

Watching a Pandemic Unfold: A Nursing Student's Take

An interview by Logan Johnson

Nov 2020

This interview explores the thoughts and feelings of nursing student and New Jersey native Janel Weeks regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected her life personally. As a nursing student, Janel shares strong feelings and opinions about the situations the virus has caused and how it has played into the view of her career path. She shares how her “new normal” looks as well as the concerns she has had the past several months, some of which are relatable to most college students during this time. As a glimpse into the life of a health sciences major, this interview shares both struggles as well as affirmations that may resonate within the lives of all college students studying for careers in the health sciences.

Logan: Can you remember what your initial thoughts were when COVID-19 reached the United States?

Janel: I was like “what is this?” I had no idea about it at all. I thought it was really downplayed at first; everyone was saying it was like the flu and nothing to worry about. And then, all of a sudden, it completely sky-rocketed and there was just so much panic, stress and worry coming from every outlet.

Logan: Did you think that it would actually reach the United States and spread as quickly as it did?

Janel: No, I thought that if it got to the US, then we would have been equipped enough to handle it right off the bat. I even thought we would have handled it better than other countries by the way our health care system is seen as being top tier. But, in reality, other countries had a way better handle on it than we did, and it just became crazier than I could have ever imagined.

Logan: What was your daily routine like before the pandemic emergency guidelines were in place? Were you participating in regular nursing program activities like clinical?

Janel: So, I had a lot of different things: I had in-person chapter for my sorority, in-person practice for dance – which was three times a week plus game days, which the arena was filled with hundreds of people. And then, of course, in-person classes as well as in-person clinical.

Logan: How have these activities changed since the societal effects of the virus?

Janel: For my sorority, we had weekly chapter as well as small events on the side, which have obviously stopped. Before COVID hit, I was planning a walk for our philanthropy that took 6 months to plan; I budgeted everything for it! We have not been able to hold any events or bond with the new sisters since all this started. It has been so hard to bond and get to know the new sisters over Zoom; it is just not the same.

For my dance team, right now we are doing the same amount of practice time, but it is really hard to engage with the new girls and stay motivated with each other. We have been having practices on Zoom, which there is not much room to dance in our houses and also all the choreography is mirrored by the camera. We had our first in-person practice the other day and it took way longer than we thought to actually learn the choreography because it is so different on Zoom. We don't have games anymore; we are just practicing for Nationals. It is so hard to have a team that you cannot do much for. I am one of the captains, and it has been so difficult to promote teamwork and leadership and be someone my teammates can look up to when I don't even know how to handle a situation like this myself.

Nursing is so hard on Zoom! Normally we have back-to-back three-hour lectures which is already hard enough. But normally we are so engaged during this time. On Zoom, it is not nearly as engaging. The first four weeks of this semester we did clinical completely online through simulations. And then, when we went to do in-person clinical, I felt like I didn't know what to do! For me, the biggest part of nursing is hands-on experience. Putting in a catheter, putting in an IV, spiking an IV bag. These things are so different hands-on then reading about them in a lecture. Luckily, we did transition to in-person clinical, but my class is so far behind, like, I feel like I am not as prepared as I would be. Also, a huge part of nursing for me was collaborating with my friends in the program. We would just go to the library and go over everything in class, but we can't do that anymore, and it just isn't the same over Zoom.

Logan: What were your thoughts and feelings about the pandemic once the quarantine emergency was put into place and the developments of COVID-19 began being reported constantly?

Janel: I think it was a lot of uncertainty, just because I felt like it was so downplayed in the beginning. I think this caused a lot of anxiety all around. I talked to a lot of nurses in the hospital and they all agreed it was like walking in blind constantly. They had little to no information about how to handle it at first. This resulted, unfortunately, in a lot of lives lost. Luckily, we know a lot more about it now and hopefully we will have a vaccine soon, but we are still combatting people who do not want to listen to pandemic guidelines, which is frustrating.

Logan: What was your daily routine like once the quarantine period began? Did you use this time to start anything new?

Janel: There was nothing to do, so physical activity is something I chose to get really into. I did lots of workouts and went on walks around the neighborhood. I started eating healthy and tried to improve my health. The walks gave me some fresh air and a reason to get out of the house. Quarantine really takes a toll on mental health, and I think more people should realize this. I felt like it was harder to get out of bed because there wasn't a whole lot to get up for, which sounds depressing, but it can be a real problem for some people. I just think people should take into account how this whole situation can affect someone mentally, and we should advocate for one another's mental health during this time.

Logan: Looking at your life during the pandemic, what changes have been the easiest to accommodate to, and what have been the hardest?

Janel: I don't even know what was easy about it. The only thing I can say would be getting to spend more time with my mom. It also forced me to try and stay motivated and on a schedule. The hardest part has been not being around people because I am a bit of an extrovert. Quarantine was horrible. I am still struggling with not being able to see all my friends normally. And when I do see people, it comes with the anxiety about the possibility of getting the virus.

Logan: How has this situation affected your feelings towards your career path as a nursing student?

Janel: I think that the corona pandemic has created even more anxiety about being in the hospital. Like, as a nurse, you are already exposed to so many diseases at once, but with corona you are an essential worker, and you are always putting yourself at risk. That is part of the job: exposing yourself to these things in order to save and help others. For most other jobs or majors, this isn't an everyday issue. So, this made me realize that you really have to want to be in the field to be good at it, and, in a way, I think this made me want to be a part of it more. Especially because this is a time of uncertainty, I want to be someone who can contribute to it.

Logan: Do you feel like you have been experiencing more stress since the pandemic started?

Janel: Yes. Honestly, motivation is my biggest issue right now, which in turn makes me more stressed about school. I feel like I didn't do as well as I could have this semester. And then there's the stress of going to the stores and them not certain having things. This also really made me stressed about money and my job. If they close the restaurant I serve at, I will have to file for unemployment. And I know I am not the only one going through this, which makes it really hard to deal with.

Logan: What do you think your future has in store for you, and do you think this pandemic will have lasting effects on our generation? What are you hopeful for?

Janel: I am hopeful that life will go back to normal. I think it will go back to normal, but economically I don't know if it will ever go completely back to normal. For the future I think our generation will always have stress about this. Once we get a vaccine, it will be more regulated like the flu. And eventually we will have to accept that it is a normal thing now, like the flu. We also won't really know if there are long-term effects of the vaccine or corona itself. So, I suspect there might be some long-term anxiety about it for us. I hope we will be able to congregate again without worry. I think our generation will always be scared of something like this happening again. Hopefully, we never have anything like this again!

Below is a photo of Janel (right) and her friend, Casey (left), before going into the hospital for their clinical shift during the COVID-19 pandemic.

