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Charlie's HITOC Reflection

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HITOC and Pandemic Reflection

The “Humboldt in the Time of Covid” archive has been a truly happy experience for me to work on. Throughout the pandemic, many of my friends and people my age (21) were laid off by their employers, or unable to work from home. It has been wonderful to be kept on by the HSU Library for nearly a year and a half. It truly has been a lifesaver to earn money from home during this pandemic. I gained so much experience from working with Digital Commons and learning how to archive online, and hope to bring it to my future jobs. Carly’s been the best supervisor I’ve had and I’m sad to move on, but excited to see what’s ahead of me. After graduating in May, I am unsure what my future holds but I want it to involve supporting myself off of my art. I wanted to write a bit about what my life has been like throughout the pandemic, and how things in Humboldt have been from my perspective.

I was hired by Carly Marino in February 2020 and we had no idea what was ahead of us. I only had about a month of in-person library work before things started going south very quickly, with lockdowns traveling up the state and new guidelines closing schools and workplaces. In Humboldt, we were very lucky that those lockdowns hit us before major waves of Covid-19 hit us. For historical purposes - the week leading up to the first lockdowns was pretty terrifying. I remember being in the library and talking with a supervisor who recently traveled back up from LA, and who we were already avoiding close contact with because he had traveled to a city, and we didn’t know how it was spread yet. We didn’t know about masking up to prevent the spread. That was probably March 9, 2020 if I had to guess. So, we were already avoiding out-of-town travelers but work was still in-person. Things started getting weirder from there. There were two large earthquakes that week, and I still don’t think it was a coincidence

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given how fast things were falling apart and how all we could do was watch. It felt extremely biblical, and was definitely scary. I was in Special Collections when a 5.5 earthquake hit, and I think it was a painting of President Arthur Gist that flew off the wall and shattered. I had just finished a display case about Judi Barry, an ecofeminist activist, and to this day I don't actually know if my exhibit is still up there. I was the last student assistant up there building exhibits, so I hope that it's still there for other students to see this fall. I got out of the building immediately due to my fear of a second earthquake. That was my last day of work in the library - the earthquake day. I believe it was the second day of Spring Break when HSU made the decision to cancel in-person classes, work, and most events. I was exceedingly grateful to be kept employed in a virtual capacity by the HSU Library.

At first, there were definitely people excited that Spring Break would be extended. We had no reason to believe that it would turn into weeks, months, years. The first thing that happened was the flights home. I wanted to make note of it here, because as I was building the archive I didn't see it mentioned near enough, but truly everyone that you ever knew from college moved home during that period of two weeks in March. The only people I knew who remained in the places they were - it was only because they couldn't go home, due to homophobic or otherwise bigoted parents. I had a girlfriend of two months, and I recall constantly talking to her about whether or not we were "worried about covid" in the weeks leading up to the lockdowns. We deduced that we were not worried. I remember saying that Humboldt is the safest place to be during this, and that I would be legitimately surprised if Covid came here. I had no reason to believe otherwise, especially because every other world-changing event never seemed to reach here.

The grocery stores were constantly being mobbed and emptied of food and resources. I'd lived through that before, with the wildfires and PGE outages, but nothing like this. It was a consistent run on the stores, not stopping for more than a month, if at all. I was talking to my girlfriend in early March about not being worried about covid, while at the same time participating in "panic-buying" at the grocery store. If there's one lesson from the last year and a half, it's that panic buying is really stupid. It's just expensive, puts a burden on grocery store workers, and eventually the capitalistic market will shift to the needs so that you have everything you need again. The great 2020 run on toilet paper was truly a dumb one for the history books.

When the lockdowns hit the week of Spring Break, truly all businesses closed in Humboldt. Not permanently, but most closed down to figure out the next steps, so Arcata was a ghost town with no businesses or students. The biggest loss for the community was the Cafe Mokka Hot tubs. I heard everyone complain about that for a year and a half straight. It was something that so many people did to de-stress, and it was closed during the most stressful times. When the businesses closed, that was the huge catalyst for every 20-something moving home for the pandemic. Overnight, everyone became unemployed. There were no emergency unemployment benefits nor was there rent relief yet. It was the largest economic collapse I'd lived through, and I remember the 2008 recession. This was a recession and a pandemic in one. My childhood best friend moved home from UC Santa Cruz when classes were cancelled, but we learned very quickly that I couldn't exactly go run up to her for a hug when she came home. We'd even been planning fun things for us to do. On her way home, we all realized that we couldn't have direct contact with her, because no one yet knew how Covid was spread. So, my best friend moved home and lived five minutes away from me, and I didn't really get to hug her for a year and a half.

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My girlfriend worked at Heart Bead on the Arcata Plaza, which was a really good job for a student to have. Before the pandemic, working in an artsy shop on the plaza was pretty good job security and generally the most desired jobs for 20-somethings. It was really cool to me that she worked in a jewelry shop and helped people/kids assemble jewelry. The most shocking thing to me at that time, which made the pandemic much more real, was when the shops on the Plaza started closing down with no re-opening plan. People who had been in their jobs for years were suddenly furloughed or laid off. I think about three weeks into March 2020, my girlfriend lost her job at Heart Bead. It was a difficult business to operate during a pandemic, as it involved children reaching into beads and lots of little hands. Two weeks after that, the economic situation resulted in her moving back to LA to live with her parents. By the time she moved, I couldn't see her or say goodbye in-person, as Covid had started circulating locally and I wanted to protect my family. The good news is that she was able to get a job at a farmers market and move out of her parents', though she never came back to Humboldt. This was the case with so, so many students. It was difficult to see a path back to where you were before the pandemic.

Most people gave up on trying to return to their paths and lots dropped out of school. If you were the Class of 2020 like my brother, you probably hung on for the last few weeks of Zoom class and graduated online, but it was really the Class of 2021 that was the smallest in decades. It entailed a full year of senior-level classwork done entirely remote. I am proud to call myself one of those students. In the beginning, I did consider taking a semester off, but as it became clear that quarantine was going to last months, I became worried as to what I'll do with my time. I did fall semester 2020 online, and it truly is the only thing I remember from that period of lockdown. Dr Cliver's Zoom classes were the only thing I did every week, besides meet with Carly.

It was hard to social distance from my friends. I really missed them, and they were going through really tough times themselves. As a result of the stressors of the pandemic, one of my friends developed alcoholism and it was hard not being physically there for them during their recovery. It made me feel like a bad friend, but I know the only thing I could do was support them virtually, as I couldn't see them in person for fear of exposure. I lived with my mother throughout the pandemic, and could not rationalize seeing anyone who may expose her. I've come to realize that *I* was the one that was the most isolated throughout the pandemic out of all of my friends, because I lived with a person on the high-risk of death from covid scale. Other people my age often made the decision to forgo social distancing because they felt they were young and low risk, though this had horrible consequences on their health. Coming out of the pandemic, it's weird trying to reconnect with friends who don't relate to your experience at all, and who were able to build memories and new relationships over the course of time while you were isolated.

The election in November was pretty terrifying to me, and the terror I felt overshadowed any celebration in the weeks after. Trump packed the Supreme Court before the election, and while he lost by enough votes that it never went to the Court, it terrifies me that it could've gone that far if he had just a few more thousand votes in Ohio or Georgia. The only way Biden could win was by overwhelming voter turnout, and at least that succeeded in that. It does disappoint me that this was the only way to win, however, and that more people voted for Trump in 2020 than in 2016. I remember actually feeling terror that night in November because of the Trump supporters in this county, and not knowing how they'll react to a win or a defeat. I actually went home from an election night gathering early, because it looked like Trump was ahead and I was worried about Trumpers partying in the streets, cops and fireworks, etc, driving home that night.

When it was called in the weeks after, all I felt was relief that Biden would help us fight Covid. I didn't really have much hopes outside of that and I still don't, as far as Biden actually doing much to change the direction of the country. I did feel overwhelming relief that Biden's government would *do something* in 2021 to help us get out of the pandemic.

As a result of this attitude, I feel like I saw an insurrection like the one on January 6th coming. Of course I and nobody knew how bad it was going to be, but I definitely saw how Trump could call up his supporters and convince them to do anything, and how that would come to overshadow the rule of order. Especially because it was the day after the Georgia senate races where both were called for Democrats, I feel that I knew I was going to wake up to Trump's Pandemonium. I don't really know how to talk about that event to this day, and I usually have words for everything in History. It was just the dead of winter in the worst phases of the pandemic, and all we could do was be glued to the TV. Like I said, I don't know how to talk about it, but I hope that doesn't stop people from it. There's already been a concerted effort by conservatives to cover up the events.

I also did my Senior Thesis in quarantine. I was exceedingly proud of how it turned out, and doing the History Conference online was actually preferable. In short, my paper was on how the Shasta Dam displaced the Winnemem Wintu Tribe and the ways the tribe continues to fight for justice and their land back. I utilized entirely online resources, aside from one print picture book. I hope to expand on the paper for a Master's, possibly. The Conference was the last History-related Zoom I had to do. I think that Zoom is a bit physically demanding, as your neck and eyes strain to see expressions, and I'm prone to migraines. I am very happy to be officially done with Zoom as classes ended, and my Zoom work ends this week.

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Under the direction of Carly, I helped build this little online space for pandemic-related thoughts. I hope that one day, the sources here will be utilized for some hard-hitting research. I have many ideas myself of how it could be used. I wanted to do some sort of project on Humboldt's food security and sovereignty during the pandemic, including surveying people on how often they had to brave the grocery stores or if they had planted gardens. Covid Victory Gardens is what we called them; everyone immediately started planting gardens in 2020. Many learned the importance of free and accessible food, especially in an emergency. There definitely could be a project to be done about how the pandemic derailed academic plans, or even life-goal plans. There's also something huge to be said about the LGTBQ community during quarantine, and how many came out of it with a new and different identity, such as myself and many of my friends. I'm sure that if a survey was done on how many students lost their jobs, it would be shocking. As a History major, I hope that some history student can build a thesis off this stuff someday. Feel free to contact me if you need help navigating the archive, or if you just want to talk about research ideas.

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