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Veterans Scholar Program: Community Service Paper

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It was only a few short months ago that the novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 was a distant problem facing a distant city 7000 miles away in the Hubei Province of China. In the months since its discovery it has crept closer and closer until it was no longer a distant problem, but a pandemic at our doorsteps. I was in 5th grade on the morning of the September 11th terrorist attacks, and I remember that day and the days after so vividly and how it disrupted the American way of life and sense of safety. I remember my brother said that “A plane had crashed into a building in New York City.” In my head, I imagined a minor accident involving some amateur pilot and a single engine plane, but much like when Coronavirus first started that actual scale and the thought of New York was a million miles away. It wasn’t until I got into class and the substitute turned on the news, that I really knew the full scope of what had happened. I will never forget the feeling of sadness and anger, seeing my country under attack. Today, as some of the very things that represent America are shut down and the American way of life has been completely disrupted, I can’t help but feel those same feelings. We are once again reminded that our way of life is so fragile and sense of safety is very much a false sense.

Personally, I am extremely fortunate, the impact physically on me and my way of life by the COVID-19 Pandemic have been minor inconveniences at worst. I am employed by a company that is diversified and is going to weather the economic storm, and while my significant other’s job is potentially at risk, we are in a position to be resilient through these surreal times. Mentally, the challenges are more prevalent and harder to describe. Like most servicemembers, I have struggled with mental health. Long before the term social distancing was commonplace, I struggled with maintaining health social circles and avoiding isolation. Today, I realize how much of an

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impact those micro social interactions and social norms kept my mental health afloat and benefitted my wellbeing.

On a global scale, I think the world's response to pandemic was slow and has showed us just how unprepared we are as a society. While it is much easier to be a keyboard warrior than to develop and implement comprehensive contingency and response plans, I cannot believe that in the 500 plus years and 10 pandemics and plagues in modern history, that we do not have better plans and responses to when these crises occur.

As current and future community leaders, we have to keep this pandemic top of mind for months and years to come after life has returned to some version of pseudo normalcy. There is no way to know if the next crisis is 5 years or 50 years away, but we have to be nimbler with our response. As a society we have to be more prepared to over react then under react or react too late. Some reports are now saying that US intelligence warned of Coronavirus as far back as November, and I think that it would have been a much different response with global support concentrated in a small area if someone would have just listened.

I hope that we start to return to some form of normalcy sooner rather than later, but I know that it cannot be rushed. With some people anticipating that the pandemic will wane in the summer months, I hope that history does not repeat itself and our complacency does not get the best of us as it did with "Spanish" flu of 1918 being mild in the spring and coming back with a vengeance in the fall of 1918 killing approximately 20 million worldwide. While this pandemic has brought some disgusting human behaviors into the light such as panic buying and taking scarce necessities from the elderly; it has also brought out the best of us, from the Venice canals clearing up and pollution around the world diminishing, and the one fight spirit we saw post 9/11. I hope that as we fight this pandemic and return to normalcy, we maintain some of those positive aspects.

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Much like after 9/11 some things will never go back to the way they were, whether we like it or not. Maybe we will all give each other a little more space in line, or all remember to wash our hands more frequently.

Ultimately, no one knows for sure how long it will be until life fully returns to normal, but America is a resilient country and eventually this surreal time we are living in will be just a distant memory. Going forward, we have to do better, for each other, in our preparedness for crises and for human kind for generations to come.