

I never thought that the pandemic would affect me, at the time it seemed like a world away. Every time someone coughed people jested “you got the corona.” Just like the Ebola outbreak, COVID-19 became a joke at my school. Looking back now, I never thought about all the lasts that were about to take place or the implications the pandemic brought. The last time walking down the hallways of my high school, the last time going to sport practices, the last time joking with friends in class. In short, enjoying the last few months of senior year.

The first time the pandemic impacted me came in early March, yet with it being in the eastern hemisphere of Europe, more specifically Italy, still made it seem distant. With Italy closing its borders and President Trump’s travel ban on March 14<sup>th</sup>, my spring break trip to France and Italy officially got postponed until the spring of 2022. Many of my friends were not surprised that our trips got cancelled but we were still disappointed. All of us had been looking forward to going to France and Italy for over a year and a half, saving all our spare money for a once in a lifetime trip with friend’s senior year. After receiving this news, my friend’s and I started to think about the implications of this trip being postponed for our freshman year of college, yet at the time no one had the answers. When spring break finally came, we learned that we would be given an extra week just to relax and stay safe. Teachers began scrambling to give us the materials we needed for the rest of the year, stating for the “just in case” scenario. Everyone joked that this would be our last day at school for the year, none of us thought that it would become reality.

Other than the pandemic, it seemed like a normal spring break. I stayed home for the most part with my family, hung out with a few friends, and kept up with the track workouts I was given thinking that after the two weeks, everything would go back to normal. My school was good at keeping us up to date and positive, making us think that everything was fine. At this

time, I started to notice more people wearing masks in public which at first seemed both awkward and strange. As we approached the end of our spring break it was announced that we would be starting the first few weeks of classes online. At this time, my school was still hopeful that we would be returning in person at the beginning of April.

One week of digital learning turned into two, then three, finally they told us we would finish the year online. All my classes became easier, becoming all open note without the possibility of finishing lower than a C. Keeping a routine made my days fly by, I would meet my friend for a quick run, finish some homework that was due later that day, until meeting for a few of my classes every other day. My earliest class began at 10am which gave me time to read my book or hang out with my dad who also had to work from home. Some parents thought us seniors were having the time of our lives, staying home and relaxing, not understanding that we would rather have been at school. Talking with friends we realized how we were missing events we had been looking forward to, thinking about how the year would have played out without the pandemic. We missed senior prom, the final concerts of the year, and last chances to say goodbye to teachers and friends before going our separate ways for college. Then it was time for graduation on June 5<sup>th</sup>. For the past four years we had waited for this day, working hard for grades, putting in the late nights, dealing with difficult classes and teachers to walk across that stage with friends and say “we did it!” Instead of walking across a stage with family and friends cheering from the stands, we received a virtual graduation streamed from YouTube Live that we watched on our T.Vs.

When summer came, everyone had to get used to a new normal. Summer is usually a time when people get to hang out with friends, go out to eat, have late night bonfires, spend the entire day on the river with family and friends. Now we had to be careful with masks because of

the mask mandate that started on June 22<sup>nd</sup> and told to stay inside and away from others as much as possible. The fourth of July had no fireworks which struck me as strange. The summer of 2020 put an end to many traditions, but my family and our closest friends kept some of the summer festivities alive. During COVID, one new tradition we started was a bean bag tournament that took place every Thursday evening which was some of the only times where my entire family left the house to do something. In August I finally met my roommate and suddenly it seemed like summer ended with college officially starting up in less than a month. With the start of college, I started to get nervous, I started thinking was I really ready for this?

Ready or not, move in day for college came. The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire did this process a little differently than previous years by having us move in all our things a week before our official move in date stating how it would help to keep traffic in the dorms down. For the few days of staying at home after moving my things felt weird since over half of my things seemed to be missing, making my room seem larger and empty. Finally, it became time permanently to move into the dorms. College living was an adjustment with having to learn how to share a room with another person and bathroom with about twenty other girls. Starting college, I thought that the most difficult part would be the school aspect after taking an almost six-month hiatus, but quickly found out that was not necessarily the reality. Originally, I had the notion that I would meet my best friends within the first few weeks, and we would hit it off automatically. Movies had given me a romanticized version of how college would be, which of course did not include COVID-19. The longer I was in Eau Claire, the more I realized that everyone felt different about the current situation. Playing volleyball the first few nights was more in line with the freshman experience I had in my mind with meeting many new people all at once. Coming into college, the things I was most looking forward to was the experience of

forcing myself out of my comfort zone and making many new connections. But as soon as it started, volleyball got shut down since it did not follow COVID-19 protocols. From there it has been hard to meet people since almost all my classes started either completely online or in a hybrid model. I have been trying to make more connections where I can by joining clubs that are still meeting in person like the Reef Team and the Student Ministry of Magic.

This brings me to the present day. I have finally started to meet more people, but everything has been changing from day-to-day. Our campus has finally announced that after Thanksgiving break, our campus will be full online with the number of COVID-19 cases spiking. Even before this announcement, my classes have already been moved fully online so not much in my schedule will be changing. Now instead of antigen testing once a week for students, the university has stated for those who choose to come back after the break, antigen testing will be mandatory twice a week. Before COVID-19, I imagined college as a time where I would be with friends all the time, but instead it feels like I have been stuck in my dorm with not much to do other than homework. With many people staying home after the break, I will also be staying home until after our winter break which ends in February. I am trying to think on the positive side and staying hopeful that once we get back for the spring semester, things on campus will go back to a relative normal, whatever that entails during this time.