

MISSISSIPPI

Seniors, Let's Finish Strong

By Shelby Dean

I don't think anyone, especially we high school seniors, saw this coming. I keep thinking back to mid-January, a few weeks after coming back to school from Christmas break, when I heard about the virus outbreak in China. It came up in small talk among my Biomedical Research class, and the conversation always ended with, "Well, it will end soon," or "Wouldn't it be crazy if it made it all the way to us?"

Fast forward to the present: everything changed. School was canceled. All extracurricular activities came to a halt. Even prom was canceled. To most, if not all of the seniors, this meant so much to us. It's as if we lost OUR time. Instead of spending the best year of our youth together, it was spent on social media, in our houses, isolated from one another. This sedentary state of mind can have a profound effect on our physical and mental health. That being said, we began taking advantage of the ways that we could exercise our maximum physical and mental capabilities!

We began online schooling during this time. I have to say: homeschoolers -- you guys deserve a round of applause. It was hard personally to find the initiative to read an online passage or to take a quiz for my classes when I could have been painting, sleeping, singing and dancing, or many more desirable options that are available when I am at home. Nonetheless, it was so crucial that we all kept our studies at the forefront of our minds. For all of the seniors graduating and planning on attending college, we couldn't take six months off of learning new material and then expect to excel in college-level courses. I'm proud we finished out this school year strong.

Along with keeping school at the forefront of our minds, we made sure that we communicated with other people. Keep in contact with your friends. Call them. Text them. Video-chat them. Mail them letters. An important part of keeping our mental states positive is communicating with others and saying what we feel. This was also a great opportunity to spend time with family before we moved onto college or the workforce. We made the most out of this dreary situation.

I found one of the best ways to cope with the effect of the virus on my current state was reading about it. The CDC is keeping track of the number of confirmed cases in each state on its website. I have been reading articles on John Hopkins Medicine, Healthline, and the National Institutes of Health. Gaining this much knowledge about the virus has helped me in feeling prepared and not fearful of what is to come.

To any student, grades K-12 or college age, we are living in history! One day, our present situation is going to be right in that history textbook you love to read. Let's make sure that we are doing all that we can to keep ourselves and each other safe so that one day we can tell these stories to our kids and grandkids. Make sure you're washing your hands, not touching your face, and, as hard for me as it is to say, practicing social distancing. The fact that we may not be in the "highest risk of injury" category due to our age does not give us any right to think we should be exempt from these policies and to continue to pass the virus along. We all need to make sure we are doing our own individual parts to overcome this obstacle.

If you are a parent/guardian of a student, a loved one of a student, or even just know a student, keep reaching out to them. Remind them that they will get through this and that they matter. We want to hear from you. We want to have a conversation. A simple word of encouragement can ripple into an ocean of confidence, of joy.

To all teachers, administrators, and school workers, thank you for the vast amount of time that you spent making sure that we were healthy and cared for. As a student, I can tell you that while I was saddened that I could not come back to school after spring break, you all have been so generous and supportive by turning my home into your classroom. It was nice, but please don't change it for good!

Shelby Dean was the senior student representative on the Mississippi State Board of Education and a student at Clinton High School in Clinton, MS.