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May 17, 2020

Abigayl Novak, UMaine Undergraduate Student in Ecology and Environmental Sciences

On March 11, 2020 I was in my 10-o'clock class talking with one of my friends Karley Skutul. We were talking about what we were going to do over the break and our concerns with the coronavirus that just hit the U.S. At this point, I didn't realize that after I got out of class that I would have an abrupt and unexpected end to my senior year of college. I didn't know that my research, classes, and life would completely change, just like every other student I knew. A couple weeks before, one of my other friends Grace Smith said that her conference in California was cancelled because of COVID. She expressed that it was so crazy that they had to make a drastic change. Then not even a week or so after this big schools like Harvard announced that they were cancelling in-person classes and would finish online for the rest of the semester. For me, I found this surreal and didn't think it would happen to Maine. Maine had no doubts and were already preparing for COVID to hit the state. It wasn't until Thursday, March 12 that there was a known and confirmed case in Maine and this was in southern Maine nowhere near us in Orono, ME. No one could really think straight or understand what was happening.

Back to March 11, after I got out of my EES 390: Senior Seminar class, my only class of the day I found out that UMaine would also be shutting down and online classes would resume after spring break. I was in a panic for the rest of the day because at the time I was in the middle of the most important part of my research. We had just started our drought experiment at the beginning of the week and I needed the data to complete my capstone research. For something that I had been working on for so long, it was difficult to grasp that I may not be able to complete my plans. Part of me felt bad that I may not be able to complete it because I was awarded a CUGR Academic Fellowship for 2019-2020 that gave me money to get materials and supplies I needed. With all that was happening on campus, I couldn't think about anything else but my research and how I was going to finish it. After a day of panicking I had figured out a plan that would last for the rest of the week into spring break. That night another one of my friends Sophia Palangas made an event on Facebook to get together to say goodbye on the Fogler Library steps because Fogler had been an integral part in our college careers. In part because we had both been apart of Sophomore Eagles and All Maine Women together. These traditional honor societies have a annual tradition where we would sing the Stein Song on the Fogler steps with our new and old members, but this year would be different we wouldn't get the chance to celebrate together and see each other's faces. That's why Sophia wanted to get the chance to do this. When Thursday came around, it was hard to go to work and concentrate on how I was going to finish my research, finish my schoolwork, and get into graduate school. It was so much stress and so much uncertainty that it consumed my day. I went to class after work and there was a different sense of self in the room, people were gloomy and sad, shocked and concerned, and no one knew anything. No one expected it to be our last class, but it was and we just had to deal with it. Professors had to immediately change the way they did things and move online. Friday was my last day of undergrad in-person and with the people I got to know during the past 4 years. It was also the day that Sophia's graduation celebration turned out to be one of the most memorable and

impactful events of the year called Coronamencement. The morning of Friday, March 13 the Class of 2020 All Maine Women met up at the steam plant lot, for what we thought may be the last time all of us together would be able to meet and say goodbye. Sierra Yost our traditions chair had a tradition that All Maine Women do that usually occurs after we tap our saplings and have our what is called as the Bear Ceremony, plans have changed and Sierra wanted us to get the chance to do it all together in-person, one last hoorah. After the traditions ceremony we were all decided to go to breakfast at a new place in Old Town. Most of us went but Katie Dube our secretary had school to go to, she was finishing up her Teachers placement and it was her first week at Bangor High School. When we finished breakfast most of us headed back to campus to get ready to tap our first sapling for All Maine Women. This was an abrupt decision to tap the Class of 2021 All Maine Women, AMW, an event that celebrates your acceptance into the traditional honor society. We wore our AMW gear green shirts, white sweaters and stickers on our left side of our face and ran around campus finding the next class of saplings. When we found them at their designated locations, we sang the Stein Song and then said, "you've been tapped, welcome to All Maine Women." We planned to tap them after break, but we wouldn't get this chance because we wouldn't be able to come back. We were pumped and had been waiting for this for a year as we got the chance to be surprised when we got into AMW. You could see us literally running around out of breath but having the time of our lives because we got to do it together. I was able to tap my sapling Jessica Wibby in time before I had to go to my lab to finish another day of data collection. At approximately 1:50pm, I ran back to campus to make it for Coronamencement led by Sophia Palangas and the other All Maine Women. Dean Dana spoke, Harvest Moon had catered food, free t-shirts were available and over 100 people gathered to celebrate. Fake diplomas were distributed, and senior's names were called. It lasted for about an hour, but I only stayed before names were called because I had to finish my research. The brunt of the work was done by Sophia, Taylor Cray, and Lauren Ryan. The event venue changed to in the union outside the bookstore due to rainy weather and was way bigger than any of us could have expected. It was a nice ceremony, a chance to celebrate together for one last change, a chance to say goodbye and express our love for UMaine. The following week or so I had to finish my drought experiment and seemed like days just kept passing by the same as the previous. I was able to finish the drought experiment and one of the graduate students had to finish because cases kept rising coming closer to Penobscot County and I couldn't risk infecting my family. I didn't get the results I needed, and my research was incomplete because I needed to send out my samples to another lab but we were able to preserve them. We aren't sure if our research was good protocol because of the rush to complete the experiment and the time was winding down. I was grateful to have graduate students and people in my life that supported me completing it to fulfill it. It wasn't what I expected but I got data enough to complete my capstone. The month April came quick and days continue to be busy despite only doing online courses. For some reason, I had more to do even though I was stuck at home. The hardest part was saying goodbye to friends over zoom, seeing events we planned pass by on our calendars, and just the overall uncertainty of when we would be able to see each other again. I wouldn't have been able to get through anything without the support of my family, my AMW friends, and friends that I met in college as well as some that I reconnected with because of the quarantine. It was hard to say goodbye at my last AMW meeting when nobody wanted to go no one wanted to

say goodbye and we had all been through a lot together, but that's what mattered. Life was different for everyone and time could only allow us to adjust. I tried to remain doing things for graduation even though at this point we knew May graduation was cancelled and an in-person ceremony was to be planned, hopefully. It was important to me to continue to act like we still had one going because it kept a sense of normalcy, a word that I hear too often.

All Maine Women induction of the new class was virtual with a hope that in the fall we will be able to do an in-person celebration, other clubs I am involved in like Asian Student Association continued to have virtual meetings but events like Taste of Asia were cancelled. Although in-person events were cancelled, there have been a lot more opportunities to do free events online. Free online yoga sessions, virtual events, and social media events where we can still have fun but not in-person. Efforts to stay inside have also increased my ability to go outside more, spend time with my family, and reconnect with old friends. There are benefits to an unusual situation just as this. The environment is healing and pollution has been drastically changes, NASA images have shown it.

My plans for the future have been impacted by COVID as well. I wanted to go to Ireland but with uncertainty and lack of aid, I decided to stay in the United States and at UMaine to get my Masters degree. The process of getting into graduate school and figuring everything out was extra stressful because I was supposed to find out in March the exact time that COVID hit Maine. Communication in March was very difficult since everyone was trying to make plans, figure things out, and were busy thinking about whether they would even be able to open next fall. I am grateful and glad to say that I will be going to graduate school at the University of Maine and despite the stressful process it was well worth it.

On May 9th our supposed graduation day, my family surprised me with a zoom celebration with my friends and family members. It was so nice to see people that cared about me and were willing to take some time out of their day to say happy graduation. My sisters made posters for me celebrating, my neighbor took time to decorate our flamingo in our driveway with my cap and gown and cord colors, and a friend of my family stopped by to drop off my graduation gift. These were all things that I didn't expect to happen but all very thoughtful and nice gestures to make me feel like it's a special day.

There are good and bad things that have all impacted us during this time but what matters is family, friends, animals, and people that you know that support each other. We can chose to look at the bad but we chose to recognize the good that has come out of this. People are able to pause their days and look at things differently and connect with people and nature that they didn't when life was crazy with work, school, and attending events.