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Monday August 31, 2020

Silver Linings

By Eric F. Spina

I flipped the script at a two-day virtual retreat with administrative leaders a couple weeks before the start of the semester and asked them to reflect on the unexpected silver linings of the pandemic. What blessings, I asked, had unexpectedly come into our professional and personal lives as the result of what has otherwise been a devastating pandemic?

If I hadn't posed that question, I wouldn't have learned that the sunsets at Eastwood Lake are spectacular, a discovery College of Arts and Sciences Dean Jason Pierce made when his family went fishing.

Or that School of Law Dean Andy Strauss, like many of us, found joy reconnecting with friends from childhood and his college days over Zoom.

The extroverted Thom Madden, associate vice president for financial support services, quipped that he held “long, deep conversations” with his Redbone Coonhound before adapting to the quiet and discovering that remote work can be highly productive. And Crystal Sullivan, executive director of Campus Ministry, found new ways to use her voice as a minister, developing resources to help people pray together even when apart.

The pandemic has upended our lives, but it’s also given many in the University community deeper purpose, stronger faith — and a lens to see the world and our lives in a new way. I’m convinced it will, in the long run, make us a better, more resilient university.

I particularly relished hearing administrators talk about our faculty’s willingness to rethink how they teach. “No one said, ‘I can’t do this,’” said John Mittelstaedt, dean of the School of Business Administration. “I’ve seen adaptation and innovation,” added colleague Jason Pierce. “Faculty have embraced opportunities and are thinking critically about learning outcomes. There’s been local empowerment and capacity building across the University.”

Deb Bickford, associate provost for academic affairs and learning initiatives, agreed: “We’re seeing an emergence of our next group of leaders.” Tiffany Taylor Smith, executive director for inclusive excellence education and professional development, observed that adversity has strengthened the bonds of community across campus. “We are learning to work together, to right this ship together. We’re part of this together,” she said.

While some of us found more time to walk in the woods, bicycle along the Great Miami River or play board games and have long talks with our children, one of the newest members of the President’s Council shared a story no one could top. With flights grounded and life at a standstill, the resourceful Ali Carr-Chellman bought an RV, loaded up the family and drove more than 2,000 miles from Idaho to place roots here, where she’s the new dean of the School of Education and Health Sciences.

It’s that type of resilience that marks the character of our colleagues. During difficult times when much appears to be lost, much is also gained — and appreciated anew.

Tom Weckesser, executive director of the president’s office, may have captured that spirit best: “When I stopped back to pick up the mail and walk through campus, it’s like a little piece of heaven.”