

Life of a Mom in the COVID-19 Pandemic
By: Kirsten Anzalone

Life at the beginning of 2020 seemed to run at a break-neck pace with little time left to fully process the events of the day. Our family schedule was a well-oiled assembly line: wake at 5:00 AM, breakfast, wish my husband a good day as he bolted out the door to catch the 5:25 AM metra, off to shower, make lunches, help the kids get ready for their day, drop the kids at school, go to work, run through the grocery store to pick up milk, greet the kids at school pick-up, race to Irish dance practice, rush home to make and burn dinner, throw the children in the tub, clean the toilet, wipe the dust, run the dishwasher, read the kids a book, kiss them goodnight, check my text messages, remember that I forgot to pay a bill, promise to pay the bill tomorrow, tried to remember if I did shower that day, when was the last time I washed my hair, did I go to the bathroom today...maybe not. No joke. Can't remember. Did I ask my husband how his day was? Opportunity slipped by - he's already asleep. I'm off to bed, and I'll do it all over again tomorrow!

Sometimes the days ran into each other. There were nights I realized I never fully looked my children in the eye that day. I never truly absorbed them. How could I let a day slip by without giving them a fraction of my full attention? I made false promises that the next day we would not be so crazed. And yet, there I was the following night, rerunning the crazy events of that day again in my head knowing full well that I did not fulfill my previous night's promises.

And then COVID came.

We had heard about COVID for the first time from my father who reads the daily news from multiple sources. He warned us about a virus traveling abroad from China that would soon lay its filthy hands around America's neck. But life was moving so fast, I was not prepared. I still had my younger daughter's 4th birthday party planned for March 15, 2020. It was not until two days before that we had heard of patients in Illinois being diagnosed with the virus. So, in

an effort to be cautious, we cancelled the March 15 party not realizing this would be the last time for over a year that we would even have a party date on our calendar.

I work in the College and Career Center at Prospect High School. I missed seeing senior students who were set to celebrate their College Decision Day, prom, and graduation. Soon, school was moved remotely for the remainder of the school year. Event after event was cancelled. My own children, in pre-school and 2nd grade at St. Raymond School in Mt. Prospect, adopted a fully remote elearning schedule. We learned Zoom on the fly, mastering the mute buttons and automatic filters that made me look 5 years younger. Ta da! (One piece of Zoom I will never complain about.)

One night in May 2020, I asked my older daughter how her day was, and she said, "It was great, mom! I love that you are my teacher now!" I reminded her that Mrs. Mitchell was her teacher, but she said, "But not really, because she's not here. You're here." And I realized I was truly "here" for her. For the first time in 8 years, I truly looked at my daughter. I saw her talents, her inner-beauty, I learned her better from the inside out. COVID restrictions requiring us to stay home allowed me to fully embrace motherhood, to explore nature with my kids. I watched our 4 year old master her alphabet, recognize letters, and ride a big-girl bike. We made homemade pie, cookies, cinnamon rolls, and learned how to finger knit, tie-dye, and paint on canvas. We played more board games than I could count. My husband, a first-responder with the Illinois State Police, continued to work at the Crime Lab every day while I had the joy of staying home with our kids. And I do mean "joy." I am not writing that sarcastically. I was so lucky to be at home with them, to be their teacher, mentor, playmate, and mom.

COVID restrictions in Cook County came at a time that was convenient for me, we can't deny that. My kids still found me fun. I sent positive thoughts to the moms with newborns and the moms with teens. What were they doing to stay sane? To keep themselves positive during the day? I was fortunate that at 4 and 8, my children still found me exciting to be with while they stayed safe at home.

And now, in April 2021, people are starting to venture out. For families like ours who have been very cautious, this is new territory. Can our kids have a friend over to play? Can I see a friend in person without a mask on? I'm not sure if I will ever feel 100% secure and safe again. This pandemic hit my mental health hard. My Tiger Mom came out in full-force: I just wanted to keep my kids safe. I think anyone with kids would say the same.

If someone asked me to think of one positive aspect of the past year, I would reflect on how the stay-at-home order for our family was the reminder to...slow...down. I finally could breathe. I was able to finally enjoy my children without a time clock ticking next to me. I don't want our schedule to ever get as busy as it was prior to March 2020. I am so happy with a slower paced life and daily schedule. When life returns to normal, I will be sure to hit the breaks and pause button more often; I promise you all I will never run a daily marathon at a break-neck pace ever again.