

## Telling Our Stories

This year has been the most challenging and stressful year of my entire college experience. This pandemic has challenged my ability to remain focused and on track with my education by affecting me emotionally as well as economically and physically. I would have never thought that I would come to live in times of a global pandemic, and now I am ending my first semester at Cal State San Marcos with a proud and damaged heart.

The Sunday before the first week of school, my 93 year old grandfather was placed in a hospital in Ensenada, Baja California Mexico due to an infection in his lungs that was spreading like wildfire. The next day, his COVID test came back positive and school started for me. As a family, we knew that his chances of survival were very minimal, and with this little hope I entered all of my courses and introduced myself virtually with a smile on my face. Today I look back at my first submissions and introductions in all of my courses and I do not know how I managed to do it. During that time, my grandpa was in a very poorly funded hospital with very little space available. There was no social distancing and we never even saw a picture of where he was or what he looked like. For the first week of school, I received bad news every day. My grandpa was not receiving enough oxygen with the oxygen mask and the hospital had no more ventilators. All hospitals in the city were full, and his lungs would not stand a transfer to another city. My grandpa died alone, after a week of being away from his family.

On September 7th, my family and I went to Mexico to bury my grandpa. His casket was drilled shut and wrapped in plastic. We never saw his body and were not allowed near the casket. My grandmother, having lost her husband of 52 years, was devastated and ill. She took two COVID tests that came back negative, so I did not mind staying with her for a week to help her and keep her company during that painful time. I stayed in Mexico from September 7th to September 12th, caring for my grandmother and trying to assimilate what had just happened. I

took with me my laptop and other essentials, using the internet of a neighbor to do my work. My grandma would barely eat and was struggling to get around. For this entire first week of school, I was caring for her with a heavy heart and trying to be a responsible student. On September 13th, I brought her with me to Temecula. My grandmother woke up the next morning unable to breathe and my mother rushed her to the Temecula Valley Hospital where she was diagnosed with COVID. The two COVID tests she took in Mexico were not accurate, and the week that I spent caring for her was time that the virus took advantage of to spread in her lungs and body. Since her first day at the hospital, my grandma was put on a ventilator. Soon after, the oxygen supply was not enough and she had to be put through surgery for a tracheotomy. My grandma is currently at an acute care clinic in Poway where we are able to do zoom calls and she will be receiving therapies. My grandma was unconscious for over a month, and the last time I saw her was September 13th. Today, she does not recall my grandpa's death and asks for him constantly. There are days where she asks us to go pick her up, telling us she wants to go home. Her stress and anxiety cause us pain, as we cannot do anything to help her or make her understand why she is there. If I were to write everything that has happened to my grandma during this time, this paper would be too long.

As a little girl, I lived with my grandparents for a while. Without my mom or my dad, my grandparents were my parents and I continue to see them that way today. This entire semester I have been distracted, wondering when I'll be able to hug my grandma again and trying to make peace with the fact that a virus took the life of my grandfather. I've been trying to be okay with the way that he parted alone and struggling to breathe. My work hours have been cut and money has been tight. Everything about this year has been stressful. This will be my first year ever without my grandparents, and I can hardly bear it.

I have seen my mother cry and worry like never before, and I can do nothing about it. A virus has taken one of my most loved family members and has separated me from another. College is demanding and exhausting in times like these, so much that I wondered if maybe I should just take the year off. I somehow managed to keep my head in the game and participate as full heartedly as I could. Writing this has been more difficult than any assignment I have turned in this semester, and with tears running down my cheeks I can surely state that I never knew pain and stress until this year. I am grateful for my health and for the work that I have. I miss my grandpa, but I am glad he is no longer suffering. I remain hopeful for my grandmother, as her mood and mental health are changing every day along with the effects of the virus.

I hope that my story tells people that there are others out there living and pushing through similar things; that they are not alone. I know that telling my story does not mean anyone will fully understand my pain or stress, but I hope it can enlighten a few doubtful minds that have not experienced the true capacities of COVID. The damage I have suffered along with my family will forever live with us and has changed our outlook on life.