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UA94/6/1 COVID-19 Diary

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Pandemic Diary

Kaleb Workman

Introduction

Hello to all who may read this, present or future, my name is Kaleb Workman. I am sixteen years old as of today, January 19th, 2021. I was born on [redacted] in Indianapolis, Indiana but have lived in Florence, Kentucky since I was a baby. I am currently a student at the Gatton Academy for Excellence in Mathematics and Science in Kentucky, which is essentially a high school at Western Kentucky University where we live in a dorm and take college classes.

I remember first seeing COVID-19 on the news around November or December of 2019. I was a sophomore at Cooper High School at the time, and it just seemed like some far off thing in China. Not many people even knew the name of the virus, we just saw there was some sort of outbreak on the other side of the world. No one thought it would ever spread here. The last time people paid attention to an outbreak overseas was the Ebola outbreak in 2014. It came to the US but only a few people ever got it, so we assumed this would be the same.

Life went on, I finished my application for and got accepted to Gatton. January and February news mostly focused on the presidential primaries. We had largely forgotten the COVID outbreak. But as February turned to March, we saw it begin to affect countries other than China. I remember being in my homeroom and a girl said, “we are all gonna get coronavirus and die” and I, along with the teacher, thought she was being very dramatic.

The week it all changed was the week of March 8th through March 14th. It was a four day week, we had Friday off for a teacher training day. I was laying in bed in my room on Wednesday night just talking with my friends on Discord, when we all got an email saying that school would be completely at home for the next eight weeks. The next day at school was a complete mess. The teachers spent the whole day explaining how school was going to work from home. We still didn't understand it by the end of the day. As I rode the bus home from school that day, I remember thinking that it surely wouldn't be my last time doing so, and that we would probably be back in a few weeks when all of this was over. I never set foot in that school again.

The next few months are a blur in my memory. We settled into a rhythm with online school, it was much easier than normal school. In the initial panic, people flooded grocery stores to stock up on food and supplies. I remember going to the local Kroger with my dad, the first time I had really left the house in a few weeks. Row upon row upon row were completely empty. Thinking back on it, it almost seems unreal.

The weather got warmer and I was able to go outside more. A lot of the times I would just jump on our trampoline, and talk to my dad who would sit on the deck. My mom would lie out in our driveway in the sun, and I would walk in circles and talk to her. But usually I just stayed in my room and watched YouTube and Netflix, or played video games. I also learned how to ride a bike, something I probably should have done 8 years beforehand.

I remember when we passed the eight week mark, when we were supposed to go back to school. They had already extended it, and soon extended it to the end of the year.

The first family member of mine to die due to the virus was in June. My great uncle got it and after a few weeks in the hospital died. I didn't know him very well so it did not affect me much, but my dad and I went to his funeral. It just made the pandemic so much more real to all of us there.

By the time school ended and summer fully set in, we were still not fully used to the pandemic. Things did begin to open up, though. Restaurants, theme parks, and stores began to reopen in June and July. At the end of June, my dad and I took a trip to Colorado that we had planned since 2019. Travel was quite different in the pandemic. Especially wearing a mask anywhere public. A week after that, me and my mom took a trip to Universal Studios in Orlando. We were actually there on reopening day for the Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World. It was an interesting experience. All of the cast members clapped for us as we walked in. The lines there were reminiscent of when we first went when I was a kid in 2008 just after the financial crash.

Summer came and went, I moved into Gatton in late August. The pandemic had simply become a fact of life by this point. Wearing a mask upon going into public had become something automatic. Online classes here were harder, but I partly have myself to blame. I was not very good at paying attention during Zoom meets, especially at 8am. News became less and less about the pandemic and more about the upcoming election.

The semester passed and we went home for winter break. Everything briefly shut down again in Kentucky, but we could still drive to Cincinnati in 20 minutes from my house if we wanted to eat out. The vaccines started to roll out in December. It was crazy finally seeing a vaccine after 9 months of pandemic. My mom works at Christ hospital

in Cincinnati, so she was able to receive one of the first vaccinations in the area. She is, as of yet, the only vaccinated person I know. We also returned to Disney, as a whole family this time, over break. It was much more crowded than it was in summer.

Everyone celebrated on new years. We were all glad to see an end to the year. "Death to 2020" was a common thing to hear around this time. On January 6th, 2021 however, our attention was captured as a mob of thousands of people in denial of Biden's victory of the election stormed the United States capitol. We couldn't believe what we were seeing, live on tv. On January 17th, I moved back into school.

As of now, it is a rather uncertain time. Tomorrow, Biden will be inaugurated. I don't know what will happen but we all acknowledge that there is a real chance of something terrible happening. I think a comment someone made last night best describes what it is like now. All of the boys on my floor were hanging out and watching YouTube and anime on the tv, when one of them said, "Now, when I watch movies and TV shows, I will look at the characters outside and think *where are their masks?*" We all agreed that we have had similar thoughts.

It is almost impossible to imagine a world after the pandemic. The world pre-pandemic seems so distant, though it has only been 10 months. I don't know in what way or when this will end. But I hope as I record these next few months, I will be describing a future better than it appears to be heading towards. Only time will tell.

Monday, February 1st, 2021:

Bowling Green, Ky

Weather: 28 degrees and snowing

This past week has been a rather uneventful one. I spent most of my time laying in bed and either doing homework or watching YouTube or talking with my friends on Discord. In the common room, we started watching the show Death Note. We have not finished it yet, but I would recommend it to anyone who is remotely interested. We also went out and got real ramen the other day, a nice change of pace from eating subway every day. We also continued watching the show Attack on Titan, as it's fourth season is coming out now. If you couldn't tell, we are big fans of anime.

The monotony of being here is somewhat draining. Sure, you can hang out with friends every night. But when you do it every night it becomes less fun. The pandemic doesn't help either as it means we have to wear a mask every time we leave our rooms. I have been in my room pretty much all day because of those reasons.

That is all I really have to say about my past week. It is a blur in my memory at this point. In the news, the only notable thing was that there was a military led coup in Myanmar last night. It seems president Biden is threatening them, there is a small chance it could lead to a war. I hope not, we shouldn't keep meddling in other country's business at the expense of our own people.

Monday, February 22nd, 2021:

Florence, Ky

Weather: 37 degrees and cloudy

It seems I have forgotten to update this diary for the past two weeks, whoops. Well, quite a bit has happened since the start of the month. Recently, the entire US got hit by a huge snowstorm. Snow covered over 70% of the country's surface area. It stretched all the way into southern Texas. We got a good few inches in Bowling Green and so school got cancelled this week, of course we still had online classes. That's why I am writing this from my home in Florence. I went home on Wednesday because I figured I could use a break, and some actual good food instead of Subway for the 29184910th time in a week.

The snow was not so kind to Texas. They lost power in most of their major cities because the generators there were not built to withstand the cold. People have been stuck in the cold without heating for a week now. Of course all of the empty corporate megatowers in the centre of town remained powered, while the citizens got nothing. Their senator, Ted Cruz, ran off to Mexico and was forced to come back only when people made a fuss about it.

As for the pandemic, nothing new has happened. We are still stuck in this state of masks and social distancing. The vaccine is being rolled out though, and we are doing much better than we were in January. In early January we were getting 300,000 new cases every day nationwide, now it is down to 50,000 cases every day, which strangely enough was the peak back in last summer, it seemed like a lot then but December and January blew that out of the water. Almost 500,000 people have died since last March. If they died from any other

cause of death besides disease, a lot more people would care. But sadly, because of the nature of the pandemic and the constant misinformation spread over the past year, a lot of people just don't even care.

In other news, Trump got acquitted by the senate recently. I can't say that I'm surprised, but I am disappointed. I knew the Republicans were never gonna convict him, but it still makes me sad to see. It's like half the country lives in one reality and the other half lives in an entirely different reality. We can't even agree on what is and isn't true anymore. I mean at this point a large group of people within our country literally have absolute faith in some anonymous poster on 4chan (QAnon).

Rush Limbaugh recently died as well. I would be sad if he weren't such a hateful, racist, idiotic person. I can't believe he was the most popular radio personality in America for YEARS. For anyone reading this who is unaware who Rush Limbaugh is, he was a conservative radio talk show host. He has said some pretty messed up stuff. To name a few: He was often dismissive toward the need for consent in relationships, he denies the existence of climate change, he once said "the NFL all too often looks like a game between the Bloods and the Crips without any weapons," and he said "Holocaust 90 million Indians? Only 4 million left? They all have casinos, what's to complain about?" He opposed LGBT rights and he defended Reagan's ignoring of the AIDS epidemic by falsely claiming it did not infect straight people. So, as far as I'm concerned, good riddance.

Another crew member was revealed for Inspiration 4, SpaceX's first manned flight. It will just be a simple orbit around Earth, but it is crazy that a private company can do stuff like that now. While I am not a big fan of Elon Musk, I do think SpaceX and Tesla are both good

things. SpaceX got people interested in space exploration again, because ever since the fall of the USSR back in 1991, the US has been lacking in public interest and funding for space programs.

That's all of the recent events I can think of. Or at least all the ones that I know enough about to talk about.

Monday, March 1st, 2021:

Bowling Green, Ky

Weather: 42 and cloudy

The weather warmed up extremely quickly. It went from below freezing for a week to 70 degrees in just 3 days. Almost all of the snow has melted at this point. It seems that spring has arrived early this year, or maybe I'm just not used to the weather this far south. Either way, it has been in the 50s and 60s all week. It's absolutely lovely. Yesterday, there was a massive storm that stretched all the way from New York to Mexico, and it caused quite a lot of flooding here. There were a million weather alerts and it rained pretty much all day.

As for recent news, a few days ago, the Oklahoma House of Representatives passed a bill saying that the state legislature can declare a federal law unconstitutional. I don't even know how that is possible. It clearly is overstepping the boundaries of what a state can and can not do. If a state can ignore federal laws, then why even have a federal government at all. Surely then it would be more practical to be a loose union of countries like the European Union. The Oklahoma GOP has claimed it is to support states' rights. But I find it interesting that most people who are arguing in favor of states' rights, do so in order that states can infringe upon the rights of their citizens. We saw this happen in the civil war with slavery, in the civil rights movement, in

the legality of gay marriage, and we still see it today with issues like abortion, LGBT protections, and other such social issues. Though I do support states having rights and being able to make their own choices, it does make me suspicious of anyone arguing for “states’ rights.”

Speaking of LGBT protections, a bill has recently passed the US House of Representatives that massively expands protections for LGBT people. It will include them in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which means LGBT people will have federal protections in housing, employment, and other such fields. This is obviously a good thing and really I hope it passes the senate. It needs 60 votes in the senate to pass, meaning that at least 10 Republicans will have to vote for it. I would hope that that will not be difficult, but we shall see. This issue really bothers me, as some states have some VERY backwards laws on this. For example, Tennessee is just 30 minutes south of here, and in Tennessee there are absolutely no discrimination protections for LGBT people of any kind. In fact, there are even laws put in place that prevent any cities or counties from placing their own protections on LGBT people. The only protections in the whole state are protections in public employment found only in Memphis, Knoxville, Nashville, and Chattanooga. It frustrates me to see this sort of thing in a supposedly “civilized” country. Of course, being a member of the LGBT community myself, I am biased. But I still think it is an embarrassment that a country as modern and powerful as the United States of America still has these laws in place.

CPAC-2021 was also just held this past week. It seems Donald Trump has hinted at a third run in 2024. I would still be absolutely shocked if he were to be the candidate by then. Of course, in the poll that was held there 55% of respondents chose him as their preferred candidate for 2024. However, he will be 78 by then, and while that is president Biden’s current age, Trump is significantly less healthy than

Biden. I would not at all be surprised if he died between now and then. I have no idea who the Republican party is going to run besides him, though. The second place in that poll was Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, but he only got 29% of the vote, with South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem coming in third with just 4%. I feel that the Republican party will be lost without Trump unless some other similar “charismatic” character appears. Trump apparently said, "Joe Biden has had the most disastrous first month of any president in modern history. . . Already the Biden administration has proved that they are anti-jobs, anti-family, anti-borders, anti-energy, anti-women and anti-science. In just one short month, we have gone from America first to America last." I don't even understand this, as not very much has happened in the past few months at all. It seems like his usual over dramatic language used to rile up his base over nothing.

A third big vaccine, Johnson & Johnson's, has been approved in the US. This should speed up our production and distribution of the vaccine, which is definitely a good thing. More people I know have been getting vaccinated recently. My floor RC, my grandparents, and my mom are all vaccinated now. Next week, the school makes the decision on whether or not we will be able to go to England in July and August. I do not have high hopes but the increased distribution of the vaccine in both the US and UK do raise them a little. I am just very impatient waiting for this all to end. Of course, it'll never really be truly gone, our society has been changed forever. But I want to be able to just walk around outside without a mask on. The mask doesn't really bother me at this point, but the rare occasions I do get to be outside without one have been very nice.

Monday, March 8th, 2021

Bowling Green, Ky

Weather: Sunny and 65 degrees

It is finally starting to feel like spring. Still waiting for the leaves to come back on the trees, though. It's been so long since I've seen a forest with leaves and I really miss it. It's already the midpoint of the semester, which seems to have gone by incredibly fast. This upcoming weekend is our closed weekend. Me and my dad are going to Tennessee, but I will talk more about that next week after I've actually gone.

This week seems to have been another slow news week. I have seen that the For the People Act just passed the House with a vote of 220-210. It's a huge bill with a lot of reforms in it. It will make Election Day a federal holiday, give former felons the right to vote, establish automatic voter registration, prohibits any person from communicating "materially false" information to prevent people from voting, mandates paper ballots, introduce voluntary public funding for campaigns, impose stricter limitations on lobbying, require the president and vice president to publicly disclose tax returns, require states use independent commissions (five Democrats, five Republicans, and five independents) to draw congressional districts, and establish a code of ethics for the Supreme Court. As you can see, this bill covers a wide variety of huge reforms that would completely change our democracy. In my opinion, this would be for the better.

Monday, March 22nd, 2021

Bowling Green, Kentucky

70 degrees and sunny

I think winter is completely gone by now. The temperature is not projected to dip below the 60s for a while now. All of the flowers are blooming and it is lovely. The weather gives me some happiness in such a terrible year. On March 11th, we hit the one year anniversary

of when the pandemic became real for me. It was on that day one year ago that they announced the closure of our school. I can't believe it really has been that long. We had all thought it would last a couple weeks, maybe even two or three months at most. Here we are, a year later, and it is still going on. However depressing that may be, good news has arrived. On March 17th, they announced that everyone over 16 at WKU is now able to get a vaccination. We sign up over text and they will send us a message when it is ready. I have already signed up, but haven't received any information as to when I'll be able to get it. At the projected rate, we should achieve herd immunity sometime this summer. I will be so glad when the day comes when I can walk around outside without a mask on.

Last weekend was our closed weekend. It was what we got instead of spring break at Gatton. It was nice. I went to Tennessee with my Dad and was surprised by a visit from my brother, who I haven't seen in years. Downtown Nashville was insane. We went down there to eat dinner on the first night. Walking down Broadway, you wouldn't even know there was a pandemic. The streets were completely packed with people, every bar was entirely full, and it seemed like we were the only people wearing masks. I knew they didn't take the pandemic seriously in Tennessee, but I was still shocked. We also saw the aftermath of the bombing that took place there last Christmas. An entire street was fenced off, you could see the ruins of the AT&T building that the bombing was directed towards, windows replaced by boards of wood, holes in streetlights where shrapnel had hit them, and a lot of charred bricks. It must have been a huge explosion, as damage from it went a long way out from the actual bombing site. If you didn't know about this, the man bombed the AT&T building due to conspiracy theories about 5G data. It actually knocked out cell service for a lot of Tennessee and Kentucky.

The next day, we went to Chattanooga. We did some typical touristy things. We went inside a cave and then we went to Rock City Gardens. Both of which I would recommend if you ever find yourself in the area. There was a St Patrick's day festival going on in the town too. People there seemed more inclined to wearing masks than in Nashville. It was still the south, so people still didn't wear them as much as they should. In fact, the area of Georgia that Rock City Gardens is barely in is the district of Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene. She is most well known for saying that California wildfires were caused by "Jewish space lasers." She was just elected back in November, and has only been in office for a little under three months. Being an incredibly right wing member of congress, even compared to most Republicans, she has not been supportive of masks or social distancing. This attitude was clear in her district. I mean, this is the woman who took a video of herself holding an AR-15 and warning "antifa terrorists" to "stay the hell out of northwest Georgia." It is insane to me that a woman like that can get elected to any public office, but apparently she was.

As for other news, there was an active shooter in Colorado a few hours ago, a Kentucky bill made it past the state senate that will make it a crime to insult or taunt a police officer, and the US is set to open more border facilities for children. The first piece of news is sad, but not all too surprising. It is sad that shootings in our day and age are "just another shooting", but that is how they are seen. The second piece of news I find to be entirely ridiculous. It seems a complete and total violation of free speech to make it illegal to insult a police officer. This law is clearly targeted at protestors against police brutality and I am honestly shocked that the "party of free speech" that controls the state senate passed it. I knew they had a fondness for police, but I didn't expect such a blatantly unfair law to pass. The last piece of news seems to be yet another example of a president not meeting his

promises. He said he would stop holding people in camps at the border, and yet here he is continuing the practice. I can't say I'm too surprised as this has been a common pattern among politicians.

That seems to be everything for this week.

Monday, April 5th, 2021

Bowling Green, Kentucky

76 degrees and sunny

Aside from a random cold spell where it even snowed in Northern Kentucky, summer weather seems here to stay. It's warm and sunny and people are getting vaccinated and all of that is making me hopeful for the future. In fact, I received my first dose of the Pfizer vaccine on the 31st. I should be going in for my second dose on the 21st. With nearly a 5th of the state fully vaccinated, it is looking like this whole thing should be wrapping up in the next few months. I am so looking forward to the time in which I don't have to wear a mask or distance in lines anymore.

Today, something interesting happened on campus for once. The warm weather draws out many people, good and bad. Today it drew out the christian fundamentalists. They were standing outside of Downing Student Union for a couple of hours holding signs describing all of the people they think are going to hell. I would call them discriminatory, but the list was so long that I feel everyone on Earth belonged to at least one of the groups on it. When I passed by them, they had attracted a crowd of about 150-200 people. The shouts of "Go home!" and "Y'all are idiots!" and other such phrases were quite frequent and loud, so I couldn't hear what the fundamentalists were yelling back. But I know it can't have been good.

A big piece of news in the past two weeks is that a ship called the Ever Given got stuck sideways in the Suez Canal. It blocked traffic through the canal for six whole days. It cost an estimated 9.6 billion dollars because of the block in trade. I just find it really amusing that such a thing would even happen. A massive cargo ship with a trained crew going down a mostly straight canal somehow got itself completely stuck across the width of the canal. I don't even know how that was possible.

Biden has also unveiled a new infrastructure plan. It will spend an estimated 2 trillion dollars on infrastructure. It seems to actually be something I rather agree with. Although, I believe in many ways it doesn't go far enough. For example, the plan will raise the corporate tax from 21% to 28%, which I do agree with. However, this is only bringing us halfway back to the 35% corporate tax rate before Trump's 2017 tax cuts. Of course, personally I think even 35% is much too low, but if Biden is going to brag about raising corporate taxes he should at least raise them to where they were just 4 years ago. Other than that, I can't really disagree with a bill putting money into all good things, railways, roads, electric vehicles, housing, etc. America has suffered from a lack of good infrastructure, especially public transportation, for decades now. I hope that someday in the future we may have trains that are actually faster than driving. I once took a train from Indianapolis to Chicago, a 3 hour drive, which left at 3am and took nearly 6 hours. The state of public transportation in this country is sorely lacking and honestly embarrassing for the richest, most powerful country on the planet. I just wish we would spend more money on transportation and improving the lives of our people, and less on bombing children in the Middle East to support our global economic hegemony.

Saturday, April 17th, 2021

Bowling Green, Ky

Weather: 58 degrees and cloudy

The semester is finally coming to a close, this will be my last entry into this diary. I am very excited for summer break, which will be a whole three and a half months long this year due to our semester being shortened.

There is only one current event I wish to speak on this week. This is something that has been going on for months, but this week it finally made me angry enough to write about. Over the past few months, various states across the country have been passing anti-trans laws. In fact, more of them have been proposed already this year than in any other year in history. Republican states have been passing them constantly. The most common ones that have been passed are laws banning transgender women from participating in high school or even collegiate sports. There have also been various states passing laws banning doctors from giving transgender children (as in all under 18) any trans-related healthcare. The most recent of these just passed the Florida House of Representatives, and will likely pass the Senate and be made into law. This law not only bans transgender women from participating in high school sports, but also gives schools the authority to inspect the genitals of any students participating in sports who are suspected of being trans. This not only is grossly transphobic, but is enabling school officials to essentially commit sexual assault on students under the pretext that they “looked trans.”

All of these laws have been marketed as simply “protecting women and children.” However, that is simply a lie. They use that as a pretext for eliminating the rights of a group they simply do not like, transgender people. They are, in fact, hurting children with many of

the laws. The bans on trans healthcare for anyone under 18, greatly hurts many children who rely on that healthcare. Rates of depression and suicide are very high among trans youth largely due to a lack of access to said healthcare, along with a lack of a supportive environment. These states had already lacked a supportive environment, as these blatantly transphobic laws show, and now their healthcare is completely cut off. It is disgusting to see states passing laws explicitly taking away the rights of a vulnerable group of people.

Anyways, as this is my last entry I have been reflecting over the past semester, as well as the pandemic as a whole. The past year and a month have been unbelievably long. It seems like February 2019 was an entirely different world. This year has brought out the worst that this country has to offer. The rampant and blatant misinformation has been made plainly visible by simply seeing the number of people without masks until and even after they made them mandated in most shops and restaurants. Personally, the first months of the pandemic were incredibly draining. We were all just waiting for it to end any week now, and it never did. By sometime last summer we had accepted that this is how life would be for the foreseeable future. By this past winter, I was beginning to feel simply hopeless, like the pandemic would never end.

Thankfully, the vaccines have been rolling out faster and faster. As it stands, over a quarter of the commonwealth of Kentucky has been fully vaccinated. I will be joining that group on Wednesday when I get my second shot. If we continue at this rate, by the end of the summer we should be ready to fully open up and return to “normal” life, without COVID precautions. I am so excited for when that day comes. I will leave this diary here, with one message I have taken from all this: Even when things seem hopeless, it is good to hold on, because one day things will seem brighter.