

My COVID-19 Experience – Jane Bowman

Current thoughts and recalling the first few days of the outbreak

The first time I was seriously thinking about the coronavirus was when I was considering not going on my spring break service trip. The Bonner Leaders Program goes on a service trip every spring break and this year it was at San Antonio. My roommate and I ended up going because at that point, San Antonio felt safer than Houston. San Antonio had more cases, but they were contained to a military base or airport. Houston had a couple cases and what I suspected was possible community spread. This was at the time when epidemiology phrases like that started becoming common vernacular. We went on Spring Break in San Antonio from March 9-12th and interacted with people at an outdoor theatre and volunteered at a museum where I met some international couples. None of this felt strange at the time, but it would a couple days later. From San Antonio, I was picked up and drove to El Paso and Odessa to visit family. While in El Paso, I was sitting in the living room watching the Mar. 16th morning news and heard the stock market had dropped. I just watched, tearing up. The room felt cold and quiet. I don't know anything about the stock market, but the language they were using to describe it set the tone. Later, my roommates and I had a quiet conversation about stocking up on things in case we lost our jobs. Things were fine in those cities, but I heard about toilet paper shortages in Houston. I went to Walmart in El Paso and there was no toilet paper, no powdered milk, no cleaning supplies, no ramen. I decided that I would visit a store in Odessa and hope that it was different. On the drive back home, it was a fun game to look at Walmart parking lots to see how full they were. When I got back to Houston, I decided to self-quarantine. We all did. It was pretty widespread that the expectation was to quarantine when you travel by air or visit someone sick, but there was less conversation about what to do if you possibly interacted with someone sick and had travelled by car. It was also wide-spread at that time that young people were not at risk, but could spread it. I decided that it was my moral responsibility to self-quarantine if it had the possibility of protecting someone else. It's the same reason I wear a mask now. As the cases started increasing in late May, I didn't even go outside. I felt a deep panic and compulsion to consume information and data. After that, I realized that I had to find a "new normal", some way to live with the fact that life will always be different. I was upset a lot of the time and felt an apathy for my classes. Did they still matter if I couldn't get a job even with my degree? My professors responded in a lot of different ways. I was the most upset with the chemistry department. Even when the university went fully online officially, the chemistry departments response was to continue to hope for an in-person final so that they didn't have to make any plans. I was mad at the university, and am still mad, because I feel like all the university does is follow suit. If I want to know what some decision the university is going to make, I just wait for UT and Rice to make their announcements and assume that's what UH will do. I'm glad the University went to Pass/Fail grading. My boss in the Honors College handled the transition very well and my coworkers and I only got closer as a result of this crisis. I prefer online classes and so I'm okay with whatever happens in the Fall, but I do feel like the university has a moral obligation to acknowledge the safety risk of faculty/staff and students.