

Brianna Santana

Professor Ruiz

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Not Infected but Affected

I am a first-generation college student and a Chicana at UCLA. My name is Brianna Raquel Santana, and this is my third year as a History Major, Spanish minor, and hopefully Gender Studies minor by the time I graduate with the class of 2021. It's the end of Winter Quarter and I had spent countless evenings studying at the Biomedical Library feeling a bit uneasy because everyone had been discussing the rapid spread of COVID-19, that originated in China, reached Italy, past Brazil, to the hardest-hit country, the United States, with the recent result of at least eighty-nine thousand deaths. At the time, I wasn't worried about the spread of the virus or even its potentially fatal impacts, I thought that the world would get the common cold and we would all be fine. But truly I didn't know the nature of the virus, how quick it could spread, and how many people would be affected. I had ignorantly thought, "It's okay I'm young, I'm strong, my immune system can handle it," but I realized COVID-19 was so dangerous that I couldn't think just about *me*, the way I behaved would make a huge impact on the *entire* world. I'm aware this sounds dramatic, because that proves to be true every single day no matter the circumstances, but this time it was more crucial for us all to keep in mind our impact on the world. That was how we could all do our part to keep the virus from spreading. I had constantly felt like the chances of death were just too high for me to even step outside my apartment.

My spring break began and I was disappointed with the recent postponement of Coachella 2020, the cancellation of my study abroad trip to Spain, my termination of employment, and the inability to destress at the beach or in Arizona with my family. I was hopeless, but I tried not to dwell on it because I knew there was so much worse going on in the world. LA county announced an official "safer-at home" order on April 15. I don't use as many social media platforms as the rest of my generation but during the quarantine, I especially

refrained from the news. I knew my job was to stay at home and do my part to help the rest of the world. But we all still had to continue on with life even though it seemed like the world had stopped. I needed to buy groceries but I didn't have a car, and Westwood wasn't the best environment to be outside during a quarantine. The temporary demographic of the streets of Westwood Village consisted of poverty-stricken homeless and ignorant senseless UCLA students, both of whom scared me to death so I didn't find it best to walk to Ralph's, Target, and Trader Joe's to get groceries.

As the news of COVID-19 had begun to spread, I was terminated from my job at the Sproul Front Desk. If it were up to the state of California, I could have had a case for wrongful termination but instead, I got my housing revoked and no say in my unemployment. For this reason, I no longer had enough money to buy groceries, especially with the prices in Westwood. My roommates and I were privileged enough to have parents who were able and willing to bring us groceries or help us get groceries delivered to our apartment. Their financial support lifted a weight off my shoulders and allowed me to focus on other personal responsibilities. Our parents coming by to drop off the food was the only time we saw our parents that quarter. For us, that was one of our sad sacrifices because we were all accustomed to visiting our parents, on average, every two to three weeks.

Having an essential job was bittersweet, but fiscally speaking, my family was fortunate enough to continue to make an income. This was my ignorant mentality until my mother fell ill with the coronavirus at the end of spring break. She was in contact with one of her coworkers who had caught the virus and then she unknowingly brought it home to my father and three siblings. My family was fortunate enough to have caught a mild case and they were all able to

heal with rest and home remedies. My family was at home sick and I was in Westwood trying to complete midterm assignments in spite of my panic and anxiety. I had to worry about my mother, my younger siblings, my grandfather who lives next door, and my youngest baby cousin because they all were at risk. So many of us were truly living in fear and anxiety but trying to continue with life as if nothing has really changed. I wish life had stopped while the medical professionals worked tirelessly to combat this virus with treatment or a vaccine capable enough to prevent contamination.

During safer at home order, many institutions, companies, and organizations attempted to redirect their work to make it available online. Fortunately for me, this meant I could still meet with my therapist at CAPS through zoom. I want to first offer a trigger warning, then advise that you constantly keep in mind, as you read further, that “all feelings are valid.” Keeping this in mind will allow you to constantly realize that a person feels their emotions in response to their *perception* of reality. Due to my constant worry about my family’s health, my unemployment, my inability to afford housing in Westwood, my depression, and anxiety, I could not have survived quarantine without my regular therapy sessions. I have been seeing my therapist at CAPS for over a year now, and I have made major progress I could have never foreseen.

Since the age of thirteen, recently after my grandmother’s passing, I began to feel like I could no longer laugh. I loved belly laughs and constantly had them as an eleven-year-old, but they stopped. Nothing was funny enough, it felt like something was missing but I knew that it was no longer easy to make me smile. Eight years later, with a year of therapy, I’ve come to realize I was one of the ones with that temperament that makes you hyper aware of your environment and sometimes highly sensitive to it. And then if you feel your emotions to a much

higher intensity than the average person, you're basically set up for failure. Even more so in a low socioeconomic standing, as a semi-neglected and sheltered intelligent little girl with traumatizing experiences. I couldn't help but to feel sad all the time, as much as my family's judgemental voice was replayed in my head, and the self-inflicted shame, I couldn't turn off my emotions. Anyways, I grew up with some more trauma and deeply missed familial deaths, and a co-dependent three-year relationship that ended by the time I was nineteen. This is the part where I found myself in a good environment, education, and an abundance of love and support from those who cared about me. Now, I am writing a personal account on my experience of the COVID-19 "safer at home order" at the university apartments at UCLA. I can say that I am proud of the growth on my path down mental health awareness and practice. Had I not dedicated myself down this path, I feel I would have gone insane. I was trapped inside a one-bedroom apartment, with two roommates, unable to enjoy the outdoors, and I was faced with incessant claustrophobia-inducing, and panic-provoking, traumatizing-flashbacks. I spent hours a week trying to silence the powerfully convincing suicidal thoughts. I am fortunate to have had support from someone very dear, otherwise I don't know that I would be here.

If you can just imagine feeling what I might've felt, you would feel an immense amount of stress, sadness, anger, hopelessness, and depression. Clearly, I have many privileges and I am grateful for them all, but oftentimes it is easy and sometimes automatic for me to oversee them. I have actively worked on being aware of my maladaptive tendencies because I want to be able to shed a brighter light on my blessings. The greatest personal lesson I have learned is that you have to adapt to your environment. The remote-learning was a disaster and their expectation of us to ignore the global crises was ridiculous for them to ask. But we had to do it, as hard as it was we

had to work for the dark, unbearable, yet inevitable prospective future. It's my third year and I am thinking about law school right now. I also have to find a place to live for the next academic year. I also need to find a job during a quarantine. I also need to find cheap furniture that my roommate and I can afford. I also need to enroll in summer classes. I also need to reapply my efforts in physical activity. I have so many things that I need to do in order to be prepared for my near future under the uncertainty that permeated our society.

So, during this pandemic you feel tons of sadness and unwanted feelings, but you still want a smile and have fun, so you make the best of it. I built forts, took bubble baths, engaged in recreational activities, watched the Midnight Gospel on Netflix, and all in one day while eating as much as you possibly can. And then I had friends—whose parents can afford to buy him a car amidst a global crisis and imminent economic depression — who complained about the fact that UCLA only gave him a \$200 *waivable* (CARES) grant to support the students experiencing COVID-19 related economic crises. Celebrities complained about being stuck in their mansions with their children. Everyone had a completely different experience.

Only a thousand feet away from me there are sick homeless people in the cold, malnourished, and without masks or any form of public health services. Medical professionals wake up every day to risk their lives every day to treat the increasing number of highly-contagious patients of coronavirus that can easily spread possible fatal symptoms. I wish life had stopped while the medical professionals worked tirelessly to combat this virus with treatment or a vaccine capable enough to prevent contamination. Unfortunately, no humanitarian policies were made by our capitalistic government. There have been so many families across the world experiencing pain, anguish, and loss. So many people who are ill and without a home or

basic life necessities. There are elder people who have lived through two World Wars, and now two global pandemics. An entire century to figure it out and we still have not been able to allot everyone basic human rights.

Instead, companies decided to profit off the virus to produce items such as cloth masks, delivery services, safer-at-home sales, all methods to accommodate the general U.S. population, denied the right to any available vaccines, and free basic health services. The United States is a capitalist country founded on the value of political and economic dominance over the livelihood and well-being of its citizens. Furthermore, the U.S. is also an active and leading participant in decolonization and the distribution of global wealth at the cost of poor countries and the well-being of its people. It wasn't the first time in U.S. history that we have seen this, the same fell true for the influenza pandemic over a century ago, but I hope the future will prove to be different.

I believed this global pandemic would provide us with the opportunity to focus on the desperately needed silver-lining. The chance to finally slow down after centuries of our obsession with time and the necessity to have things now and fast. The vast majority of us in the United States are doing our part by staying indoors. We might as well spend this time enjoying life, evaluate ourselves, and empathize with the world. If we would all take the genuine time and effort to empathize with different people around the world, we would all be better for it. In a global crisis, it could make a powerful difference.