

Voices of Alfred University: Students, faculty (and one actor/trustee) continue their stories of an extraordinary year

4/30/20



ENews has been reaching out to Alfred University faculty and students asking for personal descriptions of transitions to on-line teaching. This is the fourth week we've had the pleasure of sharing these narratives with the ENews community.

Penelope Rose, Student

Penelope Rose, a first-year art student at Alfred University, is discovering an interesting symbiosis between art and the internet.

"A lot of my art classes are based in a medium that can be viewed online," she says. "The way we view art is changing drastically over time because of the internet. The Web makes art more accessible to larger numbers of people. And I've grown to enjoy animation."

Living at home in Dayton, OH, she also is sewing a lot of masks and sending them out to places and friends who need them. She enjoys dying fabrics. "Some of my professors have online tutorials in dying," she says. She laughs and adds: "YouTube is also a great teacher. Any question I have is out there."

Along with her art Foundation class, she is taking an English class in fairy tales, *Beyond Enchantment*. "I love the short stories and tales. "As someone who wants to be artist, coming into that class and reading the stories is so inspiring. I love everything we've been doing."

There is a lot of land surrounding her home in Dayton. "I live on what used to be a farm, now there's just a lot of

open space. We've been raising ducks.”

Art, tales and enchantment, and ducks. “I've just been trying to stay busy,” she says. “And staying creative.”

Bill Pullman, Actor, Trustee

Until recently, Alfred University Trustee Bill Pullman was working in New York City, playing the role of business executive David Mahoney in a five-part Netflix series about the life of designer Roy Halston Frowick (“Halston”). Mahoney, an advertising and branding whizz, served as chief executive of Norton Simon. His business and branding acumen helped create the Halston of popular culture.

Halston, the Netflix series, suspended production a month ago as the coronavirus hit New York City. Since then, Pullman and his wife, Tamara, have been living in Los Angeles, where Pullman is reading scripts and working on a variety of projects including the renovation of a 1923 commercial building in the Tujunga area of the city.

He wants to convert the building into studio space for artists. He and Tamara are the parents of three artists – “Like all artists,” he says, “they need a place to work.”

Recently, he performed a virtual visit to an Alfred University class hosted jointly by professors Michele Hluchy and Jeff Sluyter-Beltrao, whose individual classes were studying the geology and politics of public water systems. Pullman talked about his role in the 2019 film *Dark Waters*, in which he played attorney Harry Deitzler, who supports legal efforts to bring the Dupont Corporation to account for poisoning municipal water in the Parkersburg area of West Virginia. Pullman brought the real Harry Deitzler along as a guest of the class.

“I loved it!” he says. “The students asked great, thoughtful questions.”

Critical reviews of his and Deitzler's appearances have been outstanding.

Pullman, a native of Hornell, also recently filmed a video for the Steuben County Public Health Department, urging residents of the county to observe current health safeguards both recommended and mandated by New York State.

And then there's Hollywood Orchards, a project he and his wife started in 2011 to support fruit growing and harvesting in the Beachwood Canyon community. “We've gleaned fruit from people's yards that hasn't been picked yet. We just picked a ton and half of fruit with two-person squads. Then we do drop-offs at neighbors' garages, and they deliver the fruit to food pantries in South LA.”

As he signs off, he's turning his attention toward another PSA he's about to record on behalf of the Pioneers Assistance Fund, founded recently to provide financial assistance to movie theater employees out of work because of mass theater closings.

“People think you have a lot of time on your hands,” he says. “And you're thinking of what you can do to contribute.”

Beth Johnson, Professor

Online teaching and working from home have had exhilarating highs (successfully running the technology!) and stomach-pitching lows (hearing which friends have lost their jobs or loved ones). The ratcheting chunk-chunk-chunk up the steep incline is an enervating slog through infinite emails, videoconferences, and grading. As it crests, students' sweet words of support in the midst of their own stress and tedium, friends' kindness and clever solutions to common

struggles, and the internet's endless supply of sharply funny parodies and memes are the fun parts. The relief provided by those encouraging moments makes me lightheaded sometimes.

I'm lucky; it's just me and six adorable rats in my quiet house with good internet. But my whole world has narrowed down to the 13" glowing screen on my dining table, somehow still the light at the end of a tunnel. I know that many of my students do not have easy situations to contend with while doing school entirely online, and evidence of their tenacity and grit while we scream around the curves and loop-de-loops together makes it easier for me to face each new challenge. It also helps that my family and I are still healthy, and able to connect online more than we did BC (Before Coronavirus).

This whole teaching online and WFH in comfy pants thing is turning out to be like one of those classic wooden rollercoasters, beloved in the abstraction of nostalgia and good marketing. But in reality, the sudden shift amid a global natural disaster has been jarring, uncomfortable, and kind of scary, and I'm predicting that when we slide back up to the platform in a couple more weeks, we'll all be tired and a little sore. When we finally look back, I'm imagining something like the awkward expression caught by a glitching webcam showing my face, frozen in a rictus of thrilled terror, a souvenir of an unforgettable ride.

Agatha O'Connell, Student

A third-year student studying materials engineering, Agatha O'Connell is feeling the strain of studying at home, taking her classes online, and coping with the pressures of social isolation.

"I'm an extrovert," she says. "Not being to talk to people as frequently as usual...that puts a damper on my productivity."

She misses the hands-on feel of her engineering classes, in spite of the technological advantages of online learning, which include being able to revisit her professors' recorded lectures. "I'm definitely learning something. The recorded lectures with PowerPoint voiceovers are helpful, and it's helpful to be able to go over the lectures as many times as I want."

To push back against the monotony of being cooped up inside her family home on Long Island, she practices two hands-on skills she began learning over the past year: calligraphy and embroidery. "I like doodling. I don't draw pictures; I like doing cursive."

And she hopes classes resume on campus as soon as possible. "I don't have a friend to hang out with and decompress after studying. The weekends aren't weekends anymore, and the days just blend into each other."

Bill Carty, Professor

It turns out that on-line teaching requires considerably more time than teaching in the classroom.

For years I taught my classes from PowerPoint, droning on about ceramic engineering, noting to myself which slides needed revision, interacting with the class but arguably overseeing a passive event. Eventually, I realized that the students were not learning efficiently and were bored. They started packing up before the lecture was over. I moved back to chalk on the board – or, as a friend once asked, "Do you still teach on slate?"

Fast forward to Armageddon: I am forced back to PP, relying on significant preparation time, since my old PP slides

are now outdated. My class prep is significantly longer, since I have to reconstruct or revise the slides. I cannot see the students' faces, so I do not know when they have that deer-in-the-headlights look of panic when they do not understand the concept. In the normal classroom I could react to that and revise or recast the idea. Not now -- I am blind.

I have invented more in-class assignments in which I pose a question, give them 10 minutes or so, then proceed to address the problem live in PowerPoint, on the screen. In the normal classroom I would simply do the derivation or solution on the board -- that is now difficult to execute in the cumbersome electronic interface.

I have installed a whiteboard at home, but it is a poor substitute for the direct exchange in the classroom.

Will they learn? Likely. I have thought of more homework assignments, more at-home work. I teach a lab class and that has been challenging; at least, we have data from previous years to distribute. In my upper-level course, the first homework assignment was to pick a topic and prepare the lecture. That has worked out nicely as they are giving those lectures now, in a manner similar to what I do, via PowerPoint and a video link. That experience is good for them, and I think it is a helpful approach -- not as terrifying to them as being in the front of the classroom. They have risen to the occasion and have generally done a good job.

And I am almost done...

Grace Gold, Student

Grace Gold, living at home in Campbell Hall, NY, is a first-year student, studying beginning Italian, beginning dance, psychology and philosophy. She also is enjoying the music of the incomparable Nina Simone.

She wears a jersey bearing Simone's image for Art Force 5's current Women's Empowerment Draft project, held in tandem with the annual draft of the National Football League. She loves listening to Simone's distinctive music. It's a welcome relief from the pressure of her current online education.

"There're a lot of interruptions, a lot of noise, a lot of things going on," she says. "I don't have a proper workspace. Most of my work is online and has to be done on computer. I try to work downstairs at the kitchen table, but people are watching TV and interrupting. So, most of my work is done in bed. That results in insomnia."

She misses the face-to-face closeness she enjoyed before Alfred University was forced to shift to online learning. "I prefer the in-person process. The education becomes slower in a weird way."

Fortunately, she still has the music of Nina Simone.

"Some of her songs get me up, jumping and dancing."