

Life Through the Pandemic

by

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As I began exploring ideas for my senior project the COVID-19 virus was taking over every aspect of our lives. It was spreading fast between people and a lot those infected were getting very sick. It seemed like people were dropping dead all around the world. Living through this pandemic I felt I wouldn't be able to start a project because nothing felt safe for me. I had to ask myself how I can work on a yearlong project when we don't really know what is going to happen the next day. I thought I would take what is holding me back and turn that into a project. I started to make a visual diary of what I was experiencing while living through a pandemic. Elinor Carucci's photographs from her photo diary, *A Photographers Diary of Life in Isolation* and filmmaker Salem Mekuria's video, *Square Stories* were inspirational in this regards. Carucci documented her everyday life while in the early parts of the pandemic during lockdown when we had to stay inside and only go out for essentials to combat the virus. While taking these personal photographs of her family and vulnerable moments she also was revealing her deep thoughts around what she has chosen to show us. Mekuria's video shows us the transformation of a city in Ethiopia over a decade, using multiple videos and sounds. With these artists in mind, I documented my own life through photographs, videos, and sound throughout this past year, capturing moments and examining them as things around me changed the world was in an uncertain state.

In my work I revealed different challenges I had faced in the past year, school was now online on Zoom, I had a job that didn't feel safe, my partners health was declining, and I had to move back home. With so many significant changes, there was no pause and, no time to think. We all had to keep moving, there wasn't much choice. Instead of meeting in person with my professors and classmates, I was meeting them online through a computer screen. I was

worried about having classes online, I thought it would be difficult to participate and learn. Although there were instances when people glitched, and the voice was broken, I found it easier to participate in class from the comfort of my home. I had more time to get work done. However, as much as Zoom gave me flexibility it made focusing difficult, and I felt added pressure to do well even though a new virus was controlling our lives unexpectedly. Learning and working on Zoom all day everyday was exhausting and caused a lot of burn out. My peers were disappointed that they didn't have the same access to tools they used to, and what they were doing didn't seem so important right now in the face of the pandemic. I made a video to express these feelings of uncertainty and the anxiety of being on Zoom. For the piece, *On Zoom* I took multiple videos of myself in front of a plain background looking into the camera as if I was on Zoom. Each time a video appeared on the screen I added a new audio to pair with it. The audio I used were recordings of lectures and conversations on Zoom from the past year. Eventually the screen is filled up with videos with overlapping audio. I wanted the video to slowly become overwhelming.

Learning new ways to do things had a lot to do with living with the virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was working at chipotle where I had been for a year. Due to the pandemic everything about my duties and title as a cashier changed. I would run back and forth from the counter to the main door handing food to people outside who ordered online since no one was allowed to come inside and order. We would get so many online orders that we wouldn't be able to keep up with it. We would be behind for hours and I would get so many angry customers. When you work in any type of customer service, you expect and get used to customers being mean occasionally, but once the pandemic hit, it was as if people went mad. I

would be yelled at, cursed, ran into, and treated less than a human. After a few months working into the pandemic, I quit as soon as my manager decided to allow people inside the restaurant without masks. With my partner and I both losing our jobs we had to think of something else to do for work so we could keep making rent money but also feel safe. That's when my partner heard about Doordash and how you can make money by delivering food to people's homes. I started to make images about that experience of the need to work.

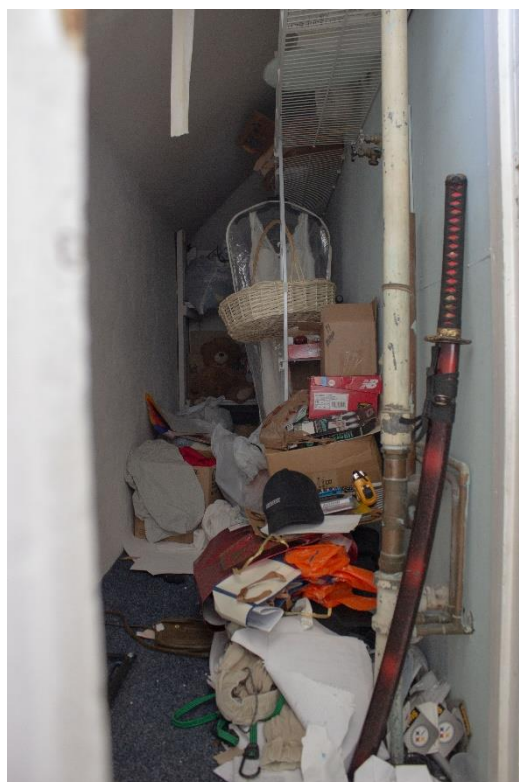


I would bring my camera along with me in the car while working and took pictures of what I was doing and ultimately question why I was still being made to work but also being grateful that I and others in the service industry had the opportunity to work independently after losing jobs because of the pandemic. Everyday Nathan, my partner, and I would be out all day in the car together going from different restaurants to customers as fast as we could. He would go inside restaurants to pick up the food and I would leave orders at the customers doors. The pay varied by day, but we were able to make enough to pay rent for the both of us.



When I look back at my experiences with work, I question why some people were allowed to stay home and protect themselves from the virus by staying indoors but others were still forced to go work with the public while risking their life for little money.

As the months went on Nathan's health kept declining due to his chronic illnesses and we couldn't keep up with Doordash work as he was in and out of the hospital. We had to come to the decision to move back into our parents' homes so he could focus on his health. While Nathan was in the hospital, I started packing up the whole apartment to get ready to move after Christmas of 2020. I photographed myself packing boxes and going through the messes we had made together.



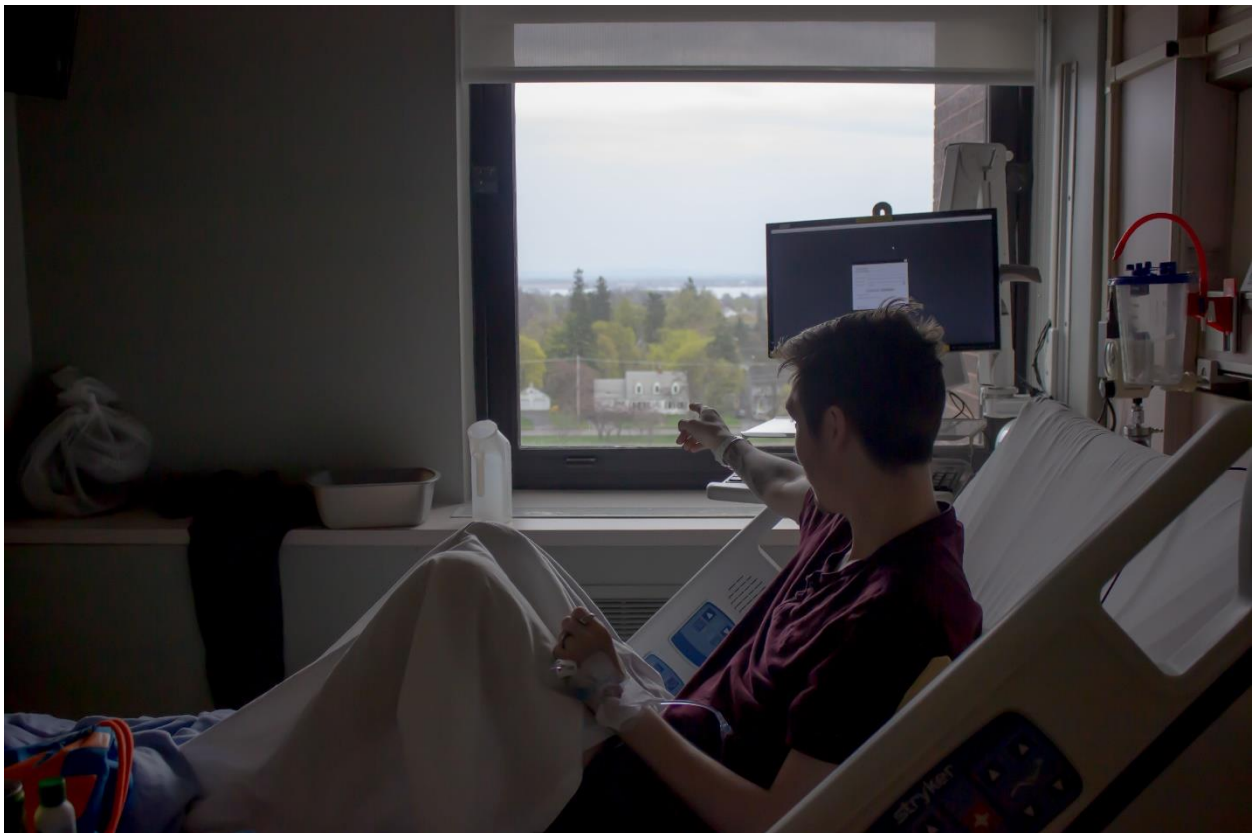


I didn't want to leave somewhere I really loved and as much as I love my family, I didn't want to move back into my childhood room and live separately from Nathan for the first time in years. But it was important to move back so Nathan could focus on his health. Nathan has had health issues since he was young, but his health really deteriorated this past year.



After being in the hospital multiple times he was finally diagnosed with celiac artery compression syndrome, medium arcuate ligament syndrome and chronic pancreatitis. He had to have surgery to release the ligaments near his heart to relieve the pain and then months later had feeding tube placed from losing so much weight from not being able to keep down any food because of his pancreas. It was difficult to watch Nathan go through these things especially during this time. Going to the hospital could expose you to the virus and Nathan would sometimes have to wait to be seen because of how full the hospital would be but people

who have chronic pancreatitis or other chronic illnesses need to go to hospital every now and then when they are having flare ups so they can get treatment. During most of the pandemic I wasn't allowed to see Nathan in the hospital because of new policies in place because of the virus, most hospitals wouldn't allow visitors for patients unless it was near end of life. I was able to visit him a few times when the rules were starting to loosen up. I was able to bring my camera and take pictures of him in his hospital bed and try to show what he is feeling with him pointing out the window with him sitting in a dark room by himself. It was hard for Nathan mentally to be alone in the hospital as he has spent most of his time in the hospital these past two years especially after his feeding tube was placed. He kept throwing up the tube and it was becoming more of a problem than a solution. Nathan is still on his health journey and with doctor appointments and tests in the future hopefully one day he can manage his symptoms and get more answers.





With no certainty of when this virus will be under control, I think photographing my experiences and expressing my feelings through photography and video helped me process a lot of what happened in the past year and half and accept the things I went through. There's a lot of pressure to get back to our normal lives now that there is a vaccine that can help protect you. It is hard to go back to normal when the virus is still spreading, and not enough people are vaccinated but I also do not think we should go back to normal. I don't think there is a way to go back to the time before the pandemic. I have learned so much and the way I think and my relationships and attitudes towards things such as school and work have changed for the better. I think we can only move forward even with virus still in our lives and we shouldn't forget all the things we went through but learn from them and question how we can do better in all areas of our life.

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