



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Oral History Interview with Alayna Radner - Transcript

Narrator: Alyana Radner (AR)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Alayna Radner ('24) finished her senior year of high school in Maryland during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this interview, she describes her final months of high school and how she decided to attend Stony Brook University in the fall of 2020. She also talks about moving to campus for her first year of college, the living conditions she experienced during quarantine, and how it all affected her academic and personal life.

00:00:02

CK: Okay, today is Wednesday, February 17, 2021. This is Chris Kretz for Stony Brook University Libraries interviewing Alayna Radner for the COVID-19: Documenting Stony Brook University Experiences project over Zencastr. Alayna, thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

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AR: Of course.

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CK: And let's start with—can you tell us currently what year you're in at Stony Brook and what you're studying?

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AR: This is my second semester of freshman year at Stony Brook University. I'm a marine science major and I'm pursuing a theater minor as well.

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CK: Okay, great. And we're going to ask you to flash back so—January 2020 you were still in high school?

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AR: Yes. I was heading into my last semester of senior year.

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CK: Okay. And where were you living? Where were you attending high school?

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AR: I went to a high school called Western School of Technology and Environmental Science right outside of Baltimore, Maryland. It's a fairly small school [with] about a thousand people. So you know most of the people in your class. And it was a magnet school, which means that I went specifically for environmental science and that's what I studied there.

00:01:11

CK: Okay, and what was your college search like at the beginning of last year? What level, what stage were you up to?

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AR: I had begun to receive some acceptances, I think. And as the spring went on, I heard back from more schools. I was completely done with applications at that point, so I was kind of moving towards making more final cuts of where I was really interested in considering and where I wasn't.

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CK: And had you visited other campuses up till then?

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AR: I had visited Stony Brook University in the fall, around the end of September [of 2019]. And a little bit farther into the fall, I had visited Boston University up in Massachusetts.

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CK: Okay. And so, if you think back to—do you remember when you first heard about COVID and what your feelings were at that point?

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AR: When I first heard about it, I honestly didn't think it was going to be something this prolonged. I don't think really anyone did. But my school told us to expect to be gone for two weeks because it fell right around our spring break, so they gave us two weeks. And then that was our spring break, and we were supposed to come right back.

I think the discussions of closing down came a little bit before March thirteenth, so we knew it was coming—in a way. But it was still a bit of a shock to know that we were getting shut down for something other than a snowstorm, you know. We hadn't been closed that long in years since we had a really big snowstorm when I was little. So for the seniors, we all had senioritis and we were like, Hey, it's a few extra weeks off school—I'm not going to complain about that.

But certainly that changed.

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CK: And so what was the rest of that semester like for you and your peers in terms of—were you taking online classes, I guess, then or—

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AR: Yeah, so after the first couple of weeks we transitioned into—we had optional class meetings we could go to over Google Meets. A lot of my classmates chose not to go. I personally went to most of the meetings. They're very similar to the way that my classes function now where it's just a teacher and a lot of the times people don't have their cameras on, and it's just teachers talking to black squares.

But I took mostly AP [Advanced Placement] coursework my senior year, so, thankfully, right around when we shut down is when we finished learning new material. And we were just heading into review, so it wasn't as strenuous for me as it was for some people who were still learning.

But at that point we didn't know [what] the AP tests was going to look like—if it was going to be back in person, if they were going to offer the tests at all. Because how can you make a secure test if people are taking it from home? So there was a lot of things up in the air all throughout that time period while we were studying our online coursework and trying to figure out how to manage our own schedules.

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CK: And just in terms of being a senior graduating from high school, what were you talking about with your friends, what were you experiencing, what were you worried about?

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AR: It was—it was definitely very strange. I don't think I've honestly stopped to process all of the things that—they kind of hit us with one at a time, you know. I never got to go to a prom. Our graduation got canceled. I had a senior trip planned to Disney World with my best friend who I've been best friends with since I was two. And just one by one, our hope was kind of snuffed out for each of these big events that we've been thinking about for our entire life.

Like, I dance outside of school, and I've been dancing since I was three with my best friend. And we had a special dance planned, and then that was cancelled, and it was just kind of one thing after another of us all losing these big events we had worked our entire lives for. And I don't really think any of us knew how to handle it. I don't think I, personally, really stopped and reflected on really all the things I lost—the fact that I never got to graduate with the class I had spent four years with still kind of boggles my mind.

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CK: So what literally happened when you graduated? Was there like a—something?

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AR: The way my school handled it is—I had to go to, like, I guess you could describe it as a bus loop almost. It's where parents would come and drop off the kids, and then we had a bus loop as well. So the first time we went and we had to drop off our textbooks and things like that. I think we also picked up our graduation gowns that day. And I just remember driving through this area with my mom, and they had put up cute little signs for us to celebrate us being done with high school and just like feeling really choked up and overwhelmed with the fact that I was never going to go back into that school and say goodbye to all my teachers, that my class was never going to be there with me again. And it was kind of overwhelming in that moment.

Graduation was a little bit better for me because it was kind of when cases were down. Cases were never awful in my area. There were a few spikes, but—so I had a fairly small friend group so we all met up to take graduation photos outside of my school. We received our diplomas. We shook our principal's hand, but there was no big event or anything. They did plan nice decorations for us which was really sweet. So when you drove up to the school, there's like a banner for us, and there was cute little spots around with different signs you could take pictures with, and a lot of our favorite teachers were there to congratulate us. But it was really not the graduation that you would expect.

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CK: And through all of that—so how did your decision making about where to go to college, how did that change, or what factors did you weigh?

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AR: It was definitely a much more difficult decision than I was anticipating it to be because I had planned—I applied to a bunch of schools. So I had planned that once I knew where I had gotten into—that I was actually interested in going to and that I had gotten enough scholarship to be able to afford to go to—I would go and visit those schools and decide from there.

So at the point of COVID, I hadn't really visited any other schools than Boston University, which is my top choice, and Stony Brook, which was like the top choice out of my more safety schools. So I ended up getting into Boston University, but they didn't give me a large enough scholarship for it to be feasible for me to attend. And I got very similar offers from two schools. I got an offer from Stony Brook University with a sizable scholarship and, like, an offer for an honors program—I'm in the University Scholars here. And I also received an offer from the University of South Carolina with a pretty much identical scholarship offer and an offer for their scholars program—or their honors program. I don't remember which one it was.

And in the end, it really came down to—I had been to Stony Brook before, and I hadn't been to the University of South Carolina. And I wasn't comfortable attending somewhere that I really knew nothing about the vibe of the campus. It was really important to me that I went to school where—somewhere I was comfortable. And I knew that [at] Stony Brook, I would be comfortable. I had been to the campus. I kind of knew what it felt like there. And I also really liked the marine program here. I really liked that you can do a semester at Southampton where they have a research vessel and things like that. And I could also pursue the theater minor that I was so passionate about.

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CK: So over the summer, as—did you have to make a commitment to room on campus, or how did that come about?

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AR: I don't remember the exact deadline for when I had to decide if I was coming or not. We were honestly, like, waiting to hear if classes were going to be in person at all, or if it was going to be all online—because my scholarship didn't cover housing, so we had to decide if you're going to pay for that. If I was going to be online, was it worth moving to another state just to sit in a room on a computer? But I did find out that I had in-person classes scheduled so we made the decision that I was going to be moving to campus for the semester. And I'm back again for spring semester as well.

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CK: So can you describe what it was like coming back to the campus in this new situation? Where [on] your tour, you know, there were still people walking around—how did it feel when you arrived in the fall of 2020?

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AR: It was a very rushed experience for me. I had originally been planning to move in at the end of August but with COVID, guidelines were constantly changing at that time, and New York had just at the beginning of August set up their mandatory two-week quarantine for anyone not coming from the tri-state area. And like I said, I'm from Maryland so I certainly did not qualify as a tri-state area. So I went from having a month to pack and say goodbye to my family and, like, emotionally prepare to move to a new state—to having two weeks to figure all of it out.

So it was suddenly frantic packing, and trying to get everything ready, and trying to see all my friends from six feet apart to wave goodbye, and wish them good luck with their school, or military, or wherever they were off to and—it was very, very rushed. And then all of a sudden I was waking up early in the morning to get in the car with my dad and drive to New York.

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CK: What was the moving-in day like for you? And actually, could you tell us what dorm you were in?

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AR: So when I moved in, I originally had to live in West Apartments for two weeks to complete my quarantine. So they instructed us to only bring a small quantity of things—just, like, what we needed for quarantine. But with the guidelines constantly changing, we were worried that my dad wasn't going to be able to come back from Maryland with the rest of my stuff two weeks afterwards. So I did bring enough to get me through the semester even though I didn't bring all of my things.

And I was on the second floor in a building with no elevators, so my dad and I lugged all of my stuff up the stairs, and I went into my little room where you could only leave to go get your food or go to the bathroom. And whatever you touched outside of your one room, you had to wipe down. And I spent two weeks in there in complete isolation. I went from living with my family for months on end—because they weren't going to work, and I wasn't going to school—to being completely and utterly alone.

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CK: When you were in those, the West Apartments for those two weeks—what contact did you have with the university, or what people or places were interacting with you?

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AR: Um—there wasn't a ton of interaction my first stay in quarantine. I think because the guidelines had changed so quickly that Stony Brook wasn't really fully prepared to house us. Because as time—I quarantined multiple times since then, and I've had a much better experience.

But the first time I quarantined, it was just me in my room. I think we had—the freshmen students who were in quarantine had a meeting with the Dean of Students, Rick Gatteau. He had set up a Zoom to meet with us at one point but, like, only four or five of us actually went. I think I talked once or twice to the people I was living with. We had to march across campus to get our COVID test near the end of quarantine to make sure that we were cleared to leave, so I talked to one of the girls I was living with then. But within the apartment, we were never outside of our bedrooms at the same time.

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CK: Were you cooking your own meals, or what was the meal service like?

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AR: No, we were not allowed to use the kitchen. (coughs) Excuse me. They delivered meals—for that first quarantine—three times a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Around, like, nine to nine thirty, twelve thirty-it, and around 5 p.m. And that's honestly the only reason that I had any sense of time whatsoever because I knew I had to go to sleep early enough to wake up to get that breakfast. Because if you didn't pick it up within the hour time frame, they would clean it up so it wasn't just sitting there spoiling all day.

That kind of helped me keep some sanity during those two-week periods. But the meals the first time were not the most organized or, you know, the best food. But it is a college campus so you can't exactly fault it for not being gourmet, restaurant-style meals. But I had dietary restrictions, so there was occasionally an issue with them if it was something I couldn't really eat or—I had a roommate who gave up on quarantine and was like, “No, I'm going back home. This is ridiculous. I'm not going to school here.”

So there were times they would send her food instead of mine after she had moved out, and it was really not the most smooth sailing. We also—they didn't give us any extra waters or anything, so you only got water with meal times. So I was kind of thirsty some of the time. But as I quarantined more later on, in my experience, I did find that that improved.

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CK: When you were able to exit quarantine, what dorm were you in?

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AR: I moved into Dewey College in Kelly Quad. My dad came back from Maryland with the rest of my stuff and helped me move out of that apartment and—Dewey College is relatively close, so it wasn't like a huge move. But it was definitely more moving than an average college student has to do moving in, moving from an apartment to a dorm after two weeks.

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CK: Could you describe a little what that living situation was like in terms of—how close were you to other people and interacting?

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AR: Sure. So the dorm that I live in now is a suite-style dorm, so there are three rooms within my suite plus our living room. So I live in one room. I did not opt to have a roommate. I originally had one, but a week or two ahead of school starting she decided that, because all her classes were online, it was not worth it for her to dorm. So I ended up deciding to pay the extra fee to just have a single within my suite.

And then the other two rooms both had a pair of girls in them. I ended up getting along really, really well with one set of those girls. We spent a lot of our time together. We still spend a lot of our time together. We hang out in the living room together all the time, and it's been, like, my saving grace of socialization because, you know, I'm not trying to go and spread COVID all over the place by hanging out with all different kinds of people. So I was really grateful to have the people in my dorm that I did. I wasn't as close with the other two girls in my dorm, and they've actually moved out this semester. They both decided not to return to housing, so now it's just the three of us in our suite.

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CK: And how much did you get out and about on campus, or what was—what impressions stick with you of what the campus felt like?

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AR: Last semester I had a good amount of classes in person. This semester I only have one, so I get a little bit less, but I had at least—I want to say three or four classes in person. About half of my coursework I did have to go somewhere on campus, and it was unsettlingly empty is the only way I can really put it.

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CK: Do you remember any particulars, like who you were—anything stand out in terms of people you met or experiences you had just in moving about campus?

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AR: I was really grateful to have the in-person classes that I did. I had a Scholars 101 class which is like our introductory seminar where we learn about the university and the Scholars program and things like that. I was really grateful for that in-person class because it was small enough that I felt comfortable talking to the people around me. So I made a friend that I still make time to see this semester. We have another class together for Scholars, so we go and get lunch afterwards.

My writing class I also just felt more connected to my professor, so I really enjoyed that class because, you know, I got to go and see her face and talk to her in person. Meanwhile, my [online] calculus class, the way the lectures were structured, I never even saw my professor's face. I couldn't point her out in a crowd. So it really stuck out to me how important it is, that face-to-face interaction.

And yet there were so few people who returned to campus. I remember just walking around and there being no one. It felt so empty. Especially, like, if I was coming back from somewhere at night. I worked at the haunted house on campus around Halloween. And I was walking back at night, and it's just completely empty and very dark and it was—it was creepy, honestly.

I've seen a lot more people on campus this semester, though. I think maybe more people have come back, or more people are doing in-person classes. I've met more people this semester outside of a class setting, and I think, honestly, people are just more interested in reaching out because it's been an entire semester of maybe just a little bit of loneliness.

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CK: Yeah, so during that first semester—outside of classes, did you have any routines or ways you found to help pass the time?

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AR: I wouldn't say I had the most structured first semester. I'm definitely working hard to make changes this semester because I found out what didn't work for me. So now I'm trying to figure out what does work for me because my schedule was definitely all over the place. There were days where I would sleep during the day and do all my work during the night. And then there were times I wouldn't sleep for a really long period of time. Then there were times I would sleep for like twenty hours. So the routine was just—God, there was no routine there.

So this semester I'm working a little bit harder. I go to the gym now a couple times a week. I just got a job offer, so that's going to add to my routine. I chose to have morning classes so I'd have a reason to get out of bed in the morning because my first semester, I had a lot of afternoon courses—or days where I didn't have my morning class because they were asynchronous. So there was a lot of me not having a reason to wake up on time. So I wouldn't say that I really had a great schedule going on that first semester, but this semester is definitely going better so far.

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CK: And if you look back, not just in the fall but even when you were quarantining at home, is there anything in particular that you found gave you comfort?

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AR: I definitely really enjoyed, like, staying and talking on the phone with my friends. It kind of showed who I was really the closest with—who I stayed in the closest contact with. I—I thrive off of socialization. It's something that's very much a part of me. I love to hang out with people I care about. I love meeting new people. So I have—one of my very best friends lives a few minutes down the street from me. So we would sometimes sit in our front yards and—six feet apart, you know—hang out in the freezing cold with our jackets and our coats, and sometimes we would do coloring pages together. Umm, I'm also a very crafty person. I did some embroidery during quarantine. I really enjoyed that. I made friends with people [online] who lived all over the country and got to know them for a little while.

I'm trying to think of other things I did to keep busy. It's honestly kind of a blur. I can't believe it's been a year. Once I got to campus, I joined a lot of clubs. So that kept me pretty busy. And also the fact that I got along so well with my roommates. If we all had any downtime, we were together in the living room playing Wii games, playing board games. Now we watch Criminal Minds together, you know. We find ways to pass the time, and we all have one collective friend who lives in the same quad as us, so sometimes we would go out to get dinner with her. That sort of thing. It was very much filling in whatever gaps we could with our socialization because it's something that's so lacking when you're just taking all of your classes in front of a screen.

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CK: Yeah, do you want to say anything more about the clubs you were able to participate in and how they handled that time?

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AR: Sure. I joined, I believe, four clubs, and I've had different consistencies of attending them. The one I probably spend the most time at is Pocket Theater on campus. We have virtual general body meetings where—it was a fairly small group of us who actually came to these meetings, but we would play different theater games, things like that. But near the end of the

semester, they decided to do a virtual production of *War of the Worlds* which I auditioned for and was cast in. So that was a lot of fun. That was the first time I had gotten to do theater since, hush, February of last year. So pretty much a full year from now back in time is when the last time I had done theater was. So I was really, really excited to be able to get that virtual opportunity. It was a lot of fun. The cast was great. We had a wonderful performance. We had some pretty good engagement with it as well.

I also joined the archery club, but unfortunately they could only practice outside. They weren't permitted to continue with their indoor practices, so it was very weather dependent on whether or not we could actually go and practice. So I think I maybe went to two or three practices last semester, but it was a lot of fun. It's something I've always wanted to learn, and I was really excited to see that was an opportunity. I'm currently waiting for the weather to warm up enough now for practices to begin because they don't practice when it's too cold to feel your fingers to shoot the bow, you know.

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CK: Right, right. And just to finish out the semester—so Thanksgiving, students were going home. What was the end of the semester like for you after Thanksgiving?

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AR: So I decided I wanted to stay on campus for the end of my semester. I didn't think I was going to be successful with my finals if I went home for them. I thought I would be too distracted. I would have too many other things going on because I'm very much—when I'm doing my work, I want to be able to keep my own schedule. It's important to me that, like, if I want to sit down and work for a while without getting up to eat or anything, I didn't want to have to be hauled away for a family meal or something like that. Or have to take care of my cats or things like that.

I was going to stay on campus. I was not planning to go home for Thanksgiving because then I would have to quarantine when I came back. Which, honestly, I think was kind of hard for my parents and for me because I'm the youngest child. So this was the first year that they were empty nesters, and then all of a sudden their kid wasn't coming home at all during fall semester because I was in a state with really strict quarantining requirements.

I had plans to go to a family friend's house [in New York] for dinner. We were all going to get tested and make sure that was all good, and I was going to go enjoy a meal at their home. But the Friday before Thanksgiving break—so when everyone was leaving—I got contact traced because someone close to me had tested positive for COVID. So I ended up having to move into quarantine on, like, four hours notice. I had to figure out what I needed, how to get there, get myself in. And I spent Thanksgiving in West Apartments locked in a little room eating my delivered meals. So that was definitely not how I expected to spend my Thanksgiving holiday. I had a family Zoom with a bunch of my family on my mom's side—my grandmother, and my

cousins, my aunts, my parents, my sister. We all had a nice family Zoom which was, you know, it was something, but it's certainly very different than the Thanksgivings I was used to.

And after that, I was the only one left that I really knew on campus because everyone else had gotten to go home for Thanksgiving. So when I got out of my quarantine because I ended up testing negative and the person I was close to never expressed symptoms and very quickly tested negative as well—thankfully everyone was all right—so I had to figure out how to get myself back across campus by myself to my dorm. I had to carry all my belongings back down and out. I went and I borrowed a cart from my college, and I moved back over to my dorm where I spent another week.

I took one final here. But my mom didn't want me getting a lot more exposure before I came home to them because at that point cases were rising really quickly in this area, more so than where I'm from in Maryland. I ended up taking one of my finals at home just so I wouldn't get any more exposure because I had been in quarantine so I couldn't have really picked anything up there. She's like, "This is a great time for you to come home and be safe because we know you're not bringing anything to us." So I respected that wish. I took one of my finals at home and, honestly, it went fine.

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CK: And just as—looking back, other than what we've already been talking about, what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

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AR: It's had its ups and downs. It's definitely—if you had told me this is what my first year as an adult would look like, I would have laughed at you. I pretty much turned eighteen when quarantine started. I just turned nineteen at the start of the week, so I really spent my first year of adulthood dealing with more stressors and major life changes than I think a lot of adults deal with in their whole college experience. You know, I had to figure out how to grieve the loss of my graduation, my prom, all of these things I had been looking forward to.

And then, like I said, I'm a very social person, so quarantining was very difficult for me. I hated it. There were—the second time I quarantined when I had been contact traced, it was—I felt like I was losing my mind, almost. There was days where I had no concept of time, and I would, like, sleep all day, and I would be up with the sunrise because I was still awake doing something.

But also, it enabled me to form really close bonds with the roommates that I live with because we never went out. We were always together. And that's something I'm going to be grateful for for the rest of my life. Those two girls that I bonded with, we are wonderful friends now. We spend a lot of time together. And if all of our classes had been in person, and there had been events to go to, and we'd all branched out more, I'm not sure that we would have bonded in the same way. So I think there are things—there are bright sides to pull out of this, but at the end of

the day it's certainly not something that I would wish on any future generation to have to deal with.

And I honestly pity the class that's coming up behind me, that's graduating class of 2021. Because even though they've had more time to process, knowing that these big events might get cancelled, they're getting a lot less pity from everyone else. My class, it was all so sudden and unexpected that people went out of their way to do nice things for us and to make us feel appreciated. And the class of 2021 is just kind of there.

I feel like people need to remember that, especially for the young people right now, it's really difficult to deal with this isolation and all of these changes of things that we've been expecting for our entire lives. For older generations—I ended up writing a paper this semester about how the social isolation was impacting my generation in particular, and why colleges need to loosen their academic guidelines for the duration of the pandemic because of it. And part of what I found is that my generation, like, our—my age group in particular—is really, really vulnerable to the effects of loneliness and feeling lonely.

And for us, this is a big percentage of our lives. There are people who have lived a longer life—this is maybe a smaller piece of it. But it feels huge and monumental to us because it is—our lives have not been so long, compared to the duration of this pandemic. I spent one of my nineteen years on this earth in isolation.

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CK: And just as a way to wrap up, what are you looking forward to?

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AR: I am definitely very excited to be able to hug my friends back at home. I have not been really [physically] close to any of them since this started, and they're really the ones who I went through those beginning stages of loss with. So I think it'll be really great to see them. I'm excited to be able to actually meet people on campus. I feel like I've made maybe three friends outside of my suite when, in a regular semester, I probably would have been going places, meeting people, talking to the people in class. It's hard to start a conversation with someone sitting six feet away from you. It's not like an exciting situation. So I'm very—I'm very excited to hopefully, maybe, next semester be able to meet more people, and branch out more, and get more of, like, the quintessential college experience.

00:29:23

CK: Well, Alayna, it was great to meet you, and thank you for sharing all of your memories with us for the Documenting Covid project.

00:29:31

AR: It was my pleasure. Thank you for listening.

[end of interview]