

In 2020, the world was shaken by the COVID-19 virus. Circumstances seemed to change daily as we learned more and tried to adapt to a new way of living. Universities and libraries in Northeast Tennessee reached out to the community for personal accounts of dealing with this pandemic. The following is my account of events from January through June in 2020.

First, I'd like to give some background on myself and my connection to this region. My name is Gregory Jones. I am a native of East Tennessee as well as an ETSU graduate. I hold both degrees in business and education, the most recent being a 2005 Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT). I have taught high school government and economics, as well as middle school social studies. After pursuing a career in education, I took a position at the Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority (KHRA). KHRA provides rental assistance for low-income families in Northeast Tennessee. During the time of the pandemic, this is where I was employed.

My first memories of the COVID-19 virus were news stories becoming more frequent and detailed as the final months of 2019 moved into 2020. I saw small articles and television reports about a small outbreak of an unknown virus in China grow into longer and more detailed news reports. Then cases of the virus began appearing in other countries and eventually made its way to the United States.

The virus became a topic of conversation among family, friends, and coworkers. My niece's wedding was scheduled in May, and my family wondered if this might impact the wedding. Friends discussed how this might affect social gatherings and society as a whole. Coworkers wondered how this might impact the workplace and the clients we serve.

In March, the impact of the virus could be felt in our region. On March 9, I attended the Southern Conference Basketball Tournament in Asheville, North Carolina. ETSU defeated Wofford to win the championship game and clinch a spot in the larger NCAA Basketball Tournament. Discussions were already occurring about how COVID-19 would impact the sports world. The ETSU championship win turned out to be among the last collegiate sporting events to be played in the 2019 – 2020 school year. Some conferences did not get to complete their conference tournaments. Eventually, the NCAA cancelled the full tournament altogether.

Schools and universities across Tennessee were dismissed for a time while officials reviewed how to safely return to the classroom. Friends of mine who were teachers scrambled to put together assignments for students to complete at home. I witnessed coworkers struggle to arrange for childcare without having any advance notice. Other challenges were more specific to our region. Parts of East Tennessee still lacked Internet service. Teachers worked to make sure printed materials were available to students who could not access assignments online. Another regional challenge was ensuring students had enough food to eat. Some schools in East Tennessee with higher volumes of students who receive free or reduced lunch looked for ways to make sure students had enough food to eat. Some local schools offered meals that could be picked up at the school. Others utilized school buses to distribute meals to students at their homes.

My employer, the Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority (KHRA), provides housing assistance to low-income families. Our clients pay a percentage of their income towards rent and my company pays the remainder. My co-workers and I regularly meet with families to confirm they are still eligible and collect verification of the family's income. Due to the virus, we were no longer able to meet with clients in our offices. As much as possible, we conducted business by phone or e-mail. We made physical changes to the lobby of our building to meet with clients. Windows were added with Plexiglas shields to provide a barrier when we did meet with clients. We also purchased digital thermometers for incoming clients and had a set of screening questions before allowing anyone into the building.

The changes to our office procedure created challenges. Using the Plexiglas shield stations reduced the number of clients that could be in our office at one time to three. Our staff had to work as a team to schedule necessary appointments. We also had to work efficiently to keep our appointments within the allotted time.

This came as my company already faced a great challenge. KHRA was in the final stages of remodeling several apartment complexes that we managed. We were qualifying families to move back in once the units were ready to lease. Reducing the number of families we could see at one time to three made finding eligible families significantly more difficult. We adapted by scheduling appointments at each window every half hour and offering a grocery store gift card just for showing up to an interview appointment.

Naturally, these events have caused a wide range of emotions. Both my parents are elderly. They are among the most vulnerable of our population. And when this virus first started spreading across the world, no one knew how easily it could be spread. This led to a great deal of anxiety as I worried about my parents.

At the same time, I felt gratitude. My company was designated as an essential business, so I was able to remain employed. While I was thankful to remain employed, it was upsetting to see so many of my clients reporting a total loss of income. The clients my company works with usually depend on either minimum wage jobs or are elderly and live off their Social Security. Many with minimum wage jobs were laid off as restaurants and department stores temporarily closed. Those living off Social Security were elderly and, like my parents, among the at-risk population. My company provided additional help with paying rent for those who lost employment, but I still worried about how they would pay for other expenses like food and medicine. And I worried about our older clients because of their advanced age.

As I looked at how our nation dealt with this pandemic, I felt a mix of hope, pride, and concern. Doctors and medical professionals around the world were working to develop a vaccine. This gave me a great sense of hope. A look at our nation, and specifically the East Tennessee region, gave me mixed emotions. Our nation is a generous one. We have always responded to national emergencies by helping our neighbors and fellow citizens. I felt great pride in April and May as we made sacrifices by socially distancing ourselves. I saw the people of East Tennessee stay home unless going to the doctor, pharmacy, or grocery store. Grocery stores set certain hours as reserved for elderly customers only to help them shop while remaining isolated from the majority of other shoppers. Restaurants operated on a take-out basis only.

Home delivery services from restaurants and independent food delivery companies also increased.

One specific act of generosity impacted my company directly. The lines of people seeking help from food pantries grew exponentially. But again, the people of East Tennessee gave generously to local food banks. The Second Harvest Food Bank gives food to my company to distribute to residents at an elderly complex we manage. Due to increased donations, we received more goods than we could distribute. KHRA was able to reach out to another income-based apartment complex and offer the leftover goods.

Unfortunately, one of our great American values, our independence, actually worked against us as May turned into June. We were tired of being apart and almost always being at home. A lack of patience and stubbornness began to manifest itself. Businesses began reopening and more people returned to work. As this happened, I saw fewer people wearing masks when out in public. I also observed people not staying the recommended six feet apart in checkout lines and in various shopping centers. Younger adults were not in the high-risk population, and they were bolder about gathering without following the recommended social distancing guidelines.

Personally, this was an extremely isolating time. Church services were cancelled, removing my ability to worship in a community setting. Like many other churches, mine adapted by hosting online services. My company purchased equipment for employees to work from home. We rotated being physically on site at work. I realized how much my coworkers are like my family. These are the people I'm with eight hours a day, five days a week. And without restaurants, movies, or shopping available, there was nothing to do during my free time. The lack of interaction with friends, family, co-workers, and my faith community left me feeling very isolated.

I found various ways to cope with this new isolation. I watched the online services available through my church. I took time to declutter my home. A huge source of entertainment is streaming movies and television shows. I watched a lot of television during this time. Local libraries were closed, preventing me from checking out books. Fortunately, I could use my library card to check out e-books and audiobooks. I also found places in the community to walk and jog for exercise. Working from home and not engaging in social activities drastically reduced the number of steps I took each day. This made it all the more important to make sure I was getting some exercise.

There were strange and unexpected reactions to this pandemic. It was natural to expect people to hoard hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies. But what caught me off guard was when it became impossible to find toilet paper in stores. Of all the household products we would use more of while at home, it was surprising that this is the product that became impossible to find. As gyms were closed and staying home kept people less physically active, I found it difficult to find home exercise equipment. While working from home more often and not meeting with clients, I decided to quit shaving. I was shocked to find that most of my male co-workers had also quit shaving.

It is currently the end of June. There are racial protests across the U.S. and a presidential election is approaching in the fall. These events are taking away from the coverage that the pandemic received earlier this year. Further, people seem to be becoming numb as I see fewer people adhering to the recommendations of our medical professionals to continue social distancing. I am optimistic we will find a vaccine, but I fear that there will still be numerous deaths from this virus. I also fear for people's ability to support themselves and pay their bills if we are forced to shut down businesses again.

There are two exhibits below showing changes made to my office.

Exhibit 1: This is an interview room at the Kingsport Housing & Redevelopment Authority. The door was taken off its hinges and a Plexiglas shield was put up. There was a small gap just above the desk to slide papers back and forth. In the background, you can see the lobby of our office.



Exhibit 2: This picture was taken from the office lobby. This was a solid wall before 2020. A window as installed to provide another place to meet with clients. Anyone using this station had to wear masks because of the lack of a Plexiglas shield. We could, however, lower the window to reduce the amount of open air between employees and clients.

