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In Sickness and in Health in South Texas: Narratives of COVID's Impact

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### My COVID-19 Pandemic Experience

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## My COVID-19 Pandemic Experience

The SARS COVID-19 pandemic took on a longer lifespan than anyone in the general population would have expected. In my opinion, it is something that will never truly go away. But when I think about how the COVID-19 pandemic effected me, I don't think about that time near spring of 2020, when my undergraduate experience officially became a virtual one. I don't think about the year that followed, that of which was spent in complete isolation due to living with family members who were high risk for contracting the virus. I don't think about 2021 and how the fear of going to public places for the first time triggered actual symptoms of anxiety for the first time in my life. I don't even think about how the joy of being accepted into optometry school during the pandemic was clouded by the overwhelming worry for leaving my family at a point where COVID made it so evident that family and life is so fragile and can be so easily taken away from you.

None of those things really come to mind when I think about how this pandemic has effected me. More so, I think about the present. About the aftermath of what I went through as a symptom of these past few years. I think about how angry I feel that while the windstorm of COVID is finally passing us, the damage it left me to deal with is still very much present.

To most accurately portray how these emotions came to be, I will start from the beginning, when the pandemic was novel and in full swing. Due to the pandemic, I was put in a place in undergrad where I was able to finish my bachelors degree in 3 years. Online classes were much more flexible and allowed me to take a much heavier coarse load. Graduating early was not something I planned on, and not something that would have been possible if the pandemic was non-existent. But I am an opportunist, for better or worse, and decided to not only graduate early but apply to optometry school way earlier than I had planned. I got in. My life felt so lucky and expedited. I was 21, a 3 year graduate, got in to a doctoral program on my first try, and frankly, everyone around me gave me so much praise. I felt on top of the world. Until I wasn't.

What I went through the year that I matriculated into professional school could be a novel in itself. But to put it short, it was a series of events that I, to this day, am working actively to build myself back up from. Looking back, I did not have the maturity and was not yet ready, emotionally or psychologically, for what I was about to experience. During this first semester at school, I experienced a curriculum I did not know how to handle, with a mind that had never known what it felt like to fail. Going to school so far away during a pandemic meant not being able to interact with my family, who was still very guarded due to the virus and did not want to risk contact. I felt like I had no support system.

I do not blame the pandemic for the endeavors that I faced during it. In fact, I think that my life course would have been similar with or without this occurring. I believe that God has a path for us, and we will stumble upon that path one way or another. My path was meant to lead me through hard mental obstacles. I know this because now, I truly believe that this experience has welded me into having more drive, more ambition, and a more genuine source of empathy which I believe are all qualities that will make me a better doctor to my future patients. I really believe that I can look myself in the mirror and call myself a resilient person. Something that I never thought of myself as pre-pandemic.

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In the midst of this experience, I worked as tech at an ophthalmologist office. It is here where I met a patient whose story had me holding back tears, but what I will never forget are the words they said at the end, "I've gone through a lot yes. But people give thanks for less than I have." Whenever I even begin to feel that my situation is too much. I think of this. I remember that life is hard, and all I could do is take my experiences, build myself from them, and use what I've learned to improve someones quality of life however I can.