

Zaina: Hi, I'm Zaina. I'm a first-year at Butler, and I'm a biochem major. I consent to being recorded.

Will: Hi, I'm Will. I'm a second year. I'm a statistics major. I consent to being recorded.

Will: What was the moment when you realized Covid-19 was going to be a serious, life-altering event?

Zaina: So, in my math class back in 2020, we had this routine where we'd watch CNN every day before class ended. At first, COVID-19 was just one of those random news stories—something happening far away that didn't seem like a big deal. But then, day by day, it started coming up more and more, until suddenly, that was all they were talking about. I still remember when they told us we were getting two weeks off for quarantine. At the time, it honestly felt kind of exciting—like an unexpected little break from school. But then those two weeks turned into a month, and then two months, and before I knew it, the rest of the school year was online.

I think the moment it really hit me that this was serious was about a month into lockdown. My mom went into full-on cleaning mode, wiping down literally everything, even the mail. She was super paranoid about germs getting into the house, and at first, I thought she was overreacting, but then I'd turn on the news, and every update just made it seem worse. Case numbers kept going up, hospitals were overwhelmed, and suddenly, this thing that had felt distant was everywhere. That's when I realized—this wasn't just some temporary disruption. Life as we knew it had completely changed.

Will: How did you spend your time during lockdowns or quarantines?

Zaina: Honestly, a lot of it was just me on my own. Being an only child, I didn't have any siblings to hang out with, so it was mostly just me and my parents. I stayed in touch with friends and family through calls and FaceTime, but it wasn't the same as actually seeing people in person. It got a little lonely at times, but I tried to keep busy.

I read a ton during that time, and this helped me pass a lot of time. And when I wasn't reading or studying, I'd be outside playing basketball, just trying to get some fresh air. I would also just find random projects to work on. I remember one time I made diy hand sanitizer with aloe vera gel because it was sold out in stores. I think that was the hardest part of quarantine: feeling like every day was the same. So, I kept trying to switch things up, finding new things to keep my brain occupied.

It's honestly weird looking back at it now—like, how did we even get through all that time stuck inside? It felt endless at the time, but now, it just feels like a blur.

Will: Did you or anyone close to you contract COVID-19? If so, what was that experience like?

Zaina: Yeah, my grandfather on my mom's side got COVID in 2021 while we were visiting family in Pakistan. The way we found out was so intense. We were getting ready to go out for my cousin's birthday dinner when we got the news. And you know that weird thing where a situation is so serious that you almost want to laugh, even though you know it's not funny? That was exactly what happened. My cousin and I just kind of looked at each other, trying not to laugh, but really, it was because we were both just freaked out.

It was especially scary because my grandfather already had some health issues, so adding COVID into the mix felt really dangerous. I remember everyone immediately going into panic mode, trying to figure out what to do next. Luckily, my uncle is a doctor in Pakistan, so he was able to make sure my grandfather got the best care possible. Even then, it was stressful—we were all just waiting, hoping things didn't take a turn for the worse. Thankfully, he pulled through and ended up being okay, but that was definitely one of the scariest moments of the whole pandemic for me.

Will: What were some of the biggest challenges in adjusting to these changes?

Zaina: Starting high school in the middle of a pandemic was awful. On top of that, I had just moved to a new school district, so I knew literally no one. And to make it even worse, school was completely online, so I had no way of meeting people. It was just me, sitting in front of a screen, trying to figure out what was going on while also feeling completely disconnected from everyone.

There were so many times when I just wanted to go back to my old school because at least there, I had friends. But here? I felt like a complete outsider. It's really hard to start fresh when there's no opportunity to just naturally talk to people—no lunchtime conversations, no running into someone in the hall, none of that. It was basically just me and my thoughts.

When in-person school finally started, it still took time to adjust. I think the pandemic made it harder for a lot of people to open up and make new friends because we had all gotten so used to just keeping to ourselves. It wasn't until much later that I really started feeling like I belonged.

Will: If you could go back in time and give yourself advice in early 2020, what would it be?

Zaina: I have so much I'd want to tell myself. First of all, I'd say, "Stop hiding in your room just because you can." There were so many times when I had the chance to reach out to

people, make new friends, or just do something productive, but instead, I stayed in my bubble. Looking back, I realize how much I missed out on because of that.

I'd also tell myself to be patient. There were so many moments where I felt lonely or like things were never going to get better. But if I had known that in just a couple of years, I'd have an amazing group of friends and never feel that kind of loneliness again, I think it would've made those tough moments a little easier to get through.

And honestly? I'd tell myself to take advantage of all that free time. Back then, I felt like time was dragging on, but now, I look back and realize how rare it is to have that much time without major responsibilities. I wish I had started something—a business, a social media page, a creative project—just something that I could've built during that time. So many people used quarantine to work on things that ended up becoming huge for them, and now, they have these amazing opportunities because of it. If I could go back, I'd push myself to do the same.

Zaina: So for you, what was the moment when you realized Covid-19 was going to be a serious and life-altering event?

Will: For me, Covid-19 was not taken incredibly seriously at first by my family. We all believed that this was just going to be a two week issue, and not the global pandemic it turned out to be. I remember waking up for school on the fourth week and my biology teacher told us that she was scared that this could last multiple years. Before that, I had no clue that a disease could affect my daily life for years. After that day I started to realize that Covid wasn't going away and it was something that had to be taken seriously. The following weeks my older sister had to come home from college and my younger sister had a virtual graduation. These events started to reveal to me that Covid was still a global pandemic.

Zaina: How did you spend your time during lockdowns or quarantines.

Will: Lockdowns were one of the most interesting, yet boring, periods of my life. My mom had already been living with my grandparents for almost a year, taking care of my grandmother who needed almost daily trips to the hospital. So my family life was just my dad coming in during the day to see if I was logged on to online school or not. About halfway through the summer of 2020, my mom did move my grandparents back to Atlanta, so a new pastime became going over to check on them and help them build a puzzle. I was probably the most sedentary I've ever been in my whole life during lockdown. Coming from a childhood of sports and summer camps, lockdown was a drastic change of pace. Lockdown really forced me to learn about myself and develop an identity outside the activities I was part of. I think, as challenging as Covid was, it definitely taught me a lot about myself.

Zaina: Did you or anyone close to you contract Covid-19? If so, what was that experience like?

Will: My grandparents got Covid in the spring of 2021, and luckily they'd already received a Covid vaccine, which likely saved their lives. This was incredibly stressful for my family, because every time we watched something on TV, you would see someone warning about the dangers of Covid affecting the elderly. This was the most stressful part of Covid for me, because we didn't know if they were going to make it. Luckily everything was OK and they both fully recovered. But that showed me the deadly and dangerous aspects of Covid.

Zaina: What were some of the biggest challenges adjusting to these changes?

Will: Online school and isolation from friends definitely were some of the hardest challenges for me. I had never been that isolated before and it was disheartening. School, while the assignments were easier, it became hard to see the purpose of being there. I had to teach myself to actually love learning, and not just hanging out with friends all day. I also learned to be closer to my family and spend more time with them because now they were the only people I really had to lean on for support. Another challenge for me was a mental health battle. For a long time during Covid I felt hopeless, like life was never going to go back to normal, and this negatively affected me greatly. This mental health struggle was compounded greatly by the fact that my family had, perceivably much greater issues, which made me feel as if I couldn't reach out to my family and ask for help. Luckily once we began going back to school, and once my grandma was able to come to Atlanta, a lot of the family and mental strain resolved itself.

Zaina: If you could go back in time and give yourself advice in early 2020, what would it be?

Will: If I could go back in time, I'd tell myself to hang in there and things would get better. I think the biggest problems I had all would have been solved with hope for a future outside of lockdown. At this time I did not have a lot of hope for the future and knowing that things would improve would have helped a lot. I think that comfort of hope was truly the only thing that I needed to keep pushing for a future where Covid wasn't isolating me from friends and family. I would also tell myself that these would be the most transformative and impactful years of your life and remind myself that I am strong enough to get through this. And that hard times like Covid make life worth living and worth appreciating.