



IN THIS TOGETHER

A KANSAS CITY STORY





OUTBREAK. EPIDEMIC. PANDEMIC.

Then came the panic buying, the shutdowns and holding our collective breath, waiting for the surge in the Midwest.

But the pandemic couldn't — and didn't — keep all Kansas Citians inside. Not during a summer marked by mass protests against police violence. And especially not during a high-stakes presidential election.

For some, the past year has been an opportunity to pause and reflect. For others, it has been a time for survival and change.

The pandemic has brought a new vocabulary to our world: Shelter in place. Flatten the curve. Social distancing. PPE. Superspreader. Quarantine. N95. Contact tracing. Antibodies. And finally — vaccine.

It has also been a year of sobering statistics. Over 117 million confirmed cases worldwide; 2.6 million deaths; 114 million jobs lost.

But those aren't just numbers. They're people. As we reach the one-year milestone of living in the pandemic, we asked fellow Kansas Citians to reflect on how their lives have changed. From nurses on the frontline to students whose schooling was disrupted to those who lost loved ones to the virus. Some are first-person accounts. Others were interviewed by Beacon reporters.



The Beacon is a non-profit online news outlet focused on in-depth journalism in the public interest, covering Kansas and Missouri. Beacon stories are revelatory, contextual, data-driven and solutions-driven. Our reporting centers around issues in health care, education, economics, environment and civic engagement.

With the one-year milestone of living in the pandemic, we asked fellow Kansas Citians how their lives have changed.



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GARNICE ROBERTSON

LOSS AND GRIEF IN ISOLATION

A year since Garnice Robertson's mother died from COVID-19, she still relives those last few days together.

"I try not to think about it, but of course you can't help but think about it. The massive change this pandemic has done. It didn't really have to be the way that it is."

Robertson's mother, Georgia May, was 89 years old and lived in a nursing home, but she was healthy. Before the pandemic, Robertson visited her mother every morning.

One day in April, Robertson went to the nursing home to fill out paperwork. All hell broke loose, she said.

"They brought her down, and I had to see her through the glass. That was the day they told me the pandemic had hit the facility."

May was moved to the hospital. Robertson couldn't visit. When May was moved to comfort care, the hospital staff said one person could visit each day for an hour. Robertson was the first to visit. She wore full personal protective gear.

"She looked at me like, 'Who are you?' And then, 'What is wrong with you?'"

The nurses let her stay for four hours. Maybe they knew.

"When the nurse said I would have to leave, I said that's fine. I leaned over, and I kissed my mother, and said, 'I'm OK.' She was gone the next day. She didn't get to see another one of her children."

Still, Robertson is grateful.

"I would say, for those who are still struggling with this pandemic, take it one day at a time. Stay prayerful, stay faithful. Momma always said, 'And this too shall pass.'"

"Don't give into it, don't let COVID win, despite that it appears it has. Don't let that pandemic win. Stand up to it, be strong, and keep living."



Photo by Danielle Randle/The Beacon



Photo by Dominick Williams/The Beacon

JAMIE RECTOR

A NURSE MADE STRONGER ON THE
FRONTLINES OF COVID-19

I worked as a team lead nurse on a mobile disaster response team that traveled throughout the state of Texas from July 2020 to January 2021. The things that I've seen firsthand and the experiences I had with trying to save as many patients as possible during my time on the frontlines, it made me to where I cherish, even more, every tiny little moment that I get to have with my friends and family.

2020 was a year that I will never forget. I am grateful for the opportunity to remain COVID free after being exposed on a daily basis for months on end. I thank God that I am healthy enough to be able to provide my skills as a nurse, to be able to take care of some of the sickest patients during this horrible pandemic.

***"If it wasn't for my experiences
that I received while being on
the frontlines of COVID, I
wouldn't be this person."***

It's made me a stronger, more educated nurse. And I learned so much about myself and how strong I am physically and mentally, that I was able to keep going day after day by showing up and giving 110%.

I am proud to be the person I am today. And if it wasn't for my experiences that I received while being on the frontlines of COVID, I wouldn't be this person.



Photo by Dominick Williams/The Beacon

ANISSA BRANTLEY

A KU SENIOR COPES WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Like many others, my world turned upside down. It was the spring semester of my junior year at KU and I felt like things were starting to turn up. I had practically everything I wanted from the college experience. I worked my way up to earn the honorable role of president of my sorority, I was getting really close with a new group of friends who actually cared about me, and I had just achieved my goal GPA. I was about to turn 21 in May and I could see the light at the end of the tunnel for my future after college.

COVID-19 ultimately closed my sorority and I was forced to find a new place to live at the last minute for the fall. I was forced out of everything that brought me joy.

No more meetings, events, fundraisers, and silly late night talks

full of laughter. I put my heart into that organization and I felt like a failure. Everyone said it wasn't my fault, but it definitely felt like it. I was left to close the organization by myself while everyone else could start mourning. The depressive episode that followed the shutdown was devastating and something that I am still healing from ... (My sorority) gave me a sense of meaning that I always longed for. Everyone has their hobbies and Greek life happened to be mine.

In May 2020, my grandmother passed away, and in November, a member of my sorority passed away. Neither were due to COVID, but each deserved much more of a proper funeral than what was given.

Processing all of the things that went on in my life was a large mental

undertaking that I was nowhere near prepared for, and I was still expected to do well in school.

Many people had it worse than me, but a part of my growth has been validating my feelings and experiences. That has been the hardest but most fruitful solution to improving my mental health.

I left 2020 without an organization I was so proud to be a part of, friends and family that drifted apart and left this world, and a largely altered world view that took most of the optimism out of my usually joyful personality. I now keep masks in every nook and cranny and most of all, I cherish everything I still have, even the small things. My mantra for 2021 became "celebrate every tiny victory."

MARTY HILLARD

A LONGTIME MUSICIAN SEES EVERYTHING CHANGE

I am a longtime musician living in Topeka, Kansas. My last live performance was in Kansas City on Saturday, March 7, 2020, at Mills Record Company. My band, EBONY TUSKS, just completed a short run of regional dates in support of a new single that we released on vinyl. It felt triumphant to not only release new music to our community, but to also support LGBTQIA+ nonprofits along the way.

We were concurrently learning new information about COVID-19 from the news every day. I began to worry if our having live concerts at its advent was irresponsible and if it would result in members of our community falling ill. It's our intent to partner with venues and organizations that are committed to creating safe, accessible spaces. Thankfully, we were not alerted to any issues that could have arisen.

Unfortunately, members of my family and I contracted COVID-19 around (a decidedly solitary) Thanksgiving of 2020. This was after months of carefully navigating our home and city, every trip to the store including face masks and hand sanitizer in and out. I was stricken by how resentful I was, that both my wife and parents and daughter's godmother had to endure these debilitating symptoms despite our caution and distance from



Courtesy photo by Ailecia Ruscini

our loved ones.

There was so much uncertainty about how we could safely care for one another without getting anyone else sick. The aches, the shallow breathing and the fatigue were prolonged.

It's been enraging to see others carry on as if COVID-19 were not a once-in-a-century affliction, as if keeping others safe from this is a bridge too far. I've been alarmed by but not surprised at our local and state governance's open skepticism of the science behind our health department's communications,

despite nearly 4,800 Kansans dying from COVID-19. People amount to more than statistics on a line chart and should be treated as such.

My bandmate Daniel B. Smith said this about the vaccine rollout and I think it's reflective of America's complete approach to COVID-19 so far: "They aren't vaccinating people, they're vaccinating the economy." This has ultimately changed how I treat every remaining day I have in this life, how I choose to spend my time, and who I desire to spend it with.

CASE DAVIDSON

A DOWNSIZED COVID WEDDING MEANS MORE MONEY FOR A HOUSE

In a span of 12 hours last March, Case Davidson lost all of their freelance gigs. A murder mystery play? Cancelled. Acting as a patient for medical students studying at a local university? Cancelled. Teaching? Cancelled.

“It was kind of overwhelming and, of course, cosmically funny, because I’m just trying to figure out what to do with this heavy bin full of props and still wearing this ridiculous costume. I’m trying to navigate losing all these jobs at once.”



As Davidson’s work ground to a halt, there was another question looming: What about the wedding?

Davidson and their partner had planned a big June wedding at in downtown Kansas City. A guest list of 150 people. A long reception with plenty of time for dancing.

The pandemic threw everything out the window.

But Davidson still got married June 13 in the backyard of a friend’s mom’s house in Lee’s Summit. It was small and intimate — friends in the Kansas City area came as witnesses, and friends and family outside the area attended via YouTube livestream.

And about two months later, the newlyweds made an unexpected decision: With the money they saved from having a smaller wedding, they looked for a house. They found the perfect home the first weekend of house hunting in August just three blocks from their apartment in Hyde Park. It was perfect.

“When we came in, I was pretty much immediately just like, ‘This is it. This is what I want.’ But it just seemed to come together exactly how it was meant to if you believe in fate.”

The couple put in an offer. They moved in early September.

For Davidson, the pandemic has been a lesson in appreciating little things and staying connected with loved ones.

“Both with our wedding and with my different jobs, that’s been the thing that saved us — the flexibility and being able to work within whatever circumstances you’re presented with.”



Photo by Zachary Linhares/TheBeacon

STACY SHAW

A LAWYER CALLED TO ACTIVISM

Kansas City lawyer Stacy Shaw wasn't originally going to attend the protests after the killing of George Floyd in late May. She worried about getting maced or tear-gassed. Plus, there was COVID-19 to think about.

Shaw planned on representing protesters arrested by the police pro bono. That was going to be her part. She was in her law office on 39th street in midtown Kansas City with her younger sister when they saw protesters march by. Shaw grabbed a bullhorn in her office, and the two joined the crowd.

Shaw was the only person with a bullhorn. She began leading call and response chants as protesters walked south on Main Street, passing a QuikTrip gas station where police stood guard. She had never seen that kind of police But that was nothing

compared to the mass of officers, outfitted in riot gear, lined up in rows along Emanuel Cleaver II Boulevard and Mill Creek Parkway as protesters gathered in the park, she said. As Shaw got closer to the crowd, she saw an officer mace a young man.

"I run over and I just let myself in front of this kid to keep him from being maced. And the officer maces me in the back of my head."

The back of her neck burned under the heat of the afternoon sun.

"Seeing all of that raw violence and raw police brutality, that permanently changed me."

After that day, Shaw stepped into the role of a community activist speaking at the protests organized in Kansas City. She organized with young Black

activists and offered legal representation to any person arrested at a protest. She began wearing a black vest with "Lawyer" printed on the back at every protest.

Shaw never thought she would find herself regularly taking politicians to task on social media, leading protesters in the streets or spending 21 days sleeping in a tent outside City Hall.

"If you told me a year ago that I was going to be doing any of this, I'd be like, 'You're lying.'"

"I'm really glad that God has allowed me the opportunity to see ... and to experience these injustices firsthand, because that just makes me a stronger soldier and advocate for radical — not just incremental — but radical change as far as systemic racism and policing."

SARAH ROLLINS

A RURAL MOM SPEAKS UP IN SUPPORT OF A MASK MANDATE

As the pandemic swept through the Midwest in the summer, the town of Windsor, Missouri — population 3,000 — had no restrictions on businesses, no mask mandates and no virtual school options.

“Everybody out there basically called it a hoax.”

That made life difficult for Sarah Rollins, a 36-year-old single mom who quit two of her three part-time jobs last spring to stay home with her 8-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son. Down to just one minimum wage, part-time job, Rollins fell behind on bills. She applied for food stamps.

Rollins’ daughter is immunocompromised and still needed special education services. She was struggling. The school wasn’t responding to emails. They weren’t answering phone calls. A teacher who was supposed to come to the house wasn’t visiting.

The final straw came during a town meeting. Rollins, who worked for the city, voiced the need for a mask mandate and more restrictions.

“I basically got bullied at home and at work for the majority of the day. I mean, every day, it was just constant.”

Between that reaction and her



Photo by Danielle Randle/The Beacon

daughter’s issues with school, Rollins decided to move on. She found a new job quickly. She and her family moved within three weeks.

“It wasn’t worth it for me to keep my children there. They deserved better.”

The family moved to the Waldo neighborhood in south Kansas City the start of November. It was a move that changed their lives. Now, Rollins is able to make more money at her new

job, and her daughter can receive the help and attention she needs.

“I don’t feel like I have to constantly watch who I’m around, what I’m saying or what I’m doing because I’m around more like-minded people, not just politically, but on the COVID side of things.

“I know somebody’s not going to make fun of me because we all walk in with masks on.”

SUSAN MIKULECKY

HOSPITALIZED AS A COVID-19 PATIENT

Susan Mikulecky, 62, Overland Park, took three tests before testing positive for COVID-19. As the severity of her case increased, her husband brought her to St. Luke's South, where she was hospitalized for pneumonia. The hospital stay changed her, she said.

Mikulecky's symptoms began on Inauguration Day.

"I wouldn't ever think to ask my husband to get something from the refrigerator if I was lying on the couch. I would get up and get it myself.

But the fatigue was unlike anything else.

"Things started getting progressively worse. I realized I couldn't breathe deeply at all."

"I was constantly amazed at how good the treatment was. I was so taken by how great the nursing care was."

Her husband watched her sleep out of concern. The next morning, he grabbed her shoulders and told her they were going to the hospital.

"All I could think of was, 'Oh gosh, I'm not that bad, am I?'"

It was the first time she'd been hospitalized in 25 years — since the birth of one of her children. The doctor told her she would have to stay five days for a course of

antiviral medication.

"It was strange not having anyone there, so I told myself I was going to pretend I was at a spa. Maybe that was my deliriousness."

She stayed in touch with her husband and friends through her phone during her visit and left the hospital a day early.

"I was constantly amazed at how good the treatment was. I was so taken by how great the nursing care was."

She reached out to customer service to praise her nursing staff.

"I think that was the start of my gratitude thing. I just feel a little more grateful every day for anything and everything, and especially for my husband for watching me so close and taking me in."



Courtesy photo

CHRIS HERSHEY

HOW THE PANDEMIC CHANGED THE NOVEMBER 2020 ELECTION

The November 2020 election was the second presidential election Chris Hershey has worked as an election official. Hershey, 40, is the director of elections for Platte County.

“Absentee voting was extreme. We had lines for absentee voting that were 45 minutes or more, stretching down the street in front of our building, which is something we’ve never seen before.”

But, he said, that absentee voting contributed to a smooth Election Day.

“I expected a lot of problems with lines and people with differing opinions on masking and things like that to come up. There also was anxiety around the possibility of armed groups in front of poll sites.

“People seemed pretty accommodating and understanding, and there seemed to be a good community spirit going into voting day.”

For election workers, the November election took a toll.

“Personally, I was kind of surprised by how long it took to unwind from the election. I noticed I was still feeling it for five weeks afterward. I just had to take a breather and calm down.”

For the upcoming April election, Hershey said nothing has changed. Voters will even be using commemorative 2020 single-use pens because of over-ordered supplies.

“We’re still voting in a pandemic. As far as our processes and concern about infection awareness, we’re basically still in the exact same spot as we were last fall.”

And election workers are continuing to do their jobs while unvaccinated.

“We’re seeing more face-to-face contact with the public, and I really hoped we would have been able to be vaccinated by the time we started doing that. ... It’s kind of frustrating.”



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon



Photo by Zachary Linhares/The Beacon

REV. ERIC WILLIAMS

REINVENTING A DISPLACED CONGREGATION

Rev. Eric Williams' congregation was already displaced when COVID-19 hit. Their church burned down in March of 2019, and since then they had worshipped at a wellness center. The pandemic meant no gatherings.

"So I said, let's use the space. My running joke is that when we started our food distribution, we had two cans of Spam and some macaroni with no cheese."

After starting a food distribution center, the congregation got access to the Harvesters food bank.

"We've probably given away 90,000 pounds of food over these last few months. It's an incredibly warm sense

to know that you helped, and to see gratitude on people's faces."

The pandemic made him more sensitive to the needs of others, he said.

***"We look over the edge
at people, when we
ought to be with them a
little more frequently."***

"We've seen so much insecurity, people struggling with bills, homelessness, people being forced out of their places."

The pandemic helped him see

something that he calls "the pain in the valley."

"Sometimes, people who are helpers or leaders, we stand on the top of the mountain and look down to people. Far away, you don't see it. You don't see the pain in the valley, those people forced to live there because of income or race or other forms of inequality."

Often, people isolate themselves from others in circumstances of inequality.

"We look over the edge at people, when we ought to be with them a little more frequently."



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

NEHA SINGH

MEDICAL STUDENT TURNED COVID-19 VACCINATOR

When Neha Singh and a group of fellow medical students at Kansas City University went to the airport together to leave for spring break in March of 2020, they said, “See you next week.”

“And then, that never happened. We never came back. We had to transition to online learning when we’re used to being on campus, going to the library, studying with friends. Celebrating the wins and losses with each other. And all of that just changed.”

Singh was just stepping in as Student Government Association president.

“The role that I thought I was going to take was completely different than what ended up happening. I was

realizing I could barely handle myself. I didn’t know how I was going to take care of a class of 270 students. But we made it work.”

The pandemic changed the way the medical students approached school.

“I think that this moment signifies even more than any other opportunity we will get in our lives.”

“We were very focused on doing the best that we can, and being on top of the line at school. But as the pandemic came, I think a lot of students started shifting their focus on mental health and taking care of ourselves, as well as the people around us.”

The first day of KCU’s vaccination clinic, Jan. 15, was the first time Singh got to see most fellow students since the beginning of the pandemic. The clinic gives the students, who are now second-year students, the opportunity to serve as COVID-19 vaccinators.

“I think that this moment signifies even more than any other opportunity we will get in our lives. We were part of the century pandemic, and we’re pretty sure that even in one clinic where we vaccinate 500 people, we might have just saved five lives that day.

It’s good to know we were part of such a big movement, and not many people are going to get to say that in the long run.”

VICKIE SMITH

A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY ISOLATES

Before the pandemic, Vickie Smith, 75, was a social butterfly. She spent time with friends at the Don Bosco Senior Center in the Columbus Park neighborhood. She played pool and danced.

Now, without being able to go to the center, Smith's days look a lot different.

"I clean the house and sit here and eat, that's about it. I do get out sometimes. I'll use one of my free rides to go to a Walmart or Target that's got a Starbucks close to them. It's the only vice I have.

Green tea frappuccino... I like their crispy grilled cheese, too."

Smith's favorite Starbucks location was downtown, where the employees got to know her while her husband was in the hospital. But that location closed at the start of the pandemic. Smith also stays home for her doctor appointments now, which are over the phone.

"It's not the same as seeing them, really. It's more impersonal."

Before the pandemic, she used the Road to Recovery service to get to her doctor appointments.

"They're the most wonderful people. That got canceled the moment the pandemic started. Because they are just volunteers, and they have their families. It's understandable, but I do miss that, because you get to know each other."

"My first (volunteer) was Pat, and she was such a little gal, but she was just so sweet. I miss her a lot."

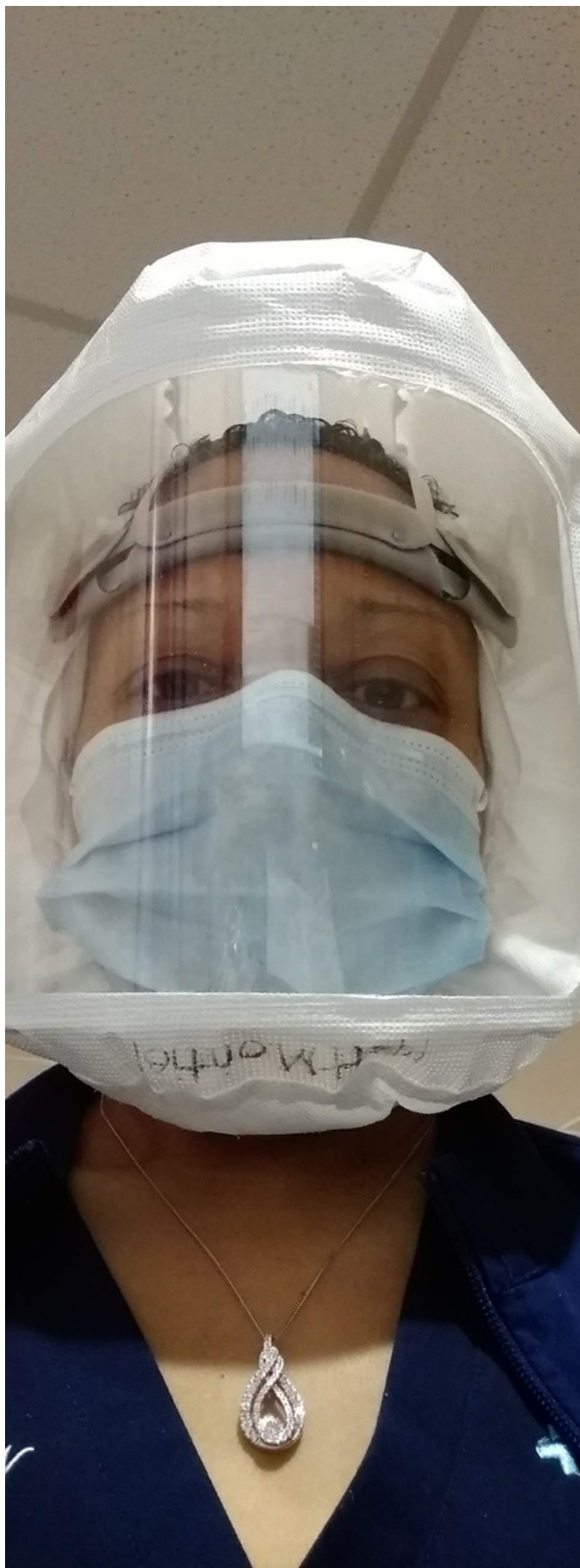
When Smith can return to the senior center at the end of the pandemic, things will be different.

"Some of the people I know, I have found out have died. Some died from COVID, and some died from the other health problems they had.

"Just the fact that I wasn't down there seeing them, and then they died. It's weird."



Photo by Zachary Linhares/The Beacon



DEBORAH MAXWELL

KEEPING THE FAITH IN HARD TIMES

Every day driving to work during the pandemic, Deborah Maxwell thought it might be the last.

“I felt like I was going to die, if I’m going to be serious. I felt like this was the end.”

Maxwell, 55, is a travel nurse who usually works in California during the winter, and spends the rest of the year at home in Kansas City. Her daughter wanted her to stay in Kansas City during the pandemic, but she didn’t feel like she could quit her job in California, where the pandemic was hitting harder, and she was needed most.

Maxwell came back to Kansas City just once, in April of 2020, for her daughter’s birthday, which she has never missed. She was able to fly with documents from her employer stating she was an essential employee.

“So I came home, but I still couldn’t be with her. She came and waved at me from the driveway. I was crying because that’s my first time not being around my baby.”

For Maxwell, at the beginning, the pandemic seemed never-ending. She found herself constantly praying for her patients, even on her days off. Sometimes she came back to work and found that patients had died while she was gone.

“There were just so many deaths. Probably as many as through my whole career. It takes a lot of prayer to keep you going.”

That faith has made her stronger, she said.

“I’ve seen God at work, bigger than ever, even though a lot of my patients, especially the initial ones I was praying for, didn’t make it. I still have faith.”

While Maxwell is continuing the same work, and the pandemic is still ongoing, she said she doesn’t feel the same sadness she did at the start of the pandemic. She says getting the vaccine hasn’t made her feel any different.

“I still have to wear a mask. I still have to protect myself.”

TERRENCE WISE

RISKING PERSONAL SAFETY TO PROVIDE FOR HIS FAMILY

Terrence Wise couldn't stay home. He had to keep going to work at a McDonald's in Kansas City. He didn't really have a choice. He needed to provide for his family.

Wise, 41, was labeled an "essential worker," and McDonald's gave Wise and his coworkers a slip of paper saying so, just in case they were

stopped by police during the citywide shutdown.

But Wise didn't feel like he was being treated like one.

"I started to question, 'Are we really essential?' We had to fight just for protective gear, masks and gloves, in our store during the pandemic."

Wise voiced those concerns during a national McDonald's press conference call in April. Workers at his store still didn't have sneeze guards or any kind of protective equipment. The next day, Wise and his co-workers received their first shipment of masks and gloves. Sneeze guards were finally put up.

It was the same feeling he'd had eight years earlier — when he went on strike for the first time. He got a raise — of 25 cents — the next day.

"I was encouraged. Like, man, this is what you gotta do to win."

But Wise was still struggling. His hours were cut during the pandemic. Less money was coming in. His family fell behind on rent. A sheriff has recently been knocking on their door — the family is at risk of eviction again. Still, as COVID-19 cases kept rising, Wise kept working. It led him to make tough choices. Like going to work sick or otherwise risk losing out on pay.

He has his family to think about. His three girls and his fiancée.

"I don't want them to be without food. ... And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to ensure those things don't happen. So if that means me going to work sick or with a cold or fever, whatever the case may be, I'm most likely going to do that. But I don't feel like it has to be that way."



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

ZACH MOORES

STAYING AFLOAT IN SMALL BUSINESS

Zach Moores misses what coffee shops used to be. A place for gathering. Friendly conversations. Morning prework chats. Shooting the breeze with regulars. It's what Moores, 45, often cherished about being an owner of Crows Coffee in Kansas City.

But the pandemic put a halt to those kinds of interactions. People just aren't having the same conversations over cups of coffee anymore. Moores shut down his three Crows Coffee locations from mid-March to April. Then the coffeeshops opened for takeout only.

As a business owner, Moores was scared. There was a lot of confusion in the pandemic's early months about what businesses should be doing. Moores thought about the worst-case scenarios.

His mental state was in shambles.

He didn't know what the future of the pandemic would bring, or what it meant for Crows.

***"We're social animals,
and we need these
interactions in our life."***

"Part of me was a little frozen. I didn't know what to do. I think in some ways, I look back on it, I think I was kind of waiting for somebody to kind of tell me what to do, like, this is how you should be handling this."

Crows reopened indoor seating in September. Moores remembers one morning in particular, when a group of regulars he hadn't seen in a long time came inside the cafe.

Masks on, they sat down at a table, talking and laughing like there was no pandemic.

It was a 45-minute-long snapshot of what life was like before the pandemic.

And it was the best morning Moores had had in a long time.

"It reminded me ... we do need this. We're social animals, and we need these interactions in our life. And even though we're not getting that right now, it just was reassuring."

He knows many people haven't been getting that same coffee experience during the pandemic. But when they do, Moores — and Crows — will be ready.





Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

ASHLEY JOHNSON

A LIFE-CHANGING FIGHT

Ashley Johnson was supposed to be sheltering in place.

But there were a lot of problems with the house. Mice. Bugs. A leaky roof.

In September, Johnson got a call from her daughter while she was at work. Everything had been taken: the refrigerator, the stove, the washing machine, the dryer. The landlord filed an eviction notice, leaving Johnson and her kids without shelter in the middle of a pandemic.

“We just wanted the house to be livable. And to know that someone is willing to go through the things that they did just to get us out? ... I guess it took a lot out of me mentally.”

It was difficult to find a new place to live. Johnson and her kids bounced back and forth from Airbnbs to

friends’ couches.

***“I feel honored and
I feel blessed to be in
that position to let
people know that it's not
the end.”***

Then Johnson got a call from KC Tenants: She had been chosen as a fellow with the local housing advocacy group, which fights for tenants’ rights.

“I know what it is to be in that fight. It's life-changing.”

The eviction hearing was scheduled for October. But Johnson didn’t go into court that morning. Instead, she stood outside the Jackson County Courthouse in downtown Kansas City along with fellow protesters.

Together, they blockaded the doors and shut down the eviction courts — online and in person. Johnson’s case was dismissed along with over a hundred others.

It was one of many actions that Johnson participated in. There was the protest along Interstate 70 in April. There was the protest outside a local judge’s house after a tenant was shot during an eviction.

It was a light in an otherwise dark year.

“I feel honored and I feel blessed to be in that position to let people know that it's not the end.”

HOWARD HANNA

A CELEBRATED RESTAURANT TURNS INTO A COMMUNITY KITCHEN

In mid-March, chef Howard Hanna, 45, knew that it didn't feel right to keep The Rieger open in the middle of a global pandemic. He wanted to keep his staff together. And there were going to be hungry people in need of food.

So the Crossroads Community Kitchen was born.

"I felt empowered... It was like, 'Hey, there's this horrible thing happening in the world. And we have a job to do here, and we have a responsibility to help.'"

The Rieger team started cooking with the food they already had. They made about 20 meals the first day. The next day, the meals tripled. Then they tripled again.

"It just snowballed. And we turned into a full-on community kitchen."

Their kitchen was feeding anybody facing food insecurity. And there were so many, like the unhoused folks living in the downtown community who would come for a meal.

"We got to know them on a much deeper level, and got to hear about their lives and hear about their problems and their issues. It was shocking — the lack of access to safe



Photo by Danielle Randle/The Beacon

and affordable housing, the lack of access to health care and the lack of access to healthy food."

Hundreds of meals. Then thousands. The community kitchen began connecting with shelters, hospitals, churches.

Requests for orders grew. Donations poured in.

By summer, they sometimes cooked over a thousand meals a day. Hanna and his team wrote menus on the fly.

When it shut down in the fall, the Crossroads Community Kitchen had served 85,000 meals. The experience radicalized Hanna even more.

He used to think incremental change was enough. But the pandemic made Hanna realize the restaurant industry can't go back to the way things were before. The old way is no longer a system he wants to be a part of.

"I don't want to work in a restaurant if it means we survive on the exploitation of our workers."



Photo by Zachary Bauman/The Beacon

MIKE MITCHELL

WORK-AT-HOME PARENTS GROW IN APPRECIATION FOR CHILDCARE, NEIGHBORS

The last time Mike Mitchell traveled for work, he got a sticker from a conference in Las Vegas saying, “Stay safe, don’t shake hands.”

That’s when it hit him.

Back in Kansas City, Mitchell, 37, and his wife suddenly found themselves working from home. The early childhood center for their 3-year-old daughter shut down.

There was a lot of juggling at the beginning, between full-time work and child care. Mitchell and his wife just couldn’t answer every email or complete every project during normal working hours. They would sometimes wake up at 4 a.m. or stay up late just to get work done.

“It felt a lot like pandemonium in our house at times.”

In late spring, the parents decided to enroll their daughter in a school that was still open.

“I’m glad we made that decision. But in the moment, (there were) numerous long family conversations about, ‘is this the right choice? Is it safe?’”

It was a decision that returned some sense of sanity back in their lives. With work trips cancelled, Mitchell was able to spend more time with his family. He was home for every meal, every dinner. He was there for bedtime with Ella.

One night, the family decided to bring a speaker out to their front yard. It was a way to get to know their neighbors.

“Everybody was Zooming and FaceTiming. And that’s great. But

seeing a smiling face in real life matters still.”

The front yard became their primary social environment. They moved their fire pit and a heater to the front when it was cold. They played music, had dance parties, set up a kiddie pool, put up a movie projector. Anyone in the neighborhood was welcome.

Now, people who were previously just neighbors are close friends.

“Multiple neighbors that we had never met before, and even the neighbors we had, we developed a closer bond with them because, you know, you can’t go anywhere.

“So it’s like, what do you do? You pull up a lawn chair, and you sit up front.”

PASCALINE MUHINDURA

COVID-19 DEATH THROUGH A NURSES EYES



Pascaline Muhindura, 39, knew the pandemic was coming. It was only a matter of time.

In mid-March of 2020, the intensive care unit at Research Medical Center was full of COVID-19 patients. The floor Muhindura worked on was turned into a COVID-19 unit shortly after.

“The floodgates opened. It just happened so quickly.”

As a nurse for six years, Muhindura watched as COVID-19 changed her relationships with her patients. She used to enjoy connecting with patients by touching their hand, offering a smile. The pandemic took those moments away.

Now, patients couldn’t see her smile through a mask.

“That was one of the biggest concerns, like, ‘Oh my gosh, these people are dealing with this.’ And now we’re coming in looking like robots.”

And when hospitals barred visitors, leaving patients isolated and alone, nurses filled in as both physical and emotional support.

“Everyone expected us to go in the room when no one wanted to go in the room. So that was hard to grasp. Because, hey, we came into this profession to help people. And it just seems like now nobody cared that we might be in danger.”

It was the deaths, and how nurses had to handle deaths, that rattled her. Death became something handled over a video call. Muhindura would hold the tablet — the conduit between a patient and their loved ones.

She could never get used to it.

“They can’t see them. And the only way they’re going to see them is on FaceTime, and that’s how they’re saying goodbye. That was probably one of the most difficult things.”

Despite the immense mental stress, Muhindura advocated for better conditions and protections for herself and her fellow nurses during the pandemic.

“That has definitely woken me up. I never thought of myself as an advocate. But I love that I can do that.”

Photo by Dominick Williams/The Beacon



Courtesy photo

MARY MOORE

A SENIOR LOOKS FORWARD TO RECLAIMED LIFE AFTER VACCINATION

In the last year, Mary Moore, an 84-year-old resident of St. Luke's Bishop Spencer Place, an assisted and independent living facility, learned she's an introvert.

The pandemic, she said, hasn't been terrible for her.

Maybe it's because her late husband, a Navy general officer, had three different one-year deployments, which helped her know she's strong enough to get through isolation.

Or maybe it's because of how her generation was raised.

"We were not constantly overwhelmed and entertained as children, so we've carried that ability to adapt pretty well and to use our own imaginations, and to learn to

read and expand our world within a small space." Moore's family couldn't visit her at Bishop Spencer Place during the pandemic. And each time she left to visit them, she quarantined in her room for two weeks after returning. Meals and mail were delivered, and a housekeeper still visited.

"It was like party central down there when they were doing the vaccine because we hadn't seen each other for so long."

After leaving to see her sick brother, and later to go to his funeral, she spent almost all of September isolated.

"I watched a good deal of TV. I was on the internet. I purposefully sought out

things I could learn about. I enjoy animal postings. I thought to myself how much I did regret not having pursued dressage, because there was a lot on the internet about equestrian things, and I loved that."

The time, she said, wasn't wasted. And Moore received her first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in January.

"It was like party central down there when they were doing the vaccine because we hadn't seen each other for so long. We weren't sure we could recognize each other after so long."

The other day, a fellow resident stopped by her door for the first time since the pandemic began. Moore looks forward to more exchanges like this.

"It feels lighter to know that we are protected."

BRANDON HENDERSON

A STUDENT LEADER STEPS BACK TO PRIORITIZE WELL-BEING

When classes at the University of Missouri-Kansas City went virtual, 21-year-old Brandon Henderson was campaigning to be president of the Student Government Association. After three days of voting, Henderson won. By one vote.

But he couldn't celebrate the win. All classes were online. He was alone, isolated in his apartment, and it felt like navigating a ship through uncharted territory.

The last weekend of May, Henderson joined the Black Lives Matter protests near the Country Club Plaza.

Just a few days later, his National Guard unit was deployed to St. Louis, where his team guarded a police station.

"I will never forget the way that the people protesting looked at me as they were walking down the street. And it was very heartbreaking, to be honest. Because I was them, two days ago."

After returning to Kansas City, getting back into the student mindset was



Photo by Dominick Williams/The Beacon

difficult. As the semester dragged on, Henderson began to neglect his academic responsibilities. He stopped taking care of himself, stopped working out and wasn't eating or sleeping consistently. He lost interest in things he liked — going to meetings, talking to people.

In November, Henderson posed a hypothetical question to his vice president: If he resigned, would she do the job?

"When she told me 'yes,' that was when it got to the point where I could not stop thinking about just pulling

the trigger on it and doing it."

So he resigned. School became his main focus. He ate consistently, worked out more, slept seven hours every night. He began talking with someone at the counseling center. And he learned to say no.

"That was something that I could not do before. ... I thought that by saying no to someone, I am letting them down or something like that, or I'm not doing my job. And I think that it's important for people to know that you can't help anybody if you are not at 100% yourself."



Courtesy photo

JESSICA PALM

THE PANDEMIC BABY EXPERIENCE

When Jessica Palm and her husband had a gender reveal party for their now-19-month-old son, Lincoln, they hosted around 50 of their friends at their house to celebrate.

This time, it's a Zoom call. Their second child is due in July.

"That's been a little difficult. But I keep reminding myself that in the grand scheme of things, it's all temporary."

The Palms are lucky — their day care took precautions and stayed open throughout the pandemic.

But from March through May, it was primarily open to families of essential workers, so they kept Lincoln home.

"He participated in all of our calls, and we just adjusted and tag-teamed whose turn it was to watch him."

By the time Palm sent Lincoln back to day care, he thought her laptop was a toy. He'd wave at the TV when people were on it, thinking it was a Zoom call.

"It has been really difficult to feel like you're missing some of those first things with a child."

Now, Palm is grateful for the time with Lincoln at home. They could play in the park in the middle of the day, go on a walk or play with sidewalk chalk.

Things that otherwise she could normally only do on the weekend.

"I got to see him, over the course of the last year, take his first steps and say 'momma' for the first time, and just be there for him and help him learn and thrive.

"But at the same time, it has been really difficult to feel like you're missing some of those first things with a child, like taking them on vacation or going to the zoo or the Deanna Rose Farmstead or going to the lake for the weekend."

Now, Palm is looking forward to having another child.

"We wanted our kids to be close in age and kind of took the philosophy that life is still happening even though COVID is still around."



ERIC BUNCH

A CITY COUNCILMAN ZOOMS FROM HOME

When Kansas City Councilman Eric Bunch was elected in 2019, he didn't think responding to a global pandemic would be in the job description.

Then the Big 12 men's basketball tournament was cancelled. Bunch, 38, was in downtown Kansas City when he heard the announcement. He watched as Iowa State fans loaded up their cars, leaving long before the tournament was supposed to be over.

At that moment, he knew.

"Just the realization that ... this has a big economic impact on our city, and we're willing to forego that for people's safety and health. That, I think, was the real lightning bolt for me or the lightbulb for me that this is real."

Bunch and his wife had to figure out how to balance full-time, demanding jobs with virtual homeschooling and child care for their 4-year-old twins and 7-year-old son — that became the No. 1 priority. It was a "figure it out as it goes" situation.

"Some of it was just, let's tread water and make sure that we stay afloat."

Bunch takes phone calls and TV interviews with his kids in the background. He stopped apologizing when they crash in.

"Kids hop in, in the middle of a legislative session when I'm making a vote. And, you know, that's part of it. I think the more we try to hide that, and the more that we try to pretend that things are normal, I think the harder it becomes, and the less empathy we all have for each other."

The pandemic has also placed a particular pressure on elected officials like Bunch.

He sees how the pandemic affects Kansas Citians, from the small-business owners who had to close down to residents suddenly without housing. And he also sees how local government can directly change lives.

"When we meet on Thursday afternoons to vote on things, those are the things that we're really impacting, and that has become all the more clear with this and realizing just how dependent folks are on us."



Photo by Zach Bauman/The Beacon

MELISSA RILEY

A NEW BEST FRIEND AMID THE CRAZINESS AND UNKNOWN

When Melissa Riley visited KC Pet Project in March of 2020, she had been looking for a dog for six months.

Then she saw Bella — a sweet, white-furred, 10-pound maltese and poodle mix — and fell in love. As Riley walked up to the glass, Bella wagged her tail, not scared at all. She seemed calm, loving, happy.

“I think that all that combined, truly, was what sold me, that I was like, ‘I have to have her.’”

The adoption was Riley’s last hurrah before the pandemic. As Kansas City went under stay-at-home orders, Riley remembers the eeriness of driving to work and not passing any cars. Amid the craziness and the unknown around her, Bella became her best friend, her companion, her cheerleader, her rock.

And she still is.

Bella’s been with Riley through it all, particularly as she battled the stresses of being a frontline nurse in the emergency room at a local hospital.

“You can have the worst day, and then you come home and they’re just so happy to see you.”

The emergency room was a difficult environment to navigate during the pandemic. Precautions increased. Every patient was treated as if they had COVID-19.

Still, Riley always tried to treat patients and their families as if she were in their shoes. Even when it meant getting on the phone to tell

family members that their loved one had passed. Those conversations will stay with her forever.

“That was just heart wrenching, literally having to be on a phone line like that, telling someone that their loved one is either A) Going to pass, or B) Had passed.”

Having Bella helped Riley separate the immense stresses of work from her personal life. She’s kept her motivated. She’s been a pick-me-up between work shifts. And when Riley takes her on walks, she notices the way Bella can attract a smile from a passing stranger — even behind a mask.

“You can have the worst day, and then you come home and they’re just so happy to see you. They’re so full of energy and love, and it’s really amazing.”



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

MISCHELLE KEMP

FROM CAREGIVER TO PATIENT

On Friday, March 20, 2020, a patient with low oxygen levels and a high fever came into the clinic where Mischelle Kemp, 46, worked as a family nurse practitioner.

“We had to get permission from the health department to even test someone. And there were a couple of times I called and got rejected. You had to get history, you had to take a flu test, rule that out before you could even call the health department.”

Kemp found out that one of the patient’s coworkers had recently gone to India and flew back through France, which had an active epidemic alert.

“I can remember that kind of angst about, oh my gosh, this is the first one, and making sure I had the gown, the mask. I swabbed him, and he

walked out of my clinic.

Within an hour, he was at Research (Medical Center).”

The intensive care doctor at Research called Kemp about when to expect COVID-19 test results. He didn’t think the patient would live through the weekend.

When Kemp returned to work on Monday, she had a fever. Her boss told her to swab herself and go home. While she waited four days for test results, she grew sicker each day. The test results were positive, and she took an ambulance to Research on March 30.

“I remember rolling through the door, and all of the nurses at the nurse’s station stopped and were staring at me. It was a horrible, eerie feeling.

“Getting into the room, my vitals were terrible. I kept staring at the monitor, thinking I could make it change. I finally said, ‘OK God, if it’s my time to go, I’ll go.’”

But Kemp pulled through and was sent home after four days. She spent 20 more days in isolation at home.

She asked her infectious disease doctor about her patient. She had been holding onto hope that he was still alive. The doctor told her he was still alive and awake, but on dialysis.

A week later, on May 14, Kemp’s patient died.

“We were the same age. He had no medical problems. So I still struggle with that. Why did I make it and he didn’t?”

FATIMA GONZALEZ

A HIGH SCHOOL PODCASTER OPENS UP

My school district was the only district that decided to strictly do online school since the beginning of the year and we have yet to be in the classroom.

I wanted to do something specifically for high school students that are currently struggling with changes because of the pandemic.

I wanted to be able to bring a ripple of hope and change during this difficult time. I decided that I would start a podcast: Amiga Advice, which begins: “Welcome to the podcast with advice from one amiga to another amiga.”

“I wanted to use my platform to bring awareness to the importance of mental health.”

For the first episode, I brought Amaya Starks, a fellow senior, to talk about the education system and how the pandemic affected education.

I wanted the second episode to be very sincere and candid, so I did it myself. I talked about my mental health journey and different methods I used to overcome anxiety. I wanted to use my platform to bring awareness to the importance of mental health.

In episode three, I had Sasha Reid, another VTT member. Sasha had already mentioned that she wanted to talk about representation of people of color in predominantly white communities. I knew that many people in my community have suffered a lot with racism and systemic racism.

One of our most successful episodes was with Warriors for Wyandotte on how violence grew in the community when the pandemic started. Afterwards the CEO posted, “We are so proud of her for going out of the norm and spreading her wings. ... She is the perfect example of being the change.”

Discussing these topics will bring hope and awareness to youth, which was the ultimate goal of this podcast. This is an exciting experience because I’m learning through my peers and I’m spreading awareness to my community. Amiga Advice has allowed me to begin my journey to complete my dream.



Courtesy photo

EVONNE MERANO

A TEACHER'S LESSONS FROM VIRTUAL CLASSES

For Evonne Medrano, virtual teaching had a learning curve, but now she's found her groove. So much so that she just committed to teaching online with Lee's Summit's R-7 Online Academy for another year.

Originally, Medrano moved to teaching online because she was in a high-risk group, and she invited a new challenge. She said she has struggled with holding students and families accountable in their learning.

"If I'm doing a math lesson in class, I am able to walk and monitor the room and ask those one-on-one questions because I'm seeing them do the work. It's easier to connect and conference with them on something they are having trouble with." Online,



Courtesy photo

sometimes students don't share their screen or skip their math lesson. Or it might look like they are working, but they are really drawing or watching YouTube.

"What's hard is letting go of things that I used to have control over, and putting it in other folks' hands. It's just not the way it used to be."

Medrano said teaching during the pandemic also opened up her mind to issues in equity and inclusion of students.

"Not all students have access to the same things as others, whether it is internet access ... or having the support at home."

Medrano has made home visits to all of her students to drop off school materials when parents can't pick them up in time and to just show

support for students and parents.

Medrano also changed her teaching process to support students socially and emotionally. She hosts small groups, where students talk about things like Minecraft, a twice-weekly lunch group, and also a cooking club.

"I think they are just really missing that extracurricular thing or friend time. I try to make that time for them to connect to each other and then also to me as their teacher."

During the pandemic, Medrano reflected on why she's still a teacher after 17 years. She's grateful to be a part of the learning journey of her students and families.

"I think I've had more opportunity in this whole online experience to learn from my students and grow from them than when I was in the classroom."

IRENE CAUDILLO

LOVE WITHOUT HUGS

Irene Caudillo celebrated her mother's 95th birthday with her family in February 2020. It was the kind of big family celebration Caudillo loved. Weeks later, with the pandemic causing citywide shutdown orders, Caudillo and her family decided to keep her mother in a bubble to protect her.

The decision meant an end to the family gatherings and the Sundays that were always spent with family. It was an absence felt over the holidays, birthdays and anniversaries — times that normally would have been cause for celebration.

"Being so close to a large family where those were suddenly gone, you're missing the hugs, you're

missing the get-togethers, you're missing the food. You're missing everything that brought you together."

As the president of El Centro, a social services organization dedicated to the Latinx communities in Johnson and Wyandotte counties, Caudillo saw the need that grew out of the pandemic. There were folks who didn't receive the stimulus check, people who didn't qualify for unemployment.

El Centro never slowed down. Caudillo and her staff helped with rent, utilities and food.

But moving to mostly virtual work was still tough for Caudillo, who prefers hugs over handshakes.

"As a Latina who didn't shake hands, I did a lot of hugging. And my welcoming to people was always

around hugging someone when I saw them and valuing some social time before and after meetings, and really making sure that that was a part of my world."

Without hugs and family gatherings, Caudillo turned to FaceTime, Zoom and even a family group chat to keep in touch with her mother and family living in different states.

And although Caudillo misses those family celebrations, the pandemic has allowed her to spend more quality time with her three college-aged kids. Now, she's able to cook dinner for them, sit down at the table together and have a conversation.

"We had a lot more conversations than I probably would have with my previous schedule. And I don't want that to change."



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

SLOANE MCKINNEY

FROM REMOTE HIGH SCHOOL TO REMOTE COLLEGE

fore Spring Hill High School moved to virtual learning, Sloane McKinney and her classmates made jokes about the possibility of the pandemic.

So the mandatory stay-at-home order came as a shock.

"I have had trouble with anxiety for a very long time, and I am very reliant on my schedule. I am a creature of habit. I like to do the same things every day."

A high school senior, she was unsure her life would ever go back to the way it was before.

"It took a lot of practice to tell myself it's OK if life isn't exactly how it was before."

It was difficult for me to find the motivation to continue with my schoolwork and finish out my last semester."

When she moved from Olathe, Kansas, to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to start school at the University of Arkansas in August, classes were still remote.

"It was different. I had never met these professors before. And it becomes difficult when I do not have any classes in person, so I have to find ways that I'm not in my room by myself for long periods of time."

So McKinney found ways to adjust.



Courtesy photo

McKinney works out and attends socially distanced group fitness classes at the university recreation center. They keep her active and she gets to see people who are as excited about health and fitness as she is.

McKinney knows life will keep changing. She just had to find ways to change with it.

"I think my big thing is finding new ways to adapt, because that's always been something that has been really scary for me.

"It took a lot of practice to tell myself it's OK if life isn't exactly how it was before. It's still your life, and you're going to like it. It's just going to be a bit different."



Photo by Chase Castor/The Beacon

CAMILLE GIVENS

ISOLATION AND PATIENCE

Over the last year, Camille Givens, 69, read biographies of presidents, murder mysteries, historical fiction and books about Missouri outlaws.

“You got to do something to sharpen your mind while you’re sitting. I’ve always been an avid reader, but with the pandemic I’m reading more, because it’s not like I have other entertainment.”

For Givens, who is blind, social isolation has been difficult.

“If I do get a chance to go out, I don’t know if I’m exposed to somebody that is not wearing their mask.”

Before the pandemic, Givens also attended church, Bible study, a monthly woman’s meeting, and social meetings and advocacy groups for people with disabilities.

“Practically everything now is virtual. And it’s a challenge learning to work Zoom. And in my case, since I can’t see, I only hear their voices.”

Givens said trying to get information during the pandemic from websites also isn’t accessible for her.

“I am lucky that I have an Echo Dot, which can’t do websites. You just have to rely on the news, and you have to ask it questions.”

Givens recently received the first dose of the Moderna vaccine at Morning Star Baptist Church. She got a ride there from her friend, who also filled out her paperwork for her.

For Givens, it’s aggravating to have to go back to get her second dose, because she doesn’t know her family’s availability and will have to find someone else to drive her.

The first thing Givens wants to do once she’s fully vaccinated? Attend a church service in person.

But for now, Givens is waiting and reaching out to family and friends with information for vaccine clinics to help get them vaccinated.

“The pandemic has taught me that I can do with less. And the pandemic has taught me how to stay home and be patient.”

ALYSON GERMINDER

DATING IN A PANDEMIC

Before the pandemic, Alyson Germinder, 30, was living the typical single, millennial lifestyle. Going out on weekends. Trying to meet people organically.

She saw Sam at a party in Kansas City in October 2019. It was the first time they'd reconnected since high school.

They talked but didn't exchange numbers. In March, during the last weekend before the pandemic shut everything down, they saw each other again at Sully's Pub in Mission, Kansas.

That was the last time Germinder and Sam were out in public.

"I went up to him, and I talked with him, and it was kind of that last, real opportunity out in the real world for us to connect and get to start a relationship together."

But starting a new relationship in a pandemic uprooted many dating expectations. They never went on a traditional first date. No going out to bars, events, restaurants or movies. No hanging out with friends together. The first time Sam met Germinder's parents was through a Zoom call.



Photo by Zach Bauman/The Beacon

They spent a lot of time together, in either her apartment or his house. They made breakfast on the weekends, ordered takeout from their favorite restaurants, watched each other's favorite reality shows.

"We were kind of fast-tracked into just sharing those experiences right off the bat and getting to learn a lot of this about each other in a very condensed, very somewhat private way."

The pandemic fostered a special closeness. They didn't worry if they were taking the right steps. They made their own rules, defined their

relationship on their own terms. They said "I love you" within their first month together.

After a year dating, the couple now lives together and shares a dog. They recently got their first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and can't wait to go on an official first date.

"I'm excited that it still feels like there's a whole other type of relationship we get to have now. We got to have our pandemic phase. We got to have this pandemic intimacy. And now we have this amazingly strong foundation."

OLIVER DAWKINS

CHILDHOOD DURING A PANDEMIC

When Oliver Dawkins, 8, found out he wasn't going to school anymore, he was surprised.

The Kansas' Stay-at-Home order came out during his mom's wedding ceremony, which had been downsized to just 10 people. Dawkins was disappointed there wasn't a big wedding cake, but still had fun dancing to the Phineas and Ferb theme song.

At first, the pandemic made Dawkins afraid.

***"I get more time with
mommy and daddy."***

"I was scared I was going to die," he said.

But now, he isn't.

"Since they developed the vaccine, I'm not scared."

Dawkins attends school through Kansas Virtual Academy. It has some advantages: He likes to take breaks between lessons to play in the ninja gym his family built in the basement.

"I get more time with mommy and daddy," he said.

But Dawkins also misses seeing his friends at school, and playing with them during recess. He talks to his friends on Messenger Kids, and has gone on a couple of playdates at the playground. But he doesn't like wearing a mask.

"It feels like you can't breathe."

Dawkins is looking forward to visiting his friends at their houses, having sleepovers and trading Pokemon cards again. He was sad not to be able to go trick-or-treating, but said spending holidays at home during the pandemic was still fun. And he likes haircuts at home because they are faster.

For Dawkins, the pandemic feels like it has lasted forever. But changes are on the way. Next year, he's returning to school in-person. And this summer, he'll be able to go to Black Bob Bay and go down his first waterslide.



Courtesy photo

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