After her season was cancelled and her classes moved online, sophomore softball player Gabby Benson left her apartment near campus and moved back home with her parents. But she sought a way to help others during the pandemic.

Inside are stories from the Georgia State community — from student-athletes to business owners to those who have lost loved ones — in the time of coronavirus.
The coronavirus pandemic may have cancelled the Alumni Association’s 7th annual GSU Cares Day of Service, but it couldn’t keep the Panther family from selflessly stepping up and giving back. Your fellow alumni are doing incredible things to aid in the COVID-19 response.

Read their stories of resilience and altruism at pantheralumni.com/gsucares.
THE COURAGE TO FACE THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGES

When faced with trying times, Georgia State has always adapted, overcome and emerged a better institution.

“I’ve seen the perseverance, the courage to tackle seemingly insurmountable challenges and the enduring commitment to hard work that symbolize our university.”

GEORGIA STATE IS FACING the toughest test in our history.

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic has forced our university to take extraordinary measures to continue delivering a first-rate education to our students, and we will continue to do so regardless of the challenges ahead.

Like all higher education institutions, we must reconsider and adapt our approaches to teaching and learning, student housing and student services, and the manner in which we conduct the university’s daily business operations.

In this time of great uncertainty it can be difficult to be optimistic, yet I am. I have seen the grit and determination that characterize Georgia State. I’ve seen the perseverance, the courage to tackle seemingly insurmountable challenges and the enduring commitment to hard work that symbolize our university. I know the brain power, the innovative nature and the creative genius that exist here, and they are fundamental to our future plans.

Our university has been through challenging times before and weathered the storm, each time emerging on the other side of the storm a stronger, better institution. We’ll do so again.

This past semester, our faculty quickly adapted their courses for remote delivery as campuses across the nation were closed to students. Our students adjusted with amazing speed to learning at a distance. Teleworking became the norm across our Georgia State campuses, and the staff overcame the obstacles of sheltering in place to do their jobs.

As we move forward, health and safety remain our top priorities. We will perform our research and university operations at the highest possible levels while also employing appropriate public health measures to ensure the health and safety of students, faculty and staff. We are creating models for working and educating that strike the appropriate balance between social distancing measures and achieving our core missions of education and research. We will once again be working on our campuses and educating in face-to-face settings, and how we do so will be different than in the past. We will continuously stay abreast of public health guidance, and we will use that guidance to make our campuses as safe as possible.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing us is to do more with less revenue. How much less won’t be known until the state budget is finalized and we receive our allocation from the University System of Georgia Board of Regents. We faced a similar reduction in state funding in 2009, and then, as it is now, our approach was strategic and targeted. Remember that coming out of the Great Recession, Georgia State experienced an unprecedented period of growth and recognition. With fewer resources available to us we will once again draw on our culture of innovation to achieve our goals, carefully investing in our future as we are making cuts where appropriate.

We are living through a historically challenging period, and it demands our best. Georgia State has been through daunting challenges. We’ve learned and grown from those experiences, and we are well prepared to prove our mettle once again. I have confidence in our Georgia State community and the future we will create together.

Sincerely,

Mark P. Becker
President

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

For most of the staff at Georgia State, the last day we were on our campuses and working together was Friday, March 13. We had just wrapped up the spring issue of the Georgia State University Magazine, and we were busy gathering stories for the magazine you’re holding.

Early into the COVID-19 pandemic and during shelter-in-place, we started hearing from the Georgia State community about how they were working, adapting, grieving, helping others and coping during these times.

Gerardo Chowell, a leading epidemiologist in the School of Public Health, began modeling the virus’ transmission as early as January. Austin Birczilh (B.A. ’20), my student assistant for the past two years and a tireless representative of the university, didn’t get his big chance to walk across the stage this spring. Stories like theirs made us quickly realize we had to make this one a special issue.

In these pages, we’ve collected a handful of personal accounts that show the heart of our Georgia State community. As Provost Wendes Hensel told me for this issue, Georgia State has always been innovative in how it responds to challenges. Here at the magazine, we will continue to keep you connected to the university the best we can as we all navigate these uncertain times.

Stay safe,
William Inman (M.H.P. ’16)

STAY UPDATED

If you need to update your address — or if this issue is addressed to someone else — just send a note to update@gsu.edu.

If you’d like to stop receiving the print issue and read the magazine online only, send an email to magazine@gsu.edu, and we’ll take it from there.
As we welcome the class of 2020 to our family of proud Panther alumni, we’re confident the determination they demonstrated during an unprecedented final semester will be key to their success. They’re a unique group who gave up their final sports seasons, left their friends and homes on campus, completed their last classes online and missed out on the pomp and circumstance of a most-deserved commencement.

They start their next chapters in a time of civil unrest and economic fragility, but their strength and poise will carry them far.
As provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, Wendy Hensel guided Georgia State’s rapid transition this spring to an entirely online teaching and learning format as the coronavirus pandemic unfolded. Now she’s turning her attention to how Georgia State will deliver high-quality instruction this fall.

“"We had been working for months on a plan to become more sophisticated in how we deliver online instruction. But nothing could have prepared us for how quickly we moved in that direction.”

WENDY HENSEL
PROVOST AND SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Everyone at Georgia State is passionate about and motivated by our students. They come from diverse backgrounds and often from challenging circumstances. No matter the obstacles they face, they continue to succeed. When it became clear that we had to transform all courses to a distance format within two short weeks, we were highly motivated to deliver. Our students were counting on us, and we were not going to let them down.

At the time COVID-19 entered the picture, I was only in my eighth month on the job. Being relatively new might have been helpful because there is no playbook for something like this. Fortunately, I have a tremendously talented team and excellent leadership from President Becker.

We began talking about the coronavirus when it emerged in China, and President Becker appointed a taskforce when it started ramping up in Italy. As the provost, the academic operation of the university is my responsibility, and I knew we had to plan for a quick transition to an online format.

To say this has been a challenge of unprecedented magnitude would be an understatement. Higher education is not an industry that moves quickly. Fortunately, at Georgia State we are always looking to the future. We had been working for months on a plan to become more sophisticated in how we deliver online instruction. But nothing could have prepared us for how quickly we moved in that direction.

I started by asking faculty to verify that they had the equipment needed to teach online and to begin thinking about what it might look like to take their courses online. Some thought we were overreacting at the time, but we knew this was going to be a massive disruption. Within a week and a half, we made the announcement that we were moving to an entirely online format.

Online teaching is difficult. It requires sophisticated training in order to do it effectively. Getting people who have never tried it before to an acceptable skill level was really challenging, and the resources we needed to deploy immediately were on a scale we had never seen. We could not have done it without the widespread teamwork of our incredibly talented faculty. I am in awe of their commitment to our students and willingness to do the heavy lifting required to deliver their classes uninterrupted.

The truth is that no one becomes an expert or a master online teacher in such a short time. However, being able to deliver educational services under those circumstances was a huge victory for the university. It showed an incredible esprit de corps — everyone stepped up across the board. What drove every single one of us was ensuring our students could succeed amid this emergency.

The scale at which we operate at Georgia State, with more than 53,000 students, is highly complex in the best of circumstances. As we look to next steps in the summer and fall semesters, it is challenging to plan without knowing the conditions in which we’ll be operating.

All summer courses are online. In many respects, this semester is even more challenging for faculty than the spring because the expectations of excellence are higher.

I have been working hand-in-hand with our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to scale up its support services and to provide guidance to the university on how to become an effective online teacher. Every summer instructor received training on how to master online teaching, or they had already demonstrated a high level of proficiency in online teaching.

We all understand that we must deliver online courses that meet the highest standards of Georgia State for our students and our faculty.

For the fall, we’re operating under numerous contingency plans because we just don’t know what’s going to happen. There are so many questions. If we’re able to have in-person classes, how big can those classes be? How do we safely conduct operations and socially distance? How should we plan for the possibility of another wave of COVID-19 illnesses or potential mid-semester?

We also worry about our ability to meet people’s needs in a time when their emotional concerns are so high. We really care about that. That’s who we are. We know we have many students in vulnerable situations, and we have to be sensitive to their unique concerns.

And we’re also facing conditions where many of our instructors are challenged, too. They’ve got kids at home, they may be at a high risk for infection and they also have concerns about family members and illness.

Again, there is no playbook.

We are planning for a resumption of face-to-face interaction on our campuses this fall, and safety is our top priority. We will offer some online classes as well to ensure we meet the needs of students and faculty who are not comfortable returning to the classroom.

Right now, we are taking an inventory of all classroom space to identify how many students can be in that classroom at a safe social distance. We are considering how to modify our large lecture courses by developing a platform for small section discussion combined with online teaching. Another method we are investigating is simulating large lectures.

It is an exercise of imagination as to how to meet this challenge with the resources we have, and we know there will be more.

Before this pandemic struck, we were working to hire our first associate provost for online strategies, and in late April we hired Kim Siegenthaler, former director of Misou Online, the University of Missouri’s online degree program. She will be a great help as we move forward into uncharted waters.

There is no question we are in a paradigm-shifting moment. Life won’t be what it was before. Because we have shown it’s possible to deliver most classes in an online format, students very likely will demand more options. Going forward, students will not take classes exclusively online or just face-to-face. Instead, they will demand a mix of services that best meets their needs.

Although this trend was occurring before COVID-19 arrived, the pandemic certainly accelerated it. All universities should anticipate these trends and leverage decisions made now to ensure a more sustainable position in the future.

The economic fallout from this pandemic is predicted to be worse than the 2008 recession, and it took 10 years to get back from that point. It will be a challenge to manage our resources at a time when tuition increases are simply not on the table.

Certainly, there will be universities that do not survive. Georgia State will. We’ve always been innovative in how we respond to challenges. We will come out of this, and I believe we will come out of this even stronger. If we can create an entirely online experience for 53,000 students within a two-week period, we can do anything.

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As told to WILLIAM IMMAN (M.H.P. ’16)
Photo by MEG BUSCEMA

PHOTO BY MEG BUSCEMA
It’s encouraging that there’s more willingness to cooperate and share data. Scientists all over the world have pivoted to study this virus, so you feel like you’re a part of a large movement. As a result, it’s remarkable how quickly the clinical trials have started for vaccines and for antiviral drugs. It shows that science can move fast when it needs to. Of course, all these things take time to test and see if they work, but the rate at which therapies and vaccines are moving into trials is much, much faster than it has been in the past. Hopefully, we’re getting closer, although it’s not right around the corner.

**CHRIS BASLER**

PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR MICROBIAL PATHOGENESIS

We have some interesting preliminary findings. We’re measuring the effectiveness of antiviral compounds, and we’re beginning to understand how the virus interacts with the cell it infects. This will help identify critical functions to target with therapeutics. We’ve recently initiated a collaboration with infectious disease clinicians at Augusta University that will allow us to look at the population living in Georgia and try to determine if there are particular characteristics that predispose individuals to more severe forms of the disease.

In a way, this experience feels familiar because I’ve worked on Ebola for so long, including during the 2014 outbreak in West Africa. Back then, there was a lot of excitement and concern. This feels the same, but to an even larger degree.

I’m a scientist who studies viruses, so if I hear about a new virus entering the human population and causing disease, I start to pay attention. When the novel coronavirus outbreak first occurred in Wuhan, China, I wasn’t particularly concerned about a global pandemic. But once it was clear that the virus could spread efficiently from person to person, I knew it was going to be much worse than the outbreaks of SARS or MERS several years earlier.

I moved very quickly to procure samples of the virus from a facility in Texas, and we had it in our lab in mid-March. We wanted to contribute to the understanding of the virus, and we initiated a collaboration with the University of California-San Francisco to look at some potential functions of viral genes. Viruses that affect humans have ways to counteract our immune defenses, and we began to look into this.

To work with the live virus, you need a biosafety-level three containment lab, which we have here at Georgia State, and you need people who are trained to work in that setting. Luckily, I have researchers with significant experience doing this kind of work with other viruses. But when you also have to be responsible and maintain social distancing and not fill the lab with a lot of people, it makes the work doubly challenging.

**I SAW THE DANGERS coming earlier than the average person.**

We had been doing some of the early epidemiological analysis on COVID-19 and the properties that make this virus so difficult to control.

In early January, I traveled to New York for a conference, and I was the only one wearing a face mask on the plane and on the subway. I wore it everywhere, but people just looked at me strangely. Yet, even then, I was optimistic we could stop the chains of transmission in this country. I figured, “We can do contact tracing. We have the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is the best in the world. We even offered to help China.”

But there were a number of issues, starting with the slow testing rate. We lost a lot of time, and the virus was able to penetrate the population very quietly. There were hundreds of introductions that we didn’t catch. It took the entire month of January for me to realize we weren’t going to cut it, that the virus was becoming widespread across the U.S. I still think about it, and I’m incredulous that we didn’t stop this.

In February, my mother-in-law flew up for a visit from Chile. She’s 70, and as we have learned, the virus is particularly severe among older adults. I was very concerned because my wife and I also have a 10-year-old who had the potential to bring the virus home from school. So about 10 days before DeKalb County schools closed, I pulled my daughter out. I called the school authorities to explain why I was keeping her home, but at the time they were still thinking of the virus as something like the seasonal flu. Thankfully, her teachers were supportive.

For weeks, I found myself having the same frustrating conversation over and over, trying to get people to understand that this was serious. That the fatality rate was an order of magnitude higher than the flu. That the virus was already here. That we already had a problem.

I’d go to the grocery store wearing a face mask, and then see that the cashier who was over 65 didn’t have one. I felt terrible. I kept thinking, “Why aren’t these people being given protection? Why aren’t they being told how important this is? They’re seeing the virus. And yet even then, we observed that 20 percent of cases were asymptomatic, meaning the people never went on to develop symptoms although they could still spread the virus. In the general population, the asymptomatic case rate could be as high as 40 percent.

So coronavirus is a component of asymptomatic cases, but 40 percent is very high. When you combine it with the fact that the virus can spread so easily — through close contacts, aerosols and contaminated surfaces — and the fact that it’s so fatal, it creates a perfect storm.

Still, I think we are going to come out of this pandemic a lot stronger in terms of our attitudes toward infectious diseases. For example, wearing face masks is not something we have traditionally done in this country or in most of the western world. We can also develop stronger systems to detect emerging infectious diseases a lot more rapidly and respond to them in a globally coordinated way. We’re learning the hard way, but we’re still learning and acquiring new behaviors that will help protect us.

**AS TOLD TO JENNIFER RAINLEY MARQUEZ**

Photo by Steven Thackston

Part of a research team that uses mathematical models to study how the environment affects transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus, Gerardo Chowell is helping to produce daily forecasts of the virus’ trajectory. His work has been widely covered in the news media during the pandemic.

**GERARDO CHOWELL**

PROFESSOR AND CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF POPULATION HEALTH SCIENCES, SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
AND ROGER KINCAID
HEAD SOFTBALL COACH

BENSON: We played at Auburn on Wednesday, March 11 — we lost 2-1, but we played great and should’ve won — and after the game, we were sitting in a restaurant there watching ESPN. That’s when we saw that they were cancelling the NBA season.

KINCAID: I remember looking at my coaches that night and saying, “This is a big deal.”

BENSON: We had to be on a bus at 3:30 p.m. the next day to go to South Alabama for a conference series. I remember we had the bus packed and ready to go, and then we were all told to wait.

KINCAID: I told the kids, “Hey, we’re planning to go, but if something changes, I’ll let you know.” The bus was supposed to pull out at 3:30, and I told them to be ready. But I was getting text messages and phone calls from [Athletics Director] Charlie Cobb saying, “Hey, give us 30 minutes, give us 30 minutes.” Then at about 5:30, we got the word that we couldn’t go.

BENSON: It didn’t really hit me then. I thought it would be a two-week thing and then we’d be back in business.

KINCAID: After we unloaded the bus, I had all my players come to the [Georgia State] stadium. Although the official word was nothing was cancelled, only suspended, we knew what was coming. It broke my heart to stand up in that conference room and break the news to those kids. It was tough. Especially for our seniors — there’s a lot of missed opportunities there. Charlie [Cobb] was in the building, and he saw us in the conference room, and he came in and spoke to the team, which was really cool.

Then, it went from that to the season is cancelled to school is cancelled, all very quickly, like one thing leads to another.

KINCAID: After everything shut down, my coaches and I split the team up into thirds. We reach out to our players every Tuesday and Thursday, either on a phone call or through FaceTime. First and foremost, we’re checking on their health and how they are doing. Some of them, you can hear it in the tone of their voice that they’re struggling a bit, so we want them to know that we’re there for them.

We also have a system called “Panther Pals” in which each kid on the team is assigned a player that they stay in touch with. Every time I speak with a player, I ask for an update on her Panther Pal. And I insist that they don’t just text but that they FaceTime or talk on the phone.

BENSON: Sofia Tuñón is my Panther Pal. She’s a freshman catcher, and we talk every week.

KINCAID: When I talk with our players, one of the big things I stress is that they have a purpose. I tell them, “Make sure that you’re accomplishing something every day, beyond your studies.” So, I was so proud when I saw a Facebook post from Gabby’s mom that had pictures of Gabby giving away food in downtown Atlanta.

BENSON: My mom is head of the pantry at our church, and we’ve been delivering food to the needy for quite a while. And when I finally came to the realization that, you know, here I am stuck at home, I started thinking about the people without a home, without a place to go. So, we went out and bought a bunch of food, drove downtown and gave it away.

KINCAID: Well, it just so happened that I had a garage chock-full of food at the time. In our locker room at Panthersville, we keep a bunch of healthy snacks for practices, pregame and postgame. I was telling my wife, “I don’t know what to do with all of this stuff!” So, I packed it up, put it in boxes and brought it all to my garage. We were thinking to ourselves, “What are we going to do with all of this food!” We didn’t want it to go to waste, so we were trying to figure out how to donate it. So, when I saw that on Facebook, I called Gabby and said, “Hey, this is pretty cool. Tell me about what you’re doing.” And come to

find out that the family was out there buying food and giving it to the less fortunate.

BENSON: He called and said, “Hey, do you want to come get all of our team snacks to give out?” And, of course, I said yes. There was a lot of food!

KINCAID: They took it straight from my garage, put it in their truck and started giving it out.

BENSON: That day, we delivered food downtown and everyone was very grateful. There’s never been a problem giving food out. We had all of those snacks, so we made several bags to hand out. Then we took some bags and gave them to families here in Gwinnett County whose kids normally receive, and depend on, two meals a day from school.

KINCAID: Gabby is such a good person, a great student-athlete. I take great pride in what our kids accomplish away from the field, and it’s been wonderful to watch Gabby’s journey out there helping people.

BENSON: We’re still going strong. We’ve been out about 20 times during the pandemic. There are bags in our kitchen ready to go.

As told to William Inman (M.H.P. ’96)
Photo by Meg Buscema

With her sophomore season scuttled by the COVID-19 pandemic, outfielder Gabby Benson was looking for a way to make a difference by giving food to the needy. When head coach Roger Kincaid heard what she was doing, he found a way to help bolster her efforts.
I started working at Grady almost six years ago in the surgical trauma intensive care unit, and I transferred to the burn unit this past August.

It’s been very different since the coronavirus outbreak, to say the least. In the burn unit, because our patients have such a high infection rate, we’ve been pretty isolated from coronavirus. Having a highly infectious respiratory patient in the burn unit is a bad idea.

A couple years ago, I joined the hazardous infectious disease team that was formed at Grady in response to Ebola. If we were to have an Ebola patient, I would be one of the nurses called in. Because of that, earlier in February, Barbara McLean, who leads the team, had those of us who were willing and able start doing personal protective equipment (PPE) training all over the hospital.

Four of us went to every single unit where they had either a COVID-positive patient or a patient under investigation (PUI) for COVID-19. We trained every unit, during every shift, day and night, for about six or seven weeks, showing exactly what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updates on PPE guidance were. At our busiest, I worked just over 100 hours in one week, and we trained roughly 1,500 employees.

In addition to that, we knew we needed to create masks to cover our N95 respirators. I love to sew, so I tried a couple of patterns I found online, but they either had too many folds or too much fabric, or they didn’t completely cover the N95, so I ended up designing one myself.

Normally, if we had a respiratory patient, our N95 would be for one-day or single-patient use. Because we don’t have enough of them, we needed to protect the outside of the mask. The respirator protects us, but if a COVID-positive patient coughs and it gets on the outside of the N95 mask, we don’t want to then take it into a room of another patient who is COVID-negative. It would put them at risk.

The original CDC guidelines were to cover the N95s with a surgical mask and discard the surgical mask after every use. Well, even back in February, the surgical masks were in short supply.

An outer mask helps protect our patients and our co-workers and prolongs the life of the N95, which we’re wearing for weeks at a time.

We started a Facebook group, BaLa N95 Cover for Frontline Healthcare Workers, organizing people to volunteer to make mask covers. We call them BaLa covers — short for Barbara and Lauren.

We’ve had close to 2,000 made and distributed to people throughout Grady as well as to some other people in need. One of our employees who went to New York to do relief nursing was sent up with 500 covers.

I’m putting together templates and fabric to send off to people willing to trace, cut and sew.

It’s complicated in the burn unit because patients coming in with inhalation injuries have all the same symptoms as a COVID-19 patient — fever, shortness of breath, a chest X-ray showing inflammation and that kind of thing — so a lot of our patients coming in from house fires are considered PUIs until confirmed negative. We did have one patient who came in positive, and this was early on, so we weren’t wearing masks at all times in the hospital. We ended up having to get tested just to make sure because so many of us did come into contact with this patient.

I’ve been up on the units taking care of COVID-19 patients since I’m delivering masks. I’m also working with another volunteer organization that’s delivering meals and other supplies. I can see how hard they’re working and what they’re having to go through to take care of these patients.

You can always tell who is staffing those units because they come home with the marks on their faces every day.

We’ve had a couple employees test positive, and they ended up requiring fluids and nebulizer treatments at home. And these are young, healthy people. These are people who run marathons. They don’t smoke. They eat healthy diets and have no health history. Even a couple of weeks after being cleared to come back to work, they’re exhausted after about eight hours. They still don’t have the stamina they did. They’re still feeling it. It really took a toll on them.

Being a nurse was not my original plan. I started off studying neuroscience, and I was working in a lab doing electrophysiology with a plan to go to graduate school for neuroscience.

I ended up getting sick with a gastrointestinal infection that had me in the hospital for a few days, and I had a terrible nurse one night. She pretty much accused me of drug-seeking. I was alone, scared, in pain and crying all night. It was a really traumatic experience for me.

Afterward, I was like, “I can do her job, and I can do her job well. I can make sure none of my patients ever feel the way I did that night.”

So, instead of going to graduate school, I decided to go to nursing school, and it was the best decision I’ve ever made. I was in the accelerated bachelor of science in nursing program at Georgia State, and I’ve been a nurse for almost 13 years now.

And I love it. It is hard. It is tiring. It is trying. But it is also extremely satisfying. I still love my job, even when I come home in tears or exhausted.

“I’ve been up on the units taking care of COVID-19 patients since I’m delivering masks. I’m also working with another volunteer organization that’s delivering meals and other supplies. I can see how hard they’re working and what they’re having to go through to take care of these patients.”
I was sitting at my computer in room 205 on the second floor of the law school at 86 Park Place when the weight of the current crisis hit me. It was the middle of March, and I had just finished recording a lecture and a civil procedure procedure. Students like schools all over the country, Georgia State announced that classes were moving online to promote social distancing during the early stages of the pandemic. The situation was unprecedented — we were all still trying to figure out how to best serve our students. Later that day, I was supposed to “attend” a Facebook Live broadcast of a dear friend’s funeral. But rather than run home to watch it around my children, I thought it might be better to stay in my office and say goodbye to Rushia alone.

Rushia Stephens was a family friend and the wife of my colleague, Georgia State law professor Cornell Stephens. She was a singer and beloved music teacher in Atlanta and DeKalb County schools, and a central figure in her church and our community. She was a mother of four, a grandmother of three. She was 65 years old, active and healthy. On March 12, she had assumed that spring allergies had given her a sinus infection and a fever. Her doctor told her to get tested for the coronavirus, but at the hospital she was denied a test because her symptoms weren’t severe enough. She went home, developed a cough and trouble breathing. She went to an emergency room, where she was finally tested. By the time the results came back positive for COVID-19, she was already gone. As I watched her funeral, I felt such loss. It was all so sudden and so tragic. I was crying, and the tears expressed my sadness and frustration. I was unable to mourn in person, alongside her family and friends. Frustration as I realized that this type of virtual funeral was going to repeat itself over and over and over again across the country for the foreseeable future. And all I could do was sit at my desk, sob and click the ‘love’ and ‘sad’ buttons on Facebook. The numbers of deaths reported on the news were no longer just numbers to me. I now knew one of the people represented in those numbers. She was someone I loved and admired, and her unexpected passing brought the deadly nature of the coronavirus into sharp focus.

In the days that followed, more frustration emerged as data revealed that the virus was disproportionately impacting the African American community. Across the nation, African Americans accounted for more than half of all COVID-19 deaths — nearly 60 percent — despite black Americans constituting only 13.4 percent of the total population. The disparity was worse here in Georgia, where one Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study found that more than 80 percent of people who were hospitalized with the disease were African American.

The coronavirus is affecting everyone, but the disease is operating as a crucible, surfacing societal fault lines — class, race, workers’ rights, food insecurity and access to housing and health care. The virus didn’t create inequity, but is it exposing the disparities.

Policies have to be sensitive to the economic realities that inform working-class people’s decision-making and choices. Some people are more afraid of not being able to work so that they don’t work, they don’t eat. Policies have to be sensitive to the economic realities that inform working-class people’s decision-making and choices. Some people are more afraid of not being able to work so that they are of being exposed to a deadly virus. That’s a horrible choice for anyone to have to make.

As one of my family members observed, “We may all be in the same boat, but we are not all in the same boat.”

Right now, I’m worried that people are not adhering to social distancing, wearing masks and practicing the other behaviors the medical community and public health officials recommend. We’re relying on controlling policies as an indication that the risk of infection is not as bad as it actually is. I realize that I am privileged. I have a place to shelter, the means to maintain that shelter and a job that enables me to work from home. But many people can’t work from home, and if they don’t work, they don’t eat.

The corona virus crisis is affecting the lives of people and communities. It is a time to reflect on how we as a society make decisions and laws that impact the lives of communities suffering in this pandemic.

Students are now going out into the world and beginning to practice law. They will have to adjust to many new conditions. I am so proud of all of them for being able to pivot in a pandemic and complete their clinical assignments. It’s a reminder of how people who are committing themselves to advocacy that protects vulnerable people and communities suffering in this pandemic.

Meanwhile, I was at home, making sure my 17-year-old did his online studies and homeschooling my 4-year-old. My mother was a kindergarten teacher, so I’ve enlisted her help. But she recently had a heart attack. She’s recovered, and back at home in the Washington, D.C., area. Under normal circumstances, I would have taken a flight immediately to be by her side, but I couldn’t visit her in the hospital. I couldn’t drive to D.C. without stopping to go to the bathroom. I couldn’t stay in a hotel. I couldn’t stay with my 8-year-old dad. Even the options we have for responding to non-COVID-19 crises are affected by COVID-19. On the other side of this pandemic, we cannot return to business as usual and ignore all of the structures, systems, policies and laws that make our communities much more vulnerable than others. We are responsible for the laws and policies we implement. The consequences are so great. There’s no room for error when you’re talking about lives. As a teacher and scholar, I know this experience will change the way I teach, what I teach and how I teach my students to use the law to make the world a better place.

“I realized that this type of virtual funeral was going to repeat itself over and over and over again all over the country for the foreseeable future. And all I could do was sit at my desk, sob and click the ‘love’ and ‘sad’ buttons on Facebook.”

Tanya Washington has seen the disparate impacts of the coronavirus first-hand. It will forever change the way she helps educate future generations of lawyers.
A lot of our students are facing extreme hardships right now. Any given semester, 85 percent of Georgia State undergraduates are working, and many of their jobs — at restaurants, in retail — were the first to be eliminated as the economy began to decline.

We enroll one of the largest low-income student populations in the country, and this spring we had almost 30,000 Pell Grant-recipient students at Georgia State. That’s three times more than the entire Ivy League.

In an interesting way, though, our unique student body has become an advantage during the pandemic. Because almost all of our students are non-traditional in some sense of the word, we’ve already built the systems to serve students who may have difficulty finding time for face-to-face meetings with staff.

One of our signature programs is academic advising based on predictive analytics. We’re tracking every student for 800 risk factors every day and reaching out to them when a problem is identified. Last year we had 60,000 meetings between advisors and students that were not initiated by students but by advisors.

As the pandemic unfolded, we were able to keep our advising of students going without missing a beat because we were already set up for video conferencing and for tracking students electronically. The first two weeks we were delivering instruction entirely online, we had more than 8,000 meetings between advisers and students, and that was almost the same pace as when we were operating normally in the early part of the semester.

We’ve also added some new alerts to our predictive analytics tracking system. If students are not logging on to their classes, advisers are reaching out. The advisers determine what the issues may be — trouble with technology, the course material, financial difficulties — and then connect the students to help. Because of these efforts, 98 percent of our under-graduates were logging on to their online classes every week.

In our Counseling Center, we’re also offering our Panther Retention Assistance Fund for students, using some of the same principles, techniques and technologies in place for the last eight years to administer our Panther Retention Grant program. If students are facing food insecurity, for example, we have a process that allows us to give them resources in a very short time, often on the spot.

Since March, we’ve awarded grants to more than 2,000 students from this emergency fund.

Over the last couple years, we’ve built up a large student Financial Management Center with dozens of financial counselors. A lot of our students have not had the experience of dealing with big financial decisions, so it’s that kind of advice that can be just as important as the dollars in helping students navigate this crisis.

There are so many distractions right now. Many of our students are trying to lead or are part of families that are under incredible duress due to economic strains or health issues. These things further challenge their ability to complete their degree programs and their courses. That’s why Georgia State’s student support services are so important.

We’ve created these supports because it’s the right thing to do and what our students need to graduate. But amid the COVID-19 pandemic, these kinds of wrap-around services delivered at scale have become more important than ever.

In order to help ramp up test kit production, the Georgia National Guard partnered with the Viral Immunology Center at Georgia State. Led by Julia Hilliard, biology professor and director of the center, the university is the sole provider of viral transport media (VTM). VTM is a substance used to collect and store samples to make sure they are not contaminated before they can be deployed in the field at collection sites.

The graduate students are working to create thousands of test kits to be distributed across the state. The team has helped produce more than 50,000 kits so far.

Knowing that those tests are likely coming from Georgia State, I’m pretty happy about that.

CREECH: I’m a Ph.D. candidate and was hoping to graduate in the summer, but things are on hold now. But I’m actually kind of grateful for this experience. It’s amazing to see the real-world impact science can have up close.

ST. MARTIN: It’s nice to be a part of something that’s helping a lot of people.

POLING: We all come in at different times and do our own parts. The end goal is to fill as many tubes with VTM as possible.

CREECH: We structured it in a way so that we can all stay interactive with one another. We’re under the supervision of Dr. Hilliard and Dr. John Houghton, and they have helped a lot.

ST. MARTIN: I’m here around 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and fill 1,500 vials of VTM before I leave. Prior to that, I was assisting with all of the steps of making VTM and creating kits for the pandemic. I get here early in the morning and make sure we have everything ready for the day. As people come in, we take on different roles.

GARDNER: We’ve all learned a lot from this. We probably learned more having gone through this experience than we would have doing a thesis. This is a different side of the scientific process that we haven’t been able to see.

CREECH: When you do research, it doesn’t always have an immediate impact. But here, the Georgia National Guard picks up these test kits almost every day and they go out to the public. These tests are having an impact and that feels pretty good.

POLING: It’s one thing to be taught how things are going to work in the real world and prepare for it, but it’s not anything that you can develop until you’ve been in it. Just trying to get this many people all together has been hard but rewarding.
MELISSA HUANG (M.F.A. ’21) AND DREW TETZ (M.F.A. ’21)

MARRIED MASTER OF FINE ARTS CANDIDATES, COLLABORATIVE ARTISTS AND INSTRUCTORS

HUANG: Quarantine has been hard for me. I’m a person who likes to stay busy to keep my mind off stress. I took at least a week where I just kind of slumped around.

TETZ: I think I’m more of a hermit than most of my friends. I’m actually pretty happy to stay in with my cat and my wife and design all day. I have the kind of brain that goes nuts if I stop making stuff. About four years ago, I started teaching myself how to animate, and I have found a niche with animations for vinyl records that create an illusion of motion when a record spins. I am really interested in how things come together and how to push techniques. I love playing with new equipment whenever I can, and I definitely miss having access to the large-format printers at Georgia State.

HUANG: I’m a painter, printmaker and video artist, and my current work is about the fragmentation of self and the different versions of a person that can exist in the minds of friends and family, and now more than ever, online and with digital audiences. Many of us have social media personas, and there are ways people can curate a specific version of themselves.

TETZ: We both taught undergrad this past year — it was our first year teaching — and we learned a lot about how to teach online. But, as freelance designers, I feel like I have been working in a virtual studio with some of my design peers for some time now. I have people I work with who do similar things, and I’m always giving and getting feedback.

HUANG: Our apartment is pretty small, and we both moved our studios into this little space. I brought home my easel and painting supplies. Drew has two 3D printers in our closet — I’ve been calling it his office — and then I took up most of the living room. For my practice, I am mostly painting on smaller panels. It’s better for quarantine setup.

TETZ: We have our own lighting setup in the corner and we finally bought a desk, so we’d have a place to work. We rearranged our studios into this little space. I brought home my easel and painting supplies. Drew has two 3D printers in our closet — I’ve been calling it his office — and then I took up most of the living room. For my practice, I am mostly painting on smaller panels. It’s better for quarantine setup.

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TETZ: I do the computer design and 3D print of the works, and then Melissa paints them. They are heavily based on source material she used for some of her paintings, so she inspired them. It’s a back-and-forth.

HUANG: Another project I worked on that was born out of quarantine was an online exhibition called “MeIRL.” It grew from being a small thing on my personal Instagram account to a really large show that coordinated with five local art organizations. It was hosted on Instagram, and it featured artists whose work explores public versus private personas. In the age of social distancing, our social media presentation makes up a larger part of our identity more than ever before. This juried exhibition took a critical look at what having a digital identity means for us as individuals now that we are connecting so much on social media. I had the idea in the shower one day, and an hour later, I put out the first call for art. Within a week I had a much larger show on my hands, with 200 artist submissions and 57 exhibited artists.

TETZ: I do think that one slightly positive angle about all of this is that because more people are going online to experience art, it has leveled the playing field a bit. Over the past 20 years, certain barriers have been removed. You don’t have to go to the number one art school to get your degree or live in a big city to get noticed. Hopefully, we will see more bright, young artists rise to the top simply by being talented and savvy enough to get their work out there. They will be able to break out into the public consciousness without needing the patron saint of a gallery or a commission to help them market themselves. It’s decentralizing the art world.

HUANG: I think galleries and artists will increasingly work online to promote and sell art, though a lot already do. This will only increase in the future. It’s hard to say how galleries are going to weather the storm. The blue-chip galleries will probably be fine. The do-it-yourself spaces, maybe less so, but a lot of them know how to fundraise through grassroots means. We’ll have to see how long that support can last while everyone is strapped for money. The arts are always the first thing to go.

Visit magazine.gsu.edu for a video on Tetz and Huang’s collaborative process for creating art for a series titled “Glitched Venus.”

AS TOLD TO JAC KUNTZ
PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON

PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON
Melissa Huang and Drew Tetz are both in their third year of the Master of Fine Arts program. Married for two years, the couple is adapting to life working in their home studios and discovering ways for people to experience their art online.
MATT HINTON (B.A. ’97)
OWNER, BELL STREET BURRITOS

When the economic consequences of the pandemic disrupted his growing restaurant business, Matt Hinton did what he’s always done — found ways to adapt.

O ur business had a really difficult year in 2019. We opened a new shop in Tucker (Ga.), and that was a big challenge for us. But at the beginning of 2020, everything started to turn around.

The winter isn’t great for selling burritos, for whatever reason, so I kept saying, “Wait until March, wait until March, we’re going to kill it!”

So, March shows up, and it brings a freaking pandemic. I have three restaurants, so I knew I had to be ready. When it got to be bad in Washington state, around the second week of March, that’s when we started introducing curbside service. We got onboard with that earlier than most restaurants.

A couple of days later, I instituted a social-distancing policy at the service counter. I went to each location and put out blue painter’s tape six feet in front of the person running the register. Some people scoffed and rolled their eyes, but I wanted to be sure that my employees and customers were safe, and that people realized we were taking this health issue seriously.

Then, things really got bad. Early on, it was clear to me that restaurants have a different supply distribution than grocery stores. We had no trouble getting toilet paper. So, we cooked up a special where you could get a free roll of toilet paper with your order if you used a certain coupon code. It’s definitely not the kind of thing a burrito shop would do in the normal world, but nothing is normal right now.

As restaurants were closing and restaurant workers were getting laid off left and right, there were a lot of people on social media out there saying, “If you’re concerned about your favorite restaurant, go support them by buying gift cards to use later.”

That was my worst nightmare because we’re spending money now to stay open. If people show up five months from now to cash in a bunch of gift cards, who knows where we’ll be financially? That money would go through The Giving Kitchen and get distributed to restaurant workers in need.

I’ve always been about simplicity — I don’t know about selling toilet paper, but you never know.

As a restaurant owner, I’ve always been about simplicity — there are the things we do, and that’s it. Our menu was pretty simple, but here we are, times are strange, and I have to do whatever it takes to keep us going.

So, we pivoted our entire model, and we started making a lot more than just tacos, burritos and quesadillas. We turned into a pre-made prepared foods company.

We started making prepared meals, and even did an Easter dinner where people could buy a smoked spiral-cut ham with their choice of three sides.

I thought we’d sell maybe 20, but we sold more than 100, and more people wanted to get in on it.

We’re selling barbecue now, and it’s pretty damn good. We’re just doing all kinds of crazy stuff to keep the doors open that we would never otherwise do.

Because of that, because we were able to broaden, I haven’t had to let go of a single employee.

Our sales are down, but not dramatically, and we’re doing OK. We’re doing everything possible to stay safe. In our shops, we have an alarm that goes off every 20 minutes letting us know it’s time to sanitize every surface.

I’ve never been so busy, but I’m not stressed. I feel pretty good about our prospects and I feel pretty good about our chances. These times are forcing us to be creative in ways that could be transformative in the long run, and in positive ways.

I’m sure that we won’t go back to the way it was before March. Maybe we will continue to do all of the different things we’re doing now. I don’t know about selling toilet paper, but you never know.

One thing I reflect on is the fact Bell Street was born during similar circumstances. We opened up in 2009, during the recession. I was teaching religion at Morehouse and Spelman at the time, and during the recession, enrollment went down. One of my classes was eliminated, so I had to come up with a scheme to make some money that semester — my wife, Erica (B.A. ’99), and I have three kids — and that’s how Bell Street was born.

At first, I was delivering burritos to people’s houses, but the following semester, the class didn’t materialize. So, I took a big swing and opened our first location in the Sweet Auburn Curb Market right by the Georgia State campus.

I’m a stubborn person to begin with, and there is no work that’s beneath me. So, if I had to dig ditches or open a restaurant, I was going to do whatever it took to get us through. And we’re in a similar situation now, but I just have a lot more mouths to feed.

Thankfully, people really like our burritos. And our barbecue! We’ll do whatever it takes to weather this, and we’re finding some truly creative ways to keep our doors open.

“So, we cooked up a special where you could get a free roll of toilet paper with your order if you used a certain coupon code. It’s definitely not the kind of thing a burrito shop would do in the normal world, but nothing is normal right now.”

AS TOLD TO WILLIAM INMAN (M.H.P. ’16)
PHOTO BY STEVEN THACKSTON
I’VE BEEN A REGISTERED NURSE FOR 25 YEARS.
Until June, I worked for Northeast Georgia Health System in educational services where we developed, implemented and executed education for all staff members. With the arrival of COVID-19, I had to organize a crash course with our staff very time the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a new guideline for personal protective equipment (PPE).

It was tough, but juggling my law school studies and transition- ing my kids to homeschooling was really a challenge. I have six boys, and my kids were all raised in the public school system here in Gwinnett County. As soon as I found out homeschooling was going to be my reality for eight weeks, I got online and made myself a template of everything that needs to be done every Sunday night to prepare for the week. I have a degree in education, and I never thought I was going to need it to homeschool my children, but that degree has been invaluable.

Everything that I do to raise the kids is very much based on my experience as a nurse. Being a nurse, you have to be organized and on top of things. You have to critically think through every aspect of what you’re doing. I have a fifth grader, an eighth grader and my youngest just turned 7; I spent the last three months helping my 19-year-old apply to Georgia State to get into the sport administration program. I’ve also spent the last three months helping my 10th-grader get all of his dual-enrollment information done so he can advance to 11th grade and start his college career a couple years early.

My oldest son is 28 and starting his fourth year of medical school, so I’ve also been focused on making sure he has every- thing he needs to start applying to residency programs soon. I’ll graduate from law school the same year my oldest son graduates from medical school. How’s that?

I had about five hours of online learning to do with the boys every day. Of course, the older kids managed their own, but because they’re teenage boys, I had to stay on them. I took five law classes this semester — 15 credit hours — so it was a lot. I had about five hours of law school work a day, among writing assignments, hypotheticals and videos. I got my older boys to tutor my younger ones so that I could get my law school work done.

At the hospital, one of the areas where I taught PPE guidelines was in the lab. The people who draw blood in a hospital, they’re sometimes 22 and 23 years old, and it struck me that this is a really high-risk group. A phlebotomist is probably the one person who can’t stay six feet away from a patient, so I spent a lot of time in the lab teaching them how to stay as safe as possible.

I also taught our staff about social media: “What are you posting? Should you post it? What can you say? What can’t you say?” Staff sometimes think they can post whatever they want on Facebook because if the hospital tells them what to do, it’s a violation of their free-speech rights. Then we have to have a little constitutional law discussion.

It was really nice because it pulled in my law school career, and I could talk about employment law, constitutional law and what it means to be a right-to-work state. Nursing is a profession where you serve others, and I think I most definitely was born to serve others. I do it very, very well and enjoy it. It never makes me tired.

My goal is to continue to do that through law. I know that I’m not going to have a career of doing just pro bono work all the time, but I know that pro bono work will be a big part of what I do. I like to be able to help those in need.

The thought of law school was very daunting, but it was always something I’d wanted to do, and my fiancé, Jay — he’s a cardiolo- gist, and we’re getting married in November — really helped a lot in my decision to try it.

It’s never too late, and that’s one of the things I tell my class- mates. There’s a great group of students at Georgia State. They’re going to be such a great group of attorneys. I tell them all the time that if there’s anything that you can take away from knowing me, please make sure that you encourage whomever, whenever, that it’s never too late.

One day though, when I’m like 67, I’m going to retire. But I feel like up until you retire, you get up and you do it every day. You do what needs to be done. You help the kids who need help. You help the parents who need help. You help the sick people. You help the confused people. You help.

That’s how we get through this.

“I took five law classes this semester — 15 credit hours — so it was a lot. I had about five hours of law school work a day, among writing assignments, hypotheticals and videos. I got my older boys to tutor my younger ones so that I could get my law school work done.”

AS TOLD TO MICHAEL DAVIS (B.A. ’03)
PHOTO BY MEG BUSCEMA

A second-year student in the College of Law, Stacy Marie Psomiadis, a mother of six, has relied on her experience as a longtime nurse to balance her studies with work, her role during the pandemic as a teacher to her children and preparations for a November wedding.
Commissioneer, Georgia Department of Administrative Services 

J. Alexander Atwood (B.S. ’76)

We’ve been fully engaged in work that supports Gov. Brian Kemp’s efforts, and we’re continuing to partner with agencies, particularly the Department of Public Health, the Department of Economic Development, the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency (GEMA) and others, to help them achieve the best outcomes possible in their respective areas.

I’ve got some great folks working with me at DOAS, and they’re relying on their procurement networks and their experience in trying to assist other agencies. For example, in addition to all the great sourcing already done by GEMA, we helped GEMA with identifying additional sourcing of more than 4 million isolation gowns, 100,000 Tyvek coveralls, 3 million N95 face masks, 55,400 nitrile gloves and 1 million medical-surgical face masks.

Likewise, the Georgia Technology Authority (GTA) reached out for help in locating surplus laptops due to the conversion to teleworking. We were able to locate refurbished laptops so GTA could pass those to the requesting agencies.

Everyday citizens generally don’t see what goes on behind the scenes, but I can tell you, the governor and his team have been working 24/7. Likewise, in DOAS we have been especially busy, particularly involving human resource issues and contracting initiatives.

Since being appointed by Gov. Kemp in March and returning to Atlanta, I have also enjoyed being a student again by taking an occasional class at night in the Georgia State College of Law. I have a soft spot in my heart for Georgia State, and it is good to be back.

I took legislative law this last semester with Professor Neil Kinkoph — essentially an analysis of statutory law. I found it fascinating, especially having been a member of the Georgia Legislature. Professor Kinkoph is a true expert in his field.

Early in my career, while working my way through Georgia State at night, I served as a detective with the Atlanta Police Department assigned to the Intelligence Division. Part of my duties involved executive protection details, including liaising with the U.S. Secret Service on protection details for then-presidential candidates and others, should we be asked to serve.

With a lengthy resume that includes service in local and federal law enforcement, three terms in the Georgia House of Representatives, and service as a Marine officer and a judge, J. Alexander Atwood is leading a state agency with a crucial role in Georgia’s COVID-19 response.

J. ALEXANDER ATWOOD (B.S. ’76)

There haven’t been many calm weekends since the pandemic began, but it’s part of doing business, and we are committed to opening all stops in our effort to make a difference.

At the Georgia Department of Administrative Services (DOAS), our main focus is helping other agencies and state entities maximize opportunities to improve performance. We offer services in five business units — risk management, state purchasing, fleet management, surplus property and human resources — in a consultative environment to help identify issues and develop solutions. That’s our mission, and that work hasn’t changed in these challenging times.

I want people to know this is what a refugee looks like. It’s someone who can save your life.

During this crisis, I’ve been volunteering in Clarkston through health education and prevention programs. The Ethnie Health nonprofit clinic that serves the city took the lead and started to educate the public about the virus from day one. They hosted one of the first drive-through testing sites for Clarkston, which became an example for Georgia. I worked with other physicians and volunteers to educate people about the event by working with community leaders so they understood the severity of the crisis.

Many refugees have limited access to testing and care due to language barriers. And while there is a lack of access to information due to these barriers, there is also an abundance of misinformation. Some refugees are afraid to speak up about being infected due to the stigma of being labeled as COVID-19 positive.

But for this event over two days, we had more than 100 volunteer interpreters on call. I triaged patients to be tested. People were so appreciative to see all the volunteers who were there for them. It reminded me of the time a group of church members came to my house when we arrived here. We felt relieved that someone cared about us. I sensed the same feeling at this event.

We did 120 tests, and the data showed 44 percent were positive. Out of those, 60 percent were people ages 20 to 39. I was also exposed to relatives who tested positive. I had similar symptoms of fever, cough and fatigue. I was concerned for several reasons. I have elderly parents with medical problems who live with us. My wife, Karen Abdallah, is also a Kurdish refugee and doctor. And we have a 1-year-old baby. I was anxious as I knew I had to stay home while someone else covered my work. I wanted to be there for my team. Fortunately, I tested negative.

My co-workers are wonderful. Everyone is trying to be there for each other. Although this is a new virus and there is a lot to learn, they are up to date with new information. They are dedicated to serving our patients during these times while trying to protect themselves and others. So, while I’m ready to help my patients and my community, I’m also being very careful to protect my family. But I felt I had to do the drive-through testing in Clarkston because the city welcomed me and my family when we were refugees. It was my turn to give back during another crisis.

I’ve also helped Georgia State’s Prevention Research Center (PRC) with a proposal that was focused on serving Clarkston and the refugee community. While the COVID-19 crisis is creating some challenges in advancing our work due to social-distancing measures, we’ve had opportunities to expand through social and digital media. In collaboration with PRC advisers and experts, I started to host community panels by inviting COVID-19 experts to educate the public and various immigrant and refugee communities.

It’s all been done through a livestream where the audience can engage with the experts. In a series called “I Had COVID-19,” we had people with the virus share their personal experiences while raising awareness. Another was “I Fight COVID-19” with health care workers from the frontlines. We can reach more people and bring information into their homes through personal stories and panels of experts. I am just the servant who is connecting people.

My parents told me I owed a book to those who taught me the alphabet. I owe volumes to people at Clarkston High School where I learned to speak English, at Georgia State where I had great mentors in chemistry and biology who believed I could be a physician, and at Emory where I’ll finish in June before joining Northside Cardiovascular Institute in Gwinnett County. I owe these places here and at Emory where I’ll finish in June before joining Northside Cardiovascular Institute in Gwinnett County.

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RENE DIAZ

PRESIDENT AND CEO, DIAZ FOODS

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, my priorities were protecting our 400 employees and ensuring the supply chain. I started devising a strategy during the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day, when I was on Rosemary Beach in Florida with my wife and two daughters. At that time, I never thought the pandemic would escalate so much, especially in the United States.

I put together a team of three people to assess our imports from Asia. Our coconut water and rice come from Thailand. We buy products from five vendors in China, but only one is a major item — garlic. We evaluated those shipping channels because factories. If those plants shutter, we’ll have backup stock while we go into reactionary mode.

We also surveyed our resources and gearing up as though this were a war — in case there’s another attack. In a sense, we are blessed that our revenues fall within three major divisions: protein, grocery stores and restaurants. Restaurants closed in March, and our sales tailed off by 90 percent in 24 hours. But at the same time our restaurant business plummeted, our grocery store sales shot up, compensating for what we had lost. When supply chain issues arose, we moved inventory we typically sell to restaurants, like certain cuts of meats, and offered them to grocery stores.

When bad things happen, I usually remain calm. The bigger the crisis, the more tranquil I become. In terms of leadership, if you panic, your people will panic. Businesses can make mistakes with knee-jerk reactions. When a lot of our competitors saw this coming in March, they suspended operations. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of dollars in fresh protein that would’ve spoiled unless they were able to freeze it sat in their coolers. Our staying open gave us an advantage. As restaurants started reopening, we picked up so many new customers who no longer had access to their usual distributors.

When one of our drivers showed up to a new restaurant in Ohio, the whole team rushed outside to cheer him on because they couldn’t find ground beef and chicken from anywhere else. The driver snapped photos of our customers proudly standing beside him.

During the pandemic, we’ve donated 4,500 pounds of food, including fresh produce, canned soup, pasta, boxes of cheese and pallets of tortillas to nurses and doctors at Grady Memorial Hospital. The person who delivered it works in communications in our office. He had a brain tumor, and an emergency procedure at another hospital saved his life. To him, it was a privilege to drop off the provisions and “pay it back.” We donated 20,000 pounds of food to Atlanta Public Schools; 5,000 pounds to Agape, a nonprofit organization benefitting underserved youth; 3,000 pounds to an event co-sponsored by Telemundo and the Mexican Consulate; 2,500 pounds to Corners Outreach, a nonprofit focused on increasing high school graduation rates and improving career opportunities for underemployed parents; and 5,000 pounds to a woman’s shelter called Women Giving Back and a church pantry in Virginia. The Atlanta Community Food Bank also picks up food from us on a weekly basis.

I was born in Cuba in the Communist regime and came to the United States when I was 7. My father’s family owned cattle ranches and was very wealthy. But we had to flee the country and lost everything. The police came and gave us 15 minutes to evacuate our home. I learned the English language in a first-grade special education class at Garden Hills Elementary School. America didn’t have to give us anything, but this country gave my family and me an opportunity to succeed. To me, that’s something you have to repay.

MY ROLE IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE is facilitating and tracking deployments for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Epidemic Intelligence Service and the laboratory Leadership Service. Fellows in these programs have the experience, skills and training to deploy at a moment’s notice.

Our response has developed a great deal since the novel coronavirus first came to the United States. Many of us have been deployed to the field to conduct epidemiological and clinical studies, help with infection control, and provide surge capacity to state and local health departments. Others are supporting the response remotely from the CDC’s Emergency Operations Center. There, we analyze data, write up findings, provide remote technical assistance and answer clinical inquiries, and liaise with a variety of federal, state, local and private partner organizations.

Teams reach out to my program for help in filling specific staffing needs. I also reach out to various teams when we have available staff.

I think could be an asset. Essentially, I’m a matchmaker for staff and roles within the COVID-19 response. I must keep track of where every one is and provide updates.

I’m grateful I can contribute to these efforts and help get the right people into the right roles, but it’s a very hectic time.

I’ve had the honor of working with this program on other responses, like Ebola and vaping-associated lung injury from e-cigarette use, but this is much different because it’s an all-hands-on-deck type of environment and nothing has ever lasted this long.

Normally, we provide emergency short-term technical assistance to state health departments who request our support. Sometimes, we have weeks to plan the logistics, staffing and objectives. Other times, a state calls and asks that we send a team of four Fellows the next day.

Our state and local health partners are equally swamped. Staff in the field may be going into areas where there is an increased risk of them being exposed to the virus, and they may be worried for their families’ well-being. It’s stressful knowing the reality of the situation and the sacrifices our frontline workers are making for the greater good.

Before the end of the semester, I had no conscious break between work and classes. I had to force myself to take time away from both, honestly, it felt like no focus on anything outside of the response.

I had class Mondays and Wednesdays, and it was a miracle I got any schoolwork done after work on Thursdays and Fridays. Weekends were for writing papers, completing assignments and studying. Fortunately, my supervisor and colleagues at the CDC were incredibly supportive of my schooling, and I was able to finish the semester successfully.

I have good days and bad days. On bad days, I try to accept that it’s just how it is, and it’s OK. I’ve always had a lot on my plate, so managing stress isn’t new. I’m lucky because I was a Peace Corps volunteer, which taught me how to cope with isolation, uncertainty and things out of my control.

It’s a scary and stressful time for a lot of people. We should all remember that showing more compassion to others can go a long way.
AUSTIN BIRCHELL (B.A. ’20)
NEW POLITICAL SCIENCE GRADUATE AND PART-TIME POUNCE

“I dream my job is to be an education legislative assistant for a member of Congress, so I am going to get a master’s degree in public policy ... I'm coming back to Georgia State, of course.”

As a first-generation student at Georgia State, of course. 

As I TOOK FULL ADVANTAGE OF MY EDUCATION, I learned every bit I could, and I earned my degree. Not walking across the stage doesn’t take that away from me.

Because of Georgia State, I’ve experienced a lot that I wouldn’t have otherwise. On top of the list was the time I met Bill Gates.

It all started in the summer before my freshman year. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was one of the first students to interact with the Admissions chatbot, Pounce. I wasn’t receiving my Zell Miller Scholarship award money, and throughout the summer I was told it was probably still processing. Finally, two weeks before classes started, Pounce told me which office to contact to resolve it.

As a first-generation student — I don’t have a sibling who went to college — having that help was huge. I probably would have had to sit out a semester.

The next summer I got a call from Allison Calhoun-Brown, associate vice president for student success, who asked if the chatbot was helpful.

I explained what happened, and she asked me if I wanted to tell my story to the Gates Foundation.

So, after my freshman year, the Gates Foundation visited Georgia State and made a short video with Timothy Renick, senior vice president for student success, Mrs. Calhoun-Brown and a couple of students. Each student was representing one of Georgia State’s student success initiatives. And I was representing Pounce, the Admissions bot. That was the first time I got to represent Pounce and Georgia State.

Before filming the video, we were told that we couldn’t let anybody know Bill Gates was coming, and that we had to wait two hours after the event to let everybody know he was here. I remember wiping the sweat off my hands to shake his hand. I was supposed to show him how the Pounce chatbot works, so I had to crack a joke to break the ice.

“First off, before we start, Mr. Gates,” I said, “it’s extremely humbling to show you a software.”

He laughed, everybody else laughed, and I felt so much better after being able to joke around like that with the man who founded Microsoft and is one of the world’s richest guys.

On the way home, I called my mom and screamed, “I just met Bill Gates!!” Both of us were just bawling on the phone. It ended up truly being a life-changing event because a week later I was in Bill Gates’ office, and that’s where I met people from Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s (D-Mass.) office and talked to people in Sen. David Perdue (R-Ga.) and Isakson’s offices and really sharpened my pen about higher education.

My dream job is to be an education legislative assistant for a member of Congress, so I am going to get a master’s degree in public policy, I think that would give me a more concrete idea of how laws pass at a local, state and federal level. I’m coming back to Georgia State, of course.

While working with PRMC, I also got to be Pounce, literally this time, though not as the official athletics mascot.

The coolest thing I got to do as Pounce was relighting the Olympic cauldron for the U.S. Olympic Team marathon trials in February. Muhammad Ali was the last person to light the flame in public, so it went from Muhammad Ali to Pounce, and I was in the Pounce suit. I used to box in high school, so it was crazy. A very surreal moment.

I never thought I would have the Pounce costume sitting in my house, but since the pandemic sent everyone home, it’s been with me. In between lectures and assignments, I’ve done about nine TikTok videos for PRMC with it now.

I kept in contact with her and applied to be a PNPI summer scholar the following February. I was accepted and spent the summer of 2019 in Washington, D.C.

And that was another life-changing experience. I got to shadow Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.) for a whole day, and that’s where I met people from Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s (D-Mass.) office and talked to people in Sen. David Perdue (R-Ga.) and Isakson’s offices and really sharpened my pen about higher education.

My dream job is to be an education legislative assistant for a member of Congress, so I am going to get a master’s degree in public policy. I think that would give me a more concrete idea of how laws pass at a local, state and federal level. I’m coming back to Georgia State, of course.

As Austin, not as Pounce, I also starred in “Adventures with Austin,” a series of videos where I was a “man on the street” going through a sorority’s haunted house. I went on a trip to Providence Canyon with a Touch the Earth group.

It’s changed my college experience, and I’ve done things I never thought I would. Who can say they practiced with the football team if they’re not a football player?

I know there are at least 10,000 people who have seen me be a dork on camera, and I honestly don’t mind it because, hey, you only live once.

For me, the worst part of the pandemic has been not knowing if anything was the last time. I never knew it was my last time in class, the last time grabbing a coffee in the library, the last time filming “Adventures with Austin,” and I never knew it was my last time on campus before graduating.

You usually know when it’s your last time and you get to breathe it in. That has been way harder than being told you’re not going to walk at graduation.

PHOTO BY CAROLYN RICHARDSON

AS TOLD TO MICHAEL DAVIS (B.A. ’03)
PHOTO BY CAROLYN RICHARDSON
A professor of epidemiology, Monica Swahn was closely monitoring the unfolding pandemic when her father fell ill with COVID-19. Here, she remembers him and discusses his death against the backdrop of various global responses to the crisis.

“Every week in class, we started with a discussion of COVID-19. At that time, it never occurred to me that the virus would strike and end my dad’s life or that it would result in such a health crisis for the U.S.”

After two weeks on a ventilator for COVID-19-related health issues, my dad died on April 20 in Stockholm, Sweden, his home for most of his life. One month later, he would have turned 75 years old.

He lived an exciting life. In semi-retirement, he managed a business in Pattaya, Thailand, and lived in a beautiful condo close to the beach. He soaked up the sun, exercised and ate the best foods. He regularly traveled to Stockholm to visit friends and family.

In January, when I last saw him, he hadn’t yet decided where he would be on his birthday, May 19, but most likely it would have been in Thailand. I was pondering the possibilities of an exotic celebration of the occasion, maybe even on the beach. But then everything changed.

The day the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, Jan. 30, I flew from Sweden back home to Atlanta. On that flight, I prepared my lecture notes and class activities for the following week. As a professor of epidemiology, I teach a global health class to graduate students, and I wanted to make sure to update them on the latest developments. This was big. We were all wondering if the COVID-19 epidemic was going to become a pandemic.

Every week in class, we started with a discussion of COVID-19. At that time, it never occurred to me that the virus would strike and end my dad’s life or that it would result in such a health crisis for the U.S.

I felt so bad. I had told my friends as late as early March that while COVID-19 was likely to become a pandemic, it should not be a major concern — at least not to those of us in the U.S. — because we have the infrastructure for testing and contact tracing, two key tools for containing the spread. This is basic epidemiology.

I had worked at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for nearly 10 years. I knew the agency’s strengths, and I thought we were in good hands. For years I trained epidemic intelligence officers or, as we like to call them, “disease detectives.” I knew we could do this.

But, when COVID-19 cases were first identified in the U.S., we did not undertake broad testing protocols, nor did we implement contract-tracing strategies. We simply focused on the cases that came from abroad. We did not address the community spread until much later, until the virus was spreading all over the country.

With horror and fascination, I followed the dramatic increase in cases in the U.S. and elsewhere, realizing that, with our limited testing, we were missing most cases.

We could have been a success story. We should have been. It never had to be this bad.

My family in Atlanta was fine, but in Stockholm, my dad got a cough. His partner was concerned. He had a hard time walking. He was disoriented. He seemed to have a fever and kept coughing. We ordered him an ambulance, but he refused care. They said his vital signs were fine and there was nothing they could do. And, perhaps, at that moment, that was true. But he deteriorated fast.

When we ordered him a second ambulance, he showed the emergency staff he was too fit to go with them. He actually did a few squats, his signature move, in a defiant way to show them he was in great shape. And he was. He took meticulous care of his physical health and kept a diary of his exercise routine. In his younger days he competed as a weightlifter and even ranked in the top nationally. Yet, he ended up taking the ambulance to the hospital and was placed on a ventilator shortly thereafter.

At first, he seemed to respond well to the treatment, but things changed. After two brutal weeks with some of the best medical care available, he died.

We never had a chance to tell him goodbye or to give him a hug. We couldn’t mourn with our friends and families. We couldn’t celebrate his life. At least not the way we usually would.

In class, we discussed the COVID-19 strategy used in Sweden. As a Swede, I found it interesting to compare and contrast strategies used in various countries. When I found out my dad had been diagnosed with COVID-19, I was concerned for him and concerned about how many people he may have infected before getting treatment, given Sweden’s more lax approach. Luckily, it seemed his friends did not get sick.

I don’t want my dad to be forgotten, to be just one of the many unexpected deaths due to COVID-19. These deaths are all tragic, and so many of them could have been avoided.

My dad was born in Finland in 1945, just as World War II was about to end. He was strong. He worked hard. He loved driving his car and listening to Elvis and Bob Marley. He loved watching movies. He loved the beach. He was stubborn, terribly stubborn, and he was full of Finnish sisu (a cultural concept incorporating characteristics including courage, willpower and tenacity).

He lives on in me and my younger brother.
Georgia State’s Emergency Assistance Fund provides students with the support they need to overcome unanticipated financial hardships or basic-needs insecurities.

With more than 53,000 students — 57 percent of whom are low-income — the need for this fund is greater than ever.

Visit impact.gsu.edu/help to learn more and make a gift.

DISTANCE LEARNING

by Samuel Donaldson

ACROSS
1. Blue shades
6. Includes in an email
9. Emulate a kangaroo
12. "Beats me"
13. Org. for the 50-
14. Feeling of wonder
15. Hard-to-find guy in kids’ books
16. Like less appetizing tries
18. "I'm standing right behind you"
19. Money, in Mexico
20. One scattered in a honey-moon suite
22. Type of tide
26. Basketball teammates of PFs and Cs
27. Surveillance aircraft hidden in "saw action"
28. Grassy yards
29. "Pics ___ didn't happen!"
30. Try to chomp on
31. Social-distancing recommendation (and what the circled squares in this puzzle represent)
32. S, on the periodic table
33. Word after liberal or martial
34. ___ salts (bath additives)
35. "Suffice ___ say"
36. Sweet and/or iced beverage
37. "Pics ___ didn't happen!"
38. Small quibbles
39. Hands-over-the-eyes question
40. Have another slice ___
41. Brewpub offering, for short
42. Beaver creations
43. Jury composition, supposedly
44. Sch. with Panther Pride
45. Questions on a forwarded email
46. Small quibbles
47. "Except..."
48. 23___ (ancestry testing company)
49. "Hamilton" star Phillipa
50. ___ the Magnificent (Johnny Carson persona)
51. Wicker fishing basket
52. Train for the big fight
53. Yes, in Yokohama
54. In debt to
55. According to
56. Attempted

DOWN
1. Campaigns fought on TV
2. "Family Guy" town (and a type of clam)
3. "Except..."
4. ___ ___ ___ ___ (ancestry testing company)
5. "Hamilton" star Phillipa
6. ___ the Magnificent (Johnny Carson persona)
7. Wicker fishing basket
8. Train for the big fight
9. Yes, in Yokohama
10. In debt to
11. According to
12. Many Beethoven works
13. More wet, in the morning
14. French fragrance
15. Vase-like vessel
16. Early med. school class
17. Fresno clock setting in fall
18. Big name in 38-Across
19. Some laced dress shoes
20. American Red Cross founder
21. Has a late meal
22. "Casablanca" role
23. Ink on bodies
24. Ready, ___ go
25. Narrow strips of land
26. Taiwan capital
27. All-inclusive
28. Determine
29. Former Broncos QB John
30. Deduc from clues
31. Home row letters for the left hand
32. Fedex rival
33. French water
34. Choose

A professor in the College of Law who creates crosswords on the side, Samuel Donaldson has published more than 120 puzzles in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and more. Donaldson is now regularly contributing a crossword to each issue of Georgia State University Magazine. Check your answers at magazine.gsu.edu.
“We are proud to light Georgia State Stadium blue every ‘THERS-day’ night to **HONOR THOSE ON THE FRONTLINES** fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. We light our stadium blue after each win and we know that with their help, **WE WILL BE ABLE TO LIGHT IT BLUE AGAIN IN THE FUTURE.**”

— CHARLIE COBB, ATHLETICS DIRECTOR