in hopeful anticipation of many more to come.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the one-year anniversary of our book club. Book club remains an event I look forward to every week, and I'm joyful to hear that other members feel the same way. 2020 turned out to be nothing like I'd hoped for or planned, but amidst all the negative emotions and events of that year, I also find

myself grateful to have had the opportunity to reconnect with friends who largely shaped who I am today. When I was at my most isolated, this book club saw me through tough times and helped all of us digest the troubling year that was 2020.

I look forward to seeing what becomes of this book club and having this support group to navigate the ups and downs of life long into 2021 and beyond. I hope that many years from now, I can look back and say, "2020 went down in history as one of the toughest years the world has faced. While that is certainly true, to me, 2020 was also special in a good way. 2020 was the year our book club started."

# THE MEANING OF COVID-19

MADELEINE KILIMNIK | Medical Student

When the novel coronavirus was the only topic constantly reiterated on every news network, I had a slight pit in my stomach. I never even imagined something like this happening in my lifetime. But I said to myself, "Ok, it is only March, it is spring break, I will miss a maximum of two weeks of school because of this." I did not even consider the possibility of online school, or the fact that I would not see my classmates or professors for the next few months.

The transition to Zoom was swift. After two weeks of online school, I curated the perfect desk setup: snow globe on the left, monitor in the center, and a bowl of candy on the right. The candy was more necessary than ever before; I did not realize the toll of not leaving my room for days at a time. Yet, I knew that I was one of the lucky students. I was living at home with my parents and commuting to school at the time. So during the pandemic, I could still leave my house to sit in the backyard. I did not lose thousands of dollars in rent. And I still got to interact with the people that love me most in person. My friends who could not leave their apartments, who were understandably too afraid to grocery shop, and who had no support from their loved ones, were the ones suffering. Yet suffering is such a relative word. Were they the ones suffering? Or were the doctors who were reusing masks for days at a time on the front lines suffering? Were the patients on ventilators the ones truly suffering? Were the families and friends of the hundreds of thousands of people killed by COVID-19 suffering? I would argue everyone was suffering in some capacity, just some people's misery was physical to the point of death, and others mostly experienced a non-visible emotional turmoil. But I believe, at some point, everyone suffered in the times of COVID-19.

Fast forward to April 2021. I breathe a sigh of relief. I am around my classmates again, and I begin my medical rotations. The wards are not full solely of COVID patients. Residents are ecstatic that they do not need to live in their N-95s anymore. All I can think is how lucky I am to have started my rotations in April 2021 and not April 2020. I can see people again, I can talk to patients, I can interact with my peers and mentors again. It truly feels like the medical community, especially, has breathed a sigh of relief.

Fast forward again to the middle of my first rotation. A resident asked me to quickly check in with one of our patients who had an unexpectedly terrible diagnosis. I came into the room, smiled at the patient who was half asleep, and put on my gloves for a brief physical exam. As I was finishing the exam, the patient grabbed my hand, and just held it for a minute. This small action stopped me in my tracks. All this patient wanted was a moment of support. I was able to spend time with this patient in person and hold her hand. This is why I entered medicine, to be that support for people.

So what was COVID-19? It was the definition of struggle and depression. It was loneliness and fear. But it showed me how lucky I am to be surrounded by support and love. And it reminded me of why I wanted to be a physician in the first place. In a perfect world, there are no times of struggle. But in our imperfect world, at least there can be some support we can provide for our fellow humans.



# MY STORY

RHONDA FLAXMAN | Business Manager, Gynecologic Oncology

I started at Abington Memorial Hospital in 1993, working with a newly created service for patients with gynecologic oncologic malignancies. At that time, there was one gynecologic oncologist, one nurse, and myself. I never dreamed that 28 years later, I would still be a part of such an amazing service that has grown miraculously to include 7 physicians, a nurse practitioner, several nurses, medical assistants and support staff. We have moved from the main hospital in Abington to the beautiful new freestanding Asplundh Cancer Pavilion in Willow Grove. I have learned so much from the brilliant and talented physicians over the years and it has truly helped to shape my life. Watching patients and their families go through the critical processes of cancer, the treatments, and witnessing the advancements in research, and treatment has made me into the person I am today.

While watching the division grow over the years, I myself became a patient. I had to undergo emergency surgery not knowing the diagnosis that I would awake to. Thank goodness it was a benign process, but the uncertainty surely takes its toll. I always thought of myself as a compassionate person, but it took my own experience to really open my eyes to the strength and vulnerability that our patients face every day. Having a young daughter and wondering if I would get to see her grow up was very scary and intense.

We can try to picture and imagine what our lives will look like in the future, but how the future unfolds can be totally unpredictable. I was raising my daughter during this time and trying to balance a very busy career and take care of her at the same time. It's hard to find life and work balance, when you want to give 100% of yourself to everything you do.

I think this past year has us all reflecting on life. Who would have ever thought we would be facing this type of epidemic causing fear, alienation and inability to leave the house without face coverings. My heart goes out to the people who live alone and who have special needs, trying to survive the loneliness, isolation and remain safe. I have watched both of my parents, ages 89 and 93, battle and survive COVID-19. Life surely throws us some curves, but somehow, we find the strength to work our way through.

If anything good came out of this past year, it's knowing how resilient we are as a society. I believe it brought us closer together as we try to grow and evolve to eradicate and educate about racism, as well as the hardships and sadness bought on by the epidemic.

Looking back over the past 28 years, I am so proud to have been able to have been a part in the creation of such an outstanding division that cares for women with cancer. The advancements that have been made in therapies, the miracles I have witnessed over the years, as well as the hardships that cancer can bring has made me appreciate life and helped to mold the person I am today. I am humbled to look back and have had a role in the development of an amazing

practice and the magnitude of what is accomplished here every day. As an iconic and intelligent surgeon used to tell me, "Life goes on", and he is right. No matter what tragedies are going on around us and in the world, these gifted physicians continue to serve our patients to enhance and save their lives.

Today, my daughter is grown and I have a beautiful grandson, with another one on the way. I feel blessed in so many ways. My last day in the division of Gynecologic Oncology is May 21, 2021. A piece of my heart will always remain with the dedicated staff and the amazingly brave patients that have touched my life.

# SMILE BEHIND THE PLEXIGLASS

MELINDA READER | Seamless Access, Jefferson Health Jersey

I am not a nurse or a doctor, but I am the first person you see when you walk into the Jefferson Emergency Department in Stratford, NJ. "Hi, welcome to Jefferson, would you like to see a doctor?" is what you will hear when you walk into MY ER any given weekday night. I am the girl in the blue shirt. I sit behind a plexiglass window with a 15"x7" opening. When a patient walks into my ER, I have zero knowledge of why the patient is here or their medical history, but you are greeted with a smile behind my mask and unconditional compassion. You are my family for the time being. "The nurse will be right with you!" Then, I hear the medic phone ring, I hear the hustle and bustle of the nurse's feet scrambling to move patients around to make sure the next patient has the best possible care and best chance for survival. I hear the nurse yell, " Medic is going to Bed 8!" "OK!" I reply and get my note pad and pen ready. I have a dark window at my desk where I try to look out and watch for the ambulance and Medic to be ready on arrival. "MEDIC" security shouts, I rush out to meet patient, EMTs and Paramedic at the ambulance, then rush back in. Why am I in such a rush? Because if I am not quick on my feet to obtain the patient's identity, then it delays the patient's treatment.

You see, at MY ER, we work as a team. I work with the most amazing staff members here. Sometimes, patients are difficult, they are verbally, mentally and physically abusive and it's so hard to watch my friends, aka coworkers, get so beat up mentally, emotionally, and physically, because no matter what, we have to care for everyone to the best of our abilities with a smile on our faces. Some nights I'll look out my dark window, but it will turn into a mirror instead and I'll stare at myself and wonder, Is this where I belong? This negativity of a global pandemic and the world as we now know it—is it worth it? Does the risk out way the reward?

Then the day came when my 14-year-old daughter became a patient. I took her to another facility and we walked into the ER. To my surprise, I wasn't greeted how I greet my patients, but by " Are you here to see someone?" I replied "Yes!" "Go see security." So my daughter and I went over to security. "My daughter is here for Crisis." Security replied, "No, you have to check in at the desk." To my confusion, I was then spoken to by the same blue shirt girl who sent me to security. "I asked you if you were here to see someone," she said in a rude tone.

I was floored that I worked in a similar department as this woman who just greeted me in such a way. My daughter was there to be screened by Behavioral Health, so I walked in not knowing what was going to happen.

We were seen by triage and then directed to another waiting room, with a tv and someone there to offer anything. To my dismay, we were seated in a room with complete strangers, but we could hear all their registrations and the doctors speaking with a girl that was suicidal. I was beside myself as I heard them ask such personal questions in this semi-private space. And to top it off, you could

be seated in this room for hours and days sometimes. It's sad when you hear a staff member tell another staff member, "It's a shame what they do to these poor people. If I had to be here and wasn't suicidal when I came in, I would be by the time I left."

The experience I had at this other hospital was mind-blowing, especially when I am so used to how we handle our patients at Stratford. It hit me that I am meant to stay at my plexi-glass window with the 15"x7" opening because I am meant to be part of such a positive team here at Stratford. During the most difficult year, I have watched our doctors, nurses, and EMS, dress in space suits and the most ridiculous masks. I watched behind the scenes how frightening it was to see patients come in for altered mental status and pass away a few hours later, when COVID tests weren't rapid at the time. And no one was completely sure what happened.

It has been a hard year, but no matter what, every day we make our patients feel more comfortable walking into a hospital, where they may be scared to walk in, or don't have a safe place to go. When you walk into MY hospital you are greeted with a friendly smile from any of our overnight staff no matter who you are. We here at Stratford, want you to feel better leaving our hospital. And at MY hospital, we work as a team, support each other, and lift each other up when sometimes it is hard to understand how the world has gotten in such despair. At MY ER, our amazing staff show their true unconditional love for helping people and I am so happy to call this ER, home.

# CITY-SIDE CHATS WITH MIMI & PAPA

KELLY MCGUIGAN | Medical Student

This has been a year that we will never forget. For many, it will bring memories of pain and suffering scattered throughout with loss and grief. I have chosen to see the splinters of good that have come out of this time, but I was privileged to have not suffered as greatly as many others. For that, I am thankful and deeply remorseful for all others that have.

In thinking about what good this year has brought me, I have pondered the relationships that were strengthened. I started the first year in my graduate program, spending many hours at my desk and computer without much of a physical or mental break. As time went on, I developed a new daily habit. When the clock turned to 5pm each day, my dog knew it was her time for a long late afternoon walk before I started cooking my dinner and preparing hers. This was a time for us to get outside and stretch our legs. She would don her harness and I would don my mask. I would put on my headphones and carrying with me just my phone and apartment keys.

At this time almost each and every day, I would then call my grandparents many states away who would be sitting at home on their porch anxiously awaiting my call. Luckily, they have a much better view of the bay in Cocoa Beach, Florida, than I do of Philadelphia row homes. Although it is easy to think about how much living and life I may have lost during this past year, I feel it even more strongly for them. They missed their friends, their life, eating out at restaurants. Our family of course had even greater fear for their health and exposure. Every day they would tell me what they ate and did, particularly what they were watching on Netflix or saw on the news. We talked about the changes in social justice that were taking place throughout this period and of masked protesters standing together. All the while my grandparents feared for having enough toilet paper or that my aunt who did their grocery shopping for a while would pick out the right lettuce. They would tell me about the kind acts of their neighbors in the building who would pick them up a rotisserie chicken or helped them schedule their vaccine appointments. I would tell them about my day which mostly included what I had studied or learned in school. We did talk about the pandemic and what was safe to do or not to do—an ongoing debate. It was nice to hear about details of their day and understand their fears. I have always been close with my grandparents, but this fortified our relationship in a unique way. If there is ever a question on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* about everything my grandparents ate in a particular day, then I will be one fortunate student.

At times the conversations did get monotonous. When you are ordered to stay at home there is only so much fun you can squeeze into a day. Still, almost every day, like clockwork, my dog was ready for her walk and my grandparents were ready by their phone awaiting my call. It may seem like a simple thing just talking to

someone on the phone, less commonplace these days, but it is powerful. Regular conversations with my grandparents almost made me forget that they were so far away, and that I had not seen them in so long. It made me reevaluate some of my other relationships.

After college, many of my friends had moved away or moved back home. It was never the same without seeing them in person all the time. It made me want to pick up the phone and reconnect, which I think and hope many people did over the pandemic. My extended family started doing regular Zoom calls with everyone. I had never before been so in-the-know with everything going on in everyone's life. With a large family spread across multiple states this was never easy. Somehow it feels like I know them all better now. I do not have to imagine what they are doing states away. I know where they are in life and what they are trying to achieve. I hope that many others had similar experiences over the pandemic.

I will never again hesitate to pick up my phone and actually call someone instead of sending a text. Hearing my loved one's voice and detailed life update is far better. My grandparents taught me so much more than how to entertain yourself by giving your Roomba a name and talking to it while it cleaned (which helped them get through isolation). They showed me that there is no relationship that cannot be improved. Any bond can be strengthened, especially at a time when we are all going through this collective trauma. It does not matter if you do not see this person every day or even live remotely near them. Let it be a reminder so many years later to call that person. At that time, I hope I am still calling my grandparents every day.

For everyone who suffered or experienced loss during this pandemic, my family and I keep you in our thoughts. Know that you are loved and supported.

# BRIGHT

MARSHALL TANG | Medical Student

As I look forward to the next chapter of my life, I find myself looking back, thinking about how I ended up where I am today. I work in security. My father started a small security guard company to support his family. Even before I was born, my father worked odd jobs and wore many hats to pursue his dreams. Coming to the United States was one of those dreams. Having a second child, was another. My existence alone necessitated my family's leaving their home and everything they knew overseas to immigrate to the States. All of this for a brighter future for my brother, me, and our future dreams.

But after I graduated from college, my situation weighed heavily on me. My father was diagnosed with stomach cancer during my fourth year of college and taking care of him and his company fell to me. Despite everything, he would tell me to always get back up even when obstacles knock you down when pursuing your goals. Although he could no longer pursue his own, he told me his dream now was for me to pursue mine.

However, one obstacle after another, often at the same time, constantly threatened to drown me. From caring for my father, his passing, the pandemic, keeping this struggling company running, and wrestling with mental health, staying afloat was demanding enough on top of preparing and applying to medical school.

Yet over the past few years, I managed to persevere through all of them. I can proudly say that I am headed to Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson this year. This acceptance is a product of all the roles I have had to play and the sacrifices made at each step of the way. Each role was a new hat I received that often did not fit well on my head. But with plenty of help, humility, and honest work, I learned to keep my spirits high despite the heavy weight atop my head.

So yes, I am a security guard who upheld his father's business, a son and brother who now understands the depth of love from his family, a person who fell in and grew from love, a friend who relearned the meaning of being there for each another, and perhaps in the future, a doctor who can take all that he's learned to pay it forward. As trying as my life's path has been, I choose to be appreciative of where I came from, grateful of the hard lessons I have learned, and proud of the progress I have made.

# IN THE BACKYARD

MIRIAM SOLOWEY | Medical Student

I hadn't hugged my dad in months. We'd met a few times in the backyard at my mom's house, wearing masks, socially distant, relying upon the fickle benevolence of Mother Nature for decent weather. In those conversations set amidst the sweltering June sun, all I would do was complain. I complained about studying for my MCAT exam in July and the ever-present fear of a last-minute exam cancellation due to COVID. I complained about the all-too frequent, jarring sound of ambulances driving by my house. I complained about Philly's hesitancy to reopen, a decision I simultaneously respected and guiltily resented as I watched my suburban peers gain more freedom. I complained about missing my friends from Penn State and high school. Heck, at that point even thinking about a disinterested acquaintance in a massive lecture hall induced a wave of nostalgia. Complaining was cathartic. Complaining was my therapy. But in those moments, I did not appreciate how truly little I had to complain about.

I got the call from my dad in the middle of the week. Whenever he called, I readied my laundry list of complaints, prepared to kvetch to my heart's content. But my dad's sobering tone stopped me in my tracks. "I'm not feeling so great," he told me somberly. I'm running a slight fever, and I'm in a lot of pain. I don't think it's COVID, but I've scheduled a test just in case. In the meantime, since I saw you last week, you should isolate and, if I test positive, you should get tested as well."

I was shocked, scared, worried, and brimming with concerns. My dad did not elaborate further on his symptoms, but his tone hinted at a sense of pain and weakness that I'd never before associated with him. I hoped he was okay. I honestly believed he'd be okay. But things got worse before they got better.

"I'm in the hospital," he stated on the phone early the next week. "It's not COVID." My dad, unbeknownst to me, had been dealing with an enlarged prostate for quite some time. His prostate obstructed the flow of urine through his urethra, but he had been taking medication to manage it for years. Now the medication had stopped working. His bladder had grown massively swollen. His kidneys were showing signs of failure. And he was starting to become incontinent. At the hospital they drained his bladder with a catheter, a device that was to become a source of constant salvation and constant vexation over the next year of his life.

He was released a few days later, feeling better but weak, far from fully recovered, never fully comfortable, and completely unprepared for this new turn in his life. I was a mess. I was relieved and grateful that my dad was okay, that he was able to go to a hospital and receive life-saving care in the middle of a global pandemic. But I was also an anxious ball of uncertainty and self-pity, shamefully aware of my self-centered mindset yet unable to avoid the pitfalls of the "why, me?" mentality. So many people were mourning for their loved ones during the pandemic, and mine was on the mend. I knew I should be more thankful and cognizant of my good fortune. I knew I should focus on the positives. But I was an isolated, melodramatic



pessimist holed away in my home in Northeast Philadelphia, trying to juggle studying for the MCAT, a global pandemic, loneliness, and now, my father's illness. I told myself that if I wanted to throw a pity party, that was my prerogative.

The next few months were marked by more uncertainty and more ER visits. First the catheter was clogged. Then it was clogged again. Then, they tried self-catheterization, but my dad's bladder had been so stretched that it lacked the muscle tone to empty properly. Then, they inserted a catheter directly into his bladder. Then, that catheter became irritated and had to be replaced. With the constant waves of COVID cases and ER visits came a gnawing fear that a day would come when they no longer had a bed for him. Bouts of stability and, even progress, always seemed to be marred by setbacks. In March, my dad regained some bladder tonicity and was cleared for prostate surgery. He had his surgery in April. He was able to go to the bathroom on his own again. Then, a week ago, he developed scabs and blood clots from surgery that blocked his urine flow and clogged his catheter. He was released from the hospital last Thursday after nearly five days.

Throughout this last year, I've grown up a lot. I've learned to roll with the punches and become a lot more resilient. But I've also learned that for me, it doesn't get any easier. Each new complication, each ER visit, hits like a ton of bricks. The feelings of helplessness and worry as a new threat looms don't diminish. But in the periods of stability and progress, I have learned to reflect upon this last year with a sense of gratitude that I would have been otherwise unable to muster.

I am most grateful for my new, deeper relationship with my dad. Before the pandemic, when I was just another busy, freedom-seeking college student at Penn State, our phone calls were brusque. Everything was *good, good, good*. Yes, my courses were going well. My friends were fine. My professors were alright. *Uh huh. Yup. Love you. Bye.* When the pandemic first hit, I began to open up, but our conversations were one-sided. *My life stinks. My friends have more freedom and fun. This pandemic sucks. Everything is awful. Things will never go back to normal. Yeah, yeah. I'll try to stay positive. Love you. Bye.*

However, with my dad's illness, I've learned that as gratifying as complaining can be, listening feels even better. Prostate problems are not a comfortable subject, especially when discussing them with your children. But I'm going into the medical field, and my dad has come to trust me as a nonjudgmental, empathetic ear who's willing and eager to listen and ask questions. The topic is not gross or weird, not something to be ashamed of or embarrassed by. Dealing with an enlarged prostate is an all-too-common issue for older men; my dad just has a more severe case than most. This last year, having dealt with the pandemic and my dad's illness, has also reinforced my desire to enter the medical field and my admiration of the amazing healthcare workers who have saved the lives of my dad and countless others time and time again under extremely difficult circumstances. I am beyond excited for the day when I can join their ranks.

Yesterday, I hugged my dad. We met in the backyard at my mom's house unmasked. He told me how he was feeling, and I told him how I was feeling. We're both vaccinated and optimistic but always on guard. Our expectations may be measured, but our love and support for each other is not.

# COVID REALIZATIONS

KABIR MALKANI | Medical Student

3 AM on a Wednesday in March 2021, the first time I was sleeping in my childhood bed at my parent's place in an entire year since the start of the pandemic. I woke up from a dream of a familiar female voice screaming at me. Still groggy, I kept hearing those screams, only now I could decipher that it was my name. Suddenly, reality set in, and I jump-started to recognize my mom screaming for help and hurried over to my parent's bathroom to find her hysterical over my dad's unconscious body.

As an almost fourth-year student in medical school, naturally, I knew exactly what to do. And by that, I mean I stood there, joining my mom in hysteria as I started to scream at him to awaken while my mom called for an ambulance.

Thirty minutes (but what felt like six hours in my emotional brain) later, we finally made it to the hospital—my mom and I switching off since the COVID protocols only allowed one guest at a time. While the emergency department did test after test, my mom and I came back to our senses and as my dad seemed to recover back to baseline.

While there have been minimal lasting effects, the whole ordeal led me to realizations and gratitude that I won't forget. I am grateful for a revolutionary vaccine that allowed me to feel comfortable staying at my parents' place again and finally seeing them in-person indoors after a year of trying to explain that they don't need to lean in and speak into their camera on Zoom. Grateful that I had a week of online classes and so could go home and be there, as, without each other, I think my mom and I would have fallen apart. Grateful for the EMTs who could calm us down while also efficiently doing their assessment and getting my dad into the ambulance.

This past year has shown us all the fragility of life and that we should take the opportunities we have to spend time with our loved ones. As we emerge slowly from this pandemic, it is essential to continue to cherish these moments we have with one another and not let that lesson fade as we get further and further away from this past year. For me, this has meant appreciating the time I have with my parents. It was sad that it took a pandemic and a potential life-altering medical emergency to realize how much I rely on seeing them and truly appreciate their involvement in my life, but better late than never. I am glad I can now fully appreciate the time I have to spend with them and will carry that lesson onwards to all my friends and loved ones.

# MY YEAR IN A PHOTO CALENDAR

MARISA JOEL | Medical Student

I make a calendar for my mom every Mother's Day featuring the snapshots of our year. The photos are usually of my immediate family, but also many others such as extended family, boyfriends, friends from school and home, roommates, teammates, and coworkers. The photos capture the highlights of the year at sporting events, graduations, parties, family gatherings, and vacations. There were usually too many photos to choose from, and I often left out many pictures that I thought were "too boring" – like hanging out in the living room or a home-cooked meal. This year's Mother's Day Calendar was much different. In fact, most of the photos I chose would have been previously in the "too boring" category. And, the people in the pictures were the same five- me, my mother, father, sister, and Nanny. There were none of the usual guest stars I mentioned, and certainly no exciting settings.

The photos were of my family in our small house in our small town in New Jersey. In a year full of hardship, loss, and fear, I looked inward to those closest to me for companionship and comfort. The relationships I once took for granted became much more meaningful. My mother is extremely caring, but a very nervous mother as well. She works as a public defender for children and deals with very difficult cases on a daily basis. Because of this, she envisions the worst outcomes and sees potential danger in most situations. It has always been a point of contention in our relationship, and was exacerbated by my leaving for college, which brought her much anxiety. Being at home every day with her for a year during quarantine allowed me to understand where she was coming from. I heard her talking on the phone with her clients and their parents late at night. I watched her make a difference in the lives of people suffering from horrible misfortunes. I began to understand the source of her anxieties and was able to talk to her about how she has taught me to be strong, aware, and independent.

My father works harder than anyone I know. Aside from working two jobs, he takes care of our house, performing daily chores, yard work, bills, and our dog. He does it quietly and without a complaint; something I admire most about him. At the start of the pandemic, he fell down the stairs and tore his hamstring. It was a serious injury that required surgery and a long recovery. For the first time in our lives, he had to sit back and our family had to take care of him. My sister and I took over all of the duties within the house as well as taking him to physical therapy, work, and doctor's appointments. He hated depending on everyone, and it definitely took a toll on him mentally, but caring for him made me realize how much he does for our family.

My sister Erin and I grew up doing everything together. Though we aren't twins, we often got mistaken for each other and have many of the same qualities. We both went to the same college, but quickly got busy in our own pursuits such

that it became hard to spend quality time together. This year presented us the opportunity to work out together, try new recipes, go on walks every day, watch movies together, and engage in the usual sisterly banter. I'm so thankful for the year I spent with Erin as my best friend before beginning medical school would lead to my being apart from her.

It was hard to watch Nanny go through the pandemic. She is 83 years old, and up until this year, she was very active with relatively few medical problems. The loneliness of the pandemic took a serious toll on her both mentally and physically. She lives alone in a house where she used to live with my late grandfather, and the house would usually be filled with family on a regular basis. It became very lonely for her to quarantine in her house, and her mental struggle manifested itself physically with the development of a spinal injury and serious pain. I've always been very close to my Nanny, but this year, we grew even closer as my role was not only granddaughter but caregiver as well.

Don't get me wrong- I'm excited to get back into the world and open up my social circle. I mean what twenty-something year old wants to spend every moment of every day with only their nuclear family. But I'm going back into the world with a deepened connection to my family members and a sense of gratitude that I have lived the pandemic year without the loss of a loved one, something many people are sadly not able to say. When I look back on this year at some point in the future, I know I will think of it as the year I determined what I valued most in my life. My five people seen in my 2021 Mother's Day Calendar will forever be a reminder of this pandemic year.

# MILESTONES

DEBORAH RICHARDS | Residency Coordinator

2020 was the year. It was the year that I dared myself to live big, to take on new challenges, and to drive myself further outside my comfort zone than ever before. You see, the few years prior to 2020 were difficult. I had said goodbye to both my mom and my mother-in-law. I was diagnosed with a chronic health condition. And I saw the strain of 30 years in law enforcement start to take its toll on my husband. But I was hitting a milestone birthday and I was determined to make the most of it. I had plans. Only I didn't know then that life had its own plans.

I started off the year by taking stock of the changes I had envisioned. Given the recent losses in my life, I wanted to make the moments count. I surrounded myself with those who mattered most to help me celebrate my birthday and ring in my new year. And although my family gathering may have been small in size, it was big in so many other ways. And it was perfect. I was right where I wanted to be.

Life is funny though. All it takes sometimes is a single word to throw us off balance. In two short weeks I had not only lost balance in my life, but I felt as though I had also lost complete sight of the shore. The stories that were coming out of China were enough to put me on edge. And then it was official, we were in a pandemic. The daily death reports and the fear in people's eyes was too much for me. At times I felt I couldn't breathe. The sense of control I had just a few weeks prior quickly diminished. But I was one of the lucky ones. I had a job and I had been given the resources to work from home. "One day at a time" quickly became my mantra, and daily prayer helped me to stay focused as best I could.

And then the call came that no one wants to get. Cancer. Stage 4. My only sister was now facing the hardest fight of her life. The thread that was holding me together officially came apart. I felt as though I was living in a parallel universe. Nothing in life made sense and I couldn't see through the darkness that now surrounded me. She had not yet told our father and my heart broke as I looked at him smiling in innocence as I waved to him through glass doors. His world was about to come crashing down and I couldn't stand to bear witness. I had to find strength from somewhere.

I often hear people talk about the 'Jefferson' family. And having been a part of it for 20 years I understand it in full. There is something special about the people who are part of this organization. From the start of the pandemic, my coworkers were a great support system. We shared our anxieties, vented our frustrations, or simply texted one another just to lessen the impact of the isolation we all felt. But when they learned of my sister's diagnosis, they reminded me of the true meaning of friendship. They would constantly check in to make sure I was ok and to see if I needed anything. They were a shoulder for me to cry on. And they helped me get past the initial shock of the blow that my family and I had been dealt. The fact that they were all dealing with their own stressors made it even more meaningful. And while I sometimes struggled to push past the pain and sadness I felt, I knew

I wasn't alone. They gave me the support I so desperately needed. As a friend once said to me, "it's about showing up." From this experience, I made a vow to myself to show up for others. I would feel honored if I could give to others even just a little of what my coworkers gave to me.

As the summer approached, the idea of warm, sunny days filled me with a sense of hope. And then another word knocked the wind out of me. This time it was 'riot.' Or 'hate.' Or 'violence.' Take your pick. With the rising discourse in the country, the mistrust towards police officers steadily increased. However, I saw and understood another side to the story. For 30 years my husband has put his life on the line to save others. I know the challenges he has encountered and the emotional scars he carries from a lifetime of duty. Throughout the pandemic I had been afraid for his safety. I knew the risks that came with being a first responder. But the riots added a new layer of fear. The uniform he wears made him a target. Bricks were thrown at him, people spat at him, and firebombs went off around him. One of them a near miss, causing temporary hearing loss. My anxiety was back in full force. I wanted him to retire. But how could he abandon those who counted on him? It was not in his DNA, and so he continued through weeks of riots not knowing what the next day would bring.

While I watched my husband and so many others around me give of themselves so selflessly, even amidst their own anxieties, I realized that true strength is first developed when we believe in ourselves and in the sense of purpose we have. And how much more powerful when we come together as a community and build one another up?

It was these thoughts that began to take shape in me. The New Year was approaching and talks of vaccines were starting to give people hope. I allowed myself to give in to the idea of putting this long, surreal journey behind us and emerging on the other side as stronger and better for the experience. This was certainly not the year I had hoped for, but I felt a sense of myself returning. Things were going to be ok.

And then my world came crashing down. Cancer won. My sister was gone. As I prayed for the nightmare to end, I thought of the thousands upon thousands who had lost their lives to COVID. And I thought about the family members left behind. I don't know what each of these people went through, but I know everyone has a story to tell. And I know that sharing our stories and lifting one another up will help empower us all.

I no longer think about the plans I had. But I do think about the challenges that have reshaped my life. I think about the milestones of living through this pandemic, the milestones that this country has faced, and the milestones that defined my sister's life. I rely on my mantra to carry me forward. And I've learned to find joy in the little things – a child's laughter, the beauty of nature, or just a simple text from a friend.

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that when we allow ourselves to connect with those around us, we help unlock the strength and beauty that each of us carry. And as I reflect on this difficult journey, I find peace in knowing that I am surrounded by people who will always help me find my strength, even in the darkest of times.

# COVID-19: A CHANGE FOR THE WORLD

## Yeo Writing Prize Honorable Mention

WILLIAM PENTECOST | Nurse, Intensive Care Unit; MPH Student

As I walked to the hospital on a cool, quiet November evening, I was filled with a small sense of cheer as I passed the Christmas Village in Philadelphia's Love Park. My mind wandered as I took in the tree and the lights at City Hall, and I smiled as I gazed at the Macy's holiday window displays. As I picked up my coffee, setting my mind to what the night would bring, I began thinking about the many COVID positive patients, one of whom would be mine, who were beginning to settle in for another lonely night in the hospital, away from friends and family, trying to squeeze in a few hours' rest. Knowing that their nurse, tech, doctor, and respiratory therapist would be the only people they would see that night, and their only distraction from their own thoughts and fears, and the suffering of their illness. I walked onto the unit and got sign out from the same nurse who relieved me just 12 hours prior, and sat for a minute sipping my coffee, and reflecting on the simple comfort of already knowing my patients; just needing an update as to what happened during the day.

Getting the shift started can be extremely stressful. The patient could have any number of life-threatening problems such as a chemical or thermal burn, a gunshot wound, a spinal cord injury, or a complex surgical procedure requiring resuscitation and ventilator or pressor support. Tonight, though my patient was an older woman, dying from congestive heart failure, exacerbated by COVID-19.

As I donned my PPE and walked in to greet her, she looked up at me and in a labored voice exclaimed: "I haven't eaten." Three words is all she could manage as she struggled for breath. No tone of resentment or frustration, just three words. And as I looked over at her untouched dinner, I knew in an instant that all day she'd been too tired to eat. Exhausted from the effort of breathing, she had been sleeping on and off, with short awakenings to take her medicine or receive care.

I was fortunate that night to have already known what I was walking into. My assessments and care could be more focused, and I could afford to take the extra time with this patient, waiting as she gingerly worked through every bite, each with increasing effort.

Oftentimes meals in the hospital are rushed, impersonal, and feel like just another task on an ever growing "to-do" list. That night was different. That night I could meet my patient's gaze as she proclaimed that which was at the same time simple and profound. For someone who had spent weeks in the hospital and hadn't had a substantial meal in at least that long, who was dying from the devastating influence of comorbid illnesses which conspired against her ability to even

breathe, and since these few bites would be all she would get to that day, and she needed all the nutrition she could get, it was most definitely time to eat.

It was one of the rare and beautiful times in the life of a nurse when you are able to step away from the din. To take your mind off the quality metrics and protocols, the disgruntled staff and stressed families, the donning and doffing of PPE, and the pressure to perform which never, never goes away. To be able to let the noise die down for just a moment and connect with your patient, a person who needs a bit of love, reminding me of why I became a nurse in the first place. As I stood there with this patient, I saw an old woman full of wisdom but clinging to life, and I also saw the innocence and vulnerability of a little girl with a boo-boo, desperate to be told that she is strong and safe. As I stood there with her, me in my PAPR and she with her nasal O<sub>2</sub> and labored breathing, she looked up at me in between bites. And as her eyes met mine, I was struck at the beauty and the profound depth of that moment.

She never said another word, but just continued her meal until she was too worn out and once again drifted off to sleep. It was only a few bites of macaroni, but it would be one of the last moments of real connection left for her on this earth. This was a rally, and she would not have one again. And in that moment, the humanity was all that mattered. It was time to eat.

Part of the beauty of being a nurse is that these moments actually do exist. They're increasingly rare, but if you can recognize them when they come and grab on to them, then they demonstrate an unbelievable power to change your perspective and bring you back to the hope instilled when you first decided to become a caregiver.

COVID-19 however changed the healthcare landscape. Patients have stayed isolated, and the times when they only had their rushed healthcare workers for companionship have happened with alarming regularity. It became a world where patients would face death without their loved ones by their side, where an old man calls his family on the phone for what will be the last time, just prior to being placed on a ventilator, and where a patient whose primary language is not English must rely on a hospital translator to communicate everything, from questions about their care plan and diagnosis to the need to use the restroom. COVID-19 brought an unbelievable burden on the world in a very short period of time. For millions around the globe the pandemic has been life altering, or life ending. For a majority of the world's population, it has added layer upon layer of stress, and it has left healthcare workers exhausted. Healthcare workers who have risen to the occasion and doubled down on their dedication and commitment to caring for the sick, have paid and will continue to pay a price with their own health and well-being.

The takeaway I have to choose is this: beautiful moments still do happen. If we can hold on to them when they happen, then they can change the way we see and live in the world. They will not take away the pain and the trauma through which we have all lived, but they just may help us hold on to our humanity a little tighter, and see the innocence, the vulnerability, and the love in others. COVID has changed the world. And, while none of us would have chosen for this to have happened, if we can take the opportunity that COVID has given us to see the humanity in ourselves and in others, then maybe, just maybe we can change the world too—this time for the better.



# Afterword

*From the sponsors of the Yeo Writing Prize*

We are pleased to support this annual writing contest of the Eakins Writers' Workshop in celebration of the community that is Jefferson Health. Caring for others is a privilege and, in these challenged times, there are countless stories to tell. In the midst of an historic pandemic, through our care we have experienced and witnessed so much. We are forever changed. These works memorialize these events with the sincere hope that through them we can find meaning and understanding from all that has happened.

—THERESA AND CHARLES YEO

Theresa P. Yeo, PhD, MPH, AOCNP, ACNP-BC, FAANP, is a Professor in the Jefferson College of Nursing and Co-Director of the Jefferson Pancreas Tumor Registry at Thomas Jefferson University. She is also Chair of the Institutional Advisory Board for the Jefferson Center for Injury Research and Prevention and Outpatient Surgical Oncology Nurse Practitioner.

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