

The Synapse: Intercollegiate science magazine

Volume 25 | Issue 1

Article 12

2020

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Recommended Citation

Heuring, Kirsten (2020) "Not Just Statistics: One Family's Experience with COVID-19," *The Synapse: Intercollegiate science magazine*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/synapse/vol25/iss1/12>

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Not Just Statistics

One Family's Experience with COVID-19

Disclaimer: Below is a statement by one of our contributors whose family member contracted the coronavirus. The opinions expressed herein solely reflect the experiences of the individual and do not necessarily represent the views of The Synapse. This piece does not present valid medical advice, nor should be understood as advice on how to respond to COVID-19 contraction. Please defer to the guidance and evidence published by the CDC and other State and Local Authorities.

Written by Kirsten Heuring

Illustrated by Alex Tash

There are three people in my house: my mom, my dad, and me. My parents are in their late 50s, part of the high-risk group for COVID-19. When I came home from college, we were, of course, worried about COVID-19, but there was not much we could do. Dad would leave the house on weekdays because he is an essential worker at an oil refinery. He would pick up the groceries and run any necessary errands. My mom, a box office manager at a local theatre, did her best to work from home. The day after I returned from college, the

first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Lucas County, an area in Northwest Ohio on the border with Michigan. We were nervous, of course, but we did not think we would get it.

It started with my dad. On the morning of Saturday, March 21, he seemed just fine. He walked six miles on the treadmill, like he does most days. But by the afternoon, he had a fever of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and he was coughing intermittently. My mom immediately wondered if he had coronavirus, and she started distancing from him, or at least as much as she could

when we were stuck in the same house. I had a different thought process. It was the second week of spring break, and I figured I would rather have the disease and get over it so I would not have to deal with it later in the semester. From what I remembered from neuroimmunology last semester, I thought if I had a disease once, I would probably not get it again.

The next evening, I started feeling disoriented. My mind was fuzzy, like I had not slept properly in days. I would cough

She was one of the lucky few to receive a COVID-19 test, and she came back positive.

occasionally, but it was intermittent -- not like what I had heard on the news. I could not concentrate. I slept longer than usual. I could barely process simple actions, and when I got out of bed to do anything, I would mindlessly play video games, not quite knowing what was real or what was fiction.

By Wednesday, my mom had a fever, too. She occasionally coughed like the rest of us but did not seem nearly as exhausted or confused as my dad and I were. By Saturday, she appeared to have fully recovered. She checked on my dad and me. She said he was ashen, and stood by his bedside while he napped, anxiously checking to see that he was still breathing.

That Saturday, my mom left the house. She did not go to any public places or interact with anyone, but drove to the theatre to pick up some forms she could not get at home. She ensured she covered her face and wore gloves, disinfecting everything she touched. She then went to my deceased grandfather's house, picking up the mail. She was busy, doing far more than she should have.

By Tuesday, my dad and I were back to almost normal. We were both sleeping more than usual, but our brains started clearing up, and our fevers cleared. However, my mom was exhausted. She was sleeping longer, and breathing became more difficult. On Thursday night, she woke up, unable to breathe. On Friday morning, my parents left before 9:00 am to drive her down to St. Vincent's, the nearest hospital. The doctors immediately took a chest X-ray and found a dark shadow at the bottom of her lungs. She had pneumonia, and they admitted her quickly, taking her to the COVID-19 patient area. She was hooked up to oxygen, and she left in isolation.

My mom is one of the most extroverted people I know. She can command almost any room she walks into, even if she technically is not the most important person there. Even the largest stadium on Earth couldn't contain her personality and voice. But in the hospital, she was trapped. She could not speak or talk to anyone. At one point, the nurses did not check on her for over 12 hours, leaving her alone with her thoughts and without food. She would call me, desperate to talk about anything unrelated to her condition.

She was one of the lucky few to receive a COVID-19 test, and she came back positive. This bolstered my suspicions that what my dad and I had come down with was indeed the coronavirus. The two of us were relieved in some ways; if we had it, we believed that we were hopefully immune (more recent research, however, has shown that contracting the coronavirus does not make you immune). A nurse from the hospital called us and requested we get tested. My dad was angry, asking how and

where we could get tested. At that point, there were no testing centers for people who were not severely ill. The nurse did not know how we could get tested but insisted that it was necessary for my dad, as he was an essential worker. My dad and I were on edge. Mom was still in the hospital, unable to breathe without additional oxygen.

But the doctors sent her home too early. They released her on Monday night, with azithromycin and hydroxychloroquine, medications that they hoped would help with COVID-19. She had started having panic attacks in the hospital, so they also gave her some anxiety medication. However, she did not have access to an external oxygen supply, despite having worrisome oxygen saturation levels the night before. When she arrived home, her voice was faint, and she seemed deflated, as if all of the confidence she usually possesses had vanished. The person before me seemed like an empty shell, a crude sketch of the passionate woman who raised me.

I woke up at 11:00 pm to my dad opening my creaky bedroom door. I blinked and looked down from my loft bed into his worried face.

But in the hospital, she was trapped. She had no one to talk to or touch.

"I'm taking your mom to the hospital again."

I was still out of it, having just woken up. I mumbled something and went back to sleep. My dad woke me again at 3:00 am when he came home. He said my mom had been readmitted to St. Vincent's before he went to bed. I was up for hours, wondering what happened to her. The next morning, I got my answer when I called my mom in the hospital.

After my dad had driven her to the emergency room, they immediately admitted her. They took her in for another chest X-ray, and they found that the cloudiness in her lungs had dispersed. At the very least, she was starting to heal. However, her oxygen levels were low. They got her the oxygen she needed, as well as anxiolytic medications, and she soon stabilized enough to get some rest.

She was in the hospital another three days before she was allowed to come home. When she finally returned, she was given an oxygen machine, along with an order to not leave the house until that Friday. When she came home this time, she seemed more hopeful, more relaxed. Though I could tell she still was not completely herself, I had a feeling that she would be able to stay.

My mom was still recovering in April. She continues to need oxygen at night, and she gets winded far easier than she used to. She has been left with anxiety from her experiences, and consistently talks about how if she had not gone to the hospital when she did, had she waited just a few hours, she might have ended up on a ventilator, her life in danger. My dad and I have fully recovered. We go about our days, social distancing as much as we can. My mom, my dad, and I are the lucky ones. We have decent insurance, and will not fall into debt because of my mom's time in the hospital. Even after all we have gone through, we still do not know if we are safe. Recent reports and studies have shown that people who have contracted COVID-19 are not necessarily immune from the virus and can contract it again. ● ● ●