

## Voices of Alfred University: Students, faculty continue their stories of an extraordinary year

4/03/20



ENews continues its survey of Alfred University's community members, asking for submissions of personal narratives from an extraordinary year.

### Leo Pamphile, Student

A defensive lineman on the Saxon football team, Leo Pamphile is currently hunkered down at his home in Rockland County, wrapping up his senior year at Alfred University as a business administration major. He is taking classes in business leadership, managerial finance, and operations management, plus a liberal arts and science class, Doing Science, which introduces students to basic scientific procedures such as planning and executing their own experiments.

His senior year continues. He has researched issues in business leadership, focusing on New England Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick. And he was able to take advantage of his spring break to work on an assignment for his Doing Science course.

The work involved a diversity lab: “Our assignment was to look at car colors in different regions. I was in Cancun, Mexico. Other students in my lab group were in Santa Fe, Ohio, and New York City. We had to determine the diversity of car colors in different regions. We started with a hypothesis that we would have a greater diversity of car colors in New York City. Then we observed and recorded the car colors for the first 50 cars we saw.

“We were actually correct.”

Since in-class work didn’t resume after the spring break, students in his group created a Word document for the lab report, then emailed the document around to different members who were responsible for different sections of the report, such as the abstract, or results, or discussion.

The work is coming together. His professors are making the transition to on-line instruction with all the tools they can

muster.

“They’re honestly doing an amazing job.”

### **Danielle Gagne, Professor of Psychology**

Big Blue Button, Zoom, Ensemble, Skype, or Google Hangouts? Synchronous or asynchronous? Webcam or no webcam? Does this microphone make me sound like techno mashup of Darth Vader and Kermit the Frog? Did I click the “publish” button? Why can’t the students see anything? Wait, now why am I muted? My text chats with friends are now filled with “Wait, how did you give your exam?” and “which button did you just push?!”

I worry students are not getting the level of quality that I want them to have from me. During a lecture on imagery and thought, I stare at the screen and ask questions to the air. Seconds tick by as my own anxiety grows. Was I clear enough? Did my PowerPoint slides provide enough information? Then, someone types “this [reasoning] bothers me a lot...” and another types “why would [researchers] think this?” I smile and breathe a sigh of relief; students are still engaging, thinking, and asking questions. I am still teaching.

I receive an email from a student; her grandmother has just died, and she is trying to grieve and make arrangements. Is it Ok if she takes the test next week? My 13-year old pokes her head in and softly asks, “Is your lecture done now? Can you hang out with me?” It’s 1:30pm, but she’s done all her schoolwork for the day. I mentally flip through a series of algebraic equations, where  $x$  equals time to grade all of the things, multiplied by number of students and classes, and added to the number of unread e-mails I have.

I am reminded that our students are juggling a new life balance as well. A new set of equations emerges, where variables become work, family, health, stress, and empathy. “Sure.” I write to my student. “Let me know when you’re ready.” I close my laptop and tell my child, “I can grade later. Let’s go out and catch some Pokémon.” It means I’ll be up much later than I’d like, but being flexible seems to be our new normal.

### **Daisy Wu, Visiting Professor of Music**

For the students who have bring the instruments home, I teach them by using zoom, or Facetime. For the ones who didn't take the instrument home, I send out assignment with my presentation of the history, culture, and music appreciation of the guzheng weekly.

### **Kailey Reyes, Student**

First-year student Kailey Reyes is taking two writing courses this semester, juggling on-line class assignments with a job at Target and the pressures of working at home in a lock-down mode. She lives with her family in Dallas, TX.

“Everything is closed,” she says. “I’m able to work, but my parents and friends aren’t working. We can’t out. It’s been kind of crazy. Not as restricted as New York, but it’s pretty bad here.”

The writing helps.

One of her English classes is an introduction to writing about literature; the other is a creative writing class in which students are encouraged to explore different genres. She likes them both. Creative Writing “may be my favorite class for all year. It’s really given me the drive and the urge to want to write.”

Her English 102 class? “By far my favorite.”

Something’s working. Her professors have been encouraging and flexible, “very understanding.” Her English 102 instructor “gives us plenty of time to get the work done. She realizes it’s hard to do this at home and online. I feel I can email her and ask what’s going on.” Reading material includes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Katey Schultz’s *Still Come Home*. Her instructor “lets me dig deep. It’s really fun, and I enjoy it.”

Working at Target is a pressure cooker. “We have to stand six feet away from people, and sometimes they don’t get it. They want to get close to you. It’s just crazy, and we’re really low on sanitizer and water. And everybody’s in panic.

### **Vicky Westacott, Director of Writing Center, ESL Specialist**

As Alfred has shifted to online education in the wake of the pandemic, I’m learning more than I ever wanted to know about how to teleconference, post quizzes and assignments, and comment on student papers all from the comfort of my own computer.

What to do to unwind at the end of a day wrestling with technology? Having noticed from news coverage of COVID-19 that people in other countries are wearing masks, I decided to try my hand at making them for friends, family, and people who meet the public but are not the health care workers (the latter need more robust protection).

Simple patterns abound online. This is the one I’m using should you want to try your hand: <https://sarahmaker.com/ho...>

### **Luis Rodriguez, Assistant Professor, Law/Taxation**

I don't know if I were to characterize the following story as a success, but it sure was humbling.

Anyway, here goes. . .

I thought that I got the hang of using online technology that was new to me after practicing my LAW 241 lecture a few times - I tend to use slides with links to web videos and other media. When the class time came, I logged on and started my lecture moving from slide to slide as I usually do, showing and commenting on videos and other linked materials as I went along.

I thought, "Hey this is easier than I thought." I was in my comfort zone.

After about 10-15 minutes into the lecture, a student sheepishly spoke up and told me that the class was staring at the first slide and saw nothing that I was discussing since the lecture started.

Sometimes you just have to pick yourself off the floor, and just laugh it off.

Fiat Grit.

### **Elizabeth Matson, Assistant Professor Mathematics**

I am teaching Calculus 2 and 3, meeting live with my students daily. Through the multi-presenter function in BigBlueButton, students can work together and solve problems on the e-board at various points during class. I love the element of community we are able to maintain even in this electronic setting. Time permitting, at the end of each

meeting, I have been putting up a blank e-board and students have drawn pictures, said “Hello,” played tic tac toe, and electronically raced each other around the board (their name is listed next to their cursor). Invariably during this time, my two-year son and cat always come to visit via the webcam.”

## **Andrew Wiechert, Student**

Andrew Wiechert, a 30-year-old U.S. Marine Corps veteran, has been studying creative writing at Alfred University, where his fiction and poetry professors typically organize their classes around the traditional workshop model. Student work is read and critiqued by the professor and other students in a roundtable conversational classroom environment, and Andrew enjoys the face-to-face conversations.

All that changed when the University shifted to on-line classes. Still, Andrew considers his advanced fiction workshop, which he is taking with nine other students, a success

Earlier this week, the students gathered via Zoom for a writing prompt – an imagined set of circumstances/parameters, defined by the professor, within which the students were to construct a short fictional narrative.

“The prompt was based on a character in a plague situation,” Andrew says. “But we couldn’t comment directly on that situation, or identify it explicitly in the story. We each picked a random character with an occupation and who was working at a particular time of the day. We chose everything else about the character ourselves, like age and gender. Then the rule was, the character had to stay in one place, they couldn’t move around. And we couldn’t comment explicitly on the fact that pandemic was going on.”

Once the prompt was distributed, the students spent about 20 minutes writing their narratives, then read them out loud to each other via Zoom.

Andrew’s character was a grocery store clerk. “I made her a woman, a mother, middle-age. The grocery store where she works is the only one left in the county receiving materials. She also has secret stockpile of toilet paper in her basement. Her daughter is on watch in the attic with a shotgun as she gets home. They’re going to eat fried pigeon again, because that’s all there is.”

He says he “loved” writing from the prompt.

When Andrew isn’t working on his classes, he and his wife, Sam Wiechert, a drawing, painting, and photography technician in the School of Art and Design, are rebuilding a 22-foot school bus for extended trips. They currently are installing the floor.

“It’s kind of like our vacation home,” Andrews says. “it’s also good for my writing and my wife’s art practice.”

*In photo at top, clockwise from top left: Leo Pamphile, Danielle Gagne, Daisy Wu, Kailey Reyes, Vicky Westacott, Luis Rodriguez, Elizabeth Matson, Andrew Wiechert*