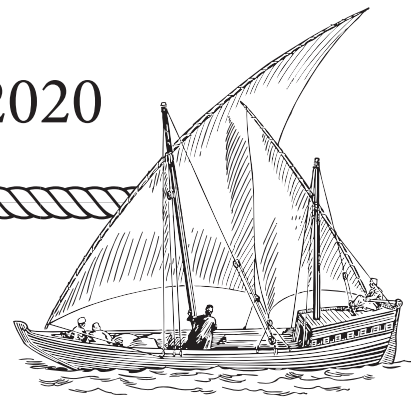


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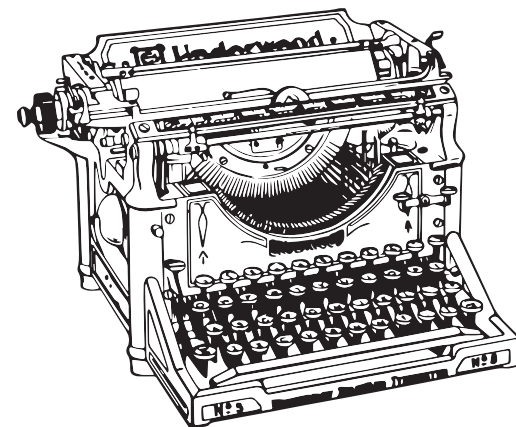
March 2020



Periodic Bulletin of Al-Noor Academy, Mansfield, Massachusetts



Eleonora Signiorini is 17, and living through the throes of her country's meeting with the COVID-19 virus. A chance meeting last summer for an MIT seminar allowed us to see what might await America. Signiorini photo



Humanities Fair Beams Creativity

by Richard Booth
Lighthouse Adviser

March is my favorite month here at the newspaper. March is home to Al-Noor's Humanities Festival, when our students unleash their creativity to fashion fiction, essays, poetry, images, and short films—in other words, fare suited to showcase in our pages.

This year is no different in that respect. But we cannot miss the most influential event of this century. That would be the spread of Corona-19. We make no pretense at comprehensive coverage, of course. But we did what we could, in our case delivering an interview across the Atlantic describing the trials of young people in hard-hit Italy.

Closer to home, we were able to dispatch a writer to a national political event and describe it.

Both of these admittedly unusual stories dovetail with one you already know: Al-Noor's physical closure and switch to technology-supported virtual classrooms. That we were able to do it at all, and do so with such success almost overnight, is a stunning tribute to the "little school that can."

And we still are. Alhamdulillah.

REPORT FROM THE FRONT

In which our editor interviews a classroom colleague in quarantine

by Amina Naidjate
Lighthouse co-editor

Empty schools. Empty grocery shelves. Empty streets. These are realities for Eleonora Signiorini, a 17-year-old living in Ferrara, Italy at the heart of the COVID-19 disaster. Like her country, her life, once structured, is now an uncertain blur.

The virus's effect on populations has been varied. Although there have been 9,037 confirmed cases in South Korea, only 120 of them have died. Ben Jacobson of the Harvard Health Institute attributes their success to "flattening the curve" and widespread and rigorous testing. However, the situation in Italy can only be described as the opposite of successful; while 8,326 people have recovered from the virus there, a whopping 6,820 have died (surpassing the Chinese death toll of 3,280). That's

a nearly one-to-one ratio, the highest fatality rate of any country.

Though Italy's government responded to the outbreak with a nationwide lockdown beginning March 15, many health officials say it was insufficient. The virus spread through the canals of Venice and alleys of Rome like wildfire, infecting nearly 70,000 in less than a month. The streets of Italy are now eerily quiet, save the sounds of church bells and constant ambulances.

Eleonora, like many Italians, hasn't left her house in weeks. The transition from normal life to quarantine was gradual but still shocking to them. "First the schools were closed...even though we weren't going to school, we were still meeting our friends and hanging out so it was not effective. Then our parks closed so we couldn't walk our dogs. Then the cafes and restaurants closed...and then it sort of

exploded."

Although those precautions were instated, Eleonora said that most Italians did not take them too seriously at first. "I heard about it in January when it started in China. We followed the news because we thought it was a big deal for China, but it didn't seem like a big deal for us. We thought that if no one from China came, the virus would just stay there."

But it didn't. Coronavirus has since wreaked havoc on the Italian health-care system, pushing it to the brink of collapse. Authorities continuously warned Italians about the dangers of disregarding social distancing (maintaining a distance of six feet from others to limit the transmission of the virus), but many, particularly elderly who are most susceptible to the virus, have disregarded the warnings.

Continued on page 3

QUARANTINE

Continued from page 1

“Young people and adults do care,” said Eleonora, “but senior citizens, not so much. They don’t understand why all these restrictions are being put on them.”

When the nationwide lockdown was announced, Eleonora said people stormed markets and grocery stores, not knowing the next time they could buy food. When arriving at her local market after the crowds, “all the meat, fish, and pasta were gone. We have pasta every day, so you know it’s bad in Italy when all the pasta is gone.” Even now, weeks into the quarantine, there is still a shortage of certain products. “We can’t find eggs anymore,” Eleonora said with a face of disappointment. “My mom goes down to the market everyday and she can’t find any. So now we can’t even make our own pasta.”

Eleonora, in her fourth of five years of high school, hasn’t gone to school in nearly a month. From Monday to Friday, she attends classes virtually through the platform “Google Meet,” but her school is limited to instructing students only a maximum of four hours a day. While she and her peers are trying to make the best of the situation, she admits that online school is not as effective as attending physically. Testing and assignments have been suspended until students can return to campus, so all teachers can do is provide material and hope that students make efforts to learn on their own.

“With no accurate grades, there is no motivation,” Eleonora says. “We think, ‘Why do I have to do it now, I can do it later?’ And then you don’t do it later.”

But Eleonora does count herself lucky to have the online-schooling option. Although her friend living in Spain has no school because of the pandemic, she does not have an online alternative since many in her school cannot afford internet access. In Italy, many major companies are providing students in quarantine free internet access, in addition to giving citizens free magazines and streaming services to cope with isolation.

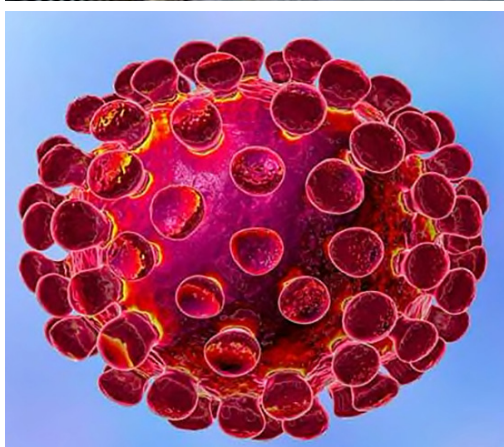
While Italian authorities are doing what they can to contain the

outbreak, such as implementing a 206 euro fine (\$230 USD) to anyone found outside their homes, Eleonora says social media trends and pop culture stars have had the biggest effects. Celebrities like Giuliano Sangiorgi are coining the hashtag #iostoa casa (#istayathome) to encourage self-isolation. Some are even helping raise money to open corona-specific hospitals. The phrase “Andrà tutto bene,” or “Everything will be fine,” is repeated by Italians across the country, uniting a people who cannot physically gather. Multiple remote displays of unity and compassion have been organized in the country, including by Eleonora and her friends. She proudly said that “last night, at 6 p.m. everyone organized to go out on their balconies and play something musical. It was nice to hear music in streets that are empty.”

When asked how the quarantine had affected her personally, a shadow fell across her usually smiling face. “Right now, I haven’t realized I’m in quarantine. It feels like I’m in a movie. No one I know has been infected yet, but everyone is really sick of staying home because you miss your friends and people in general. I don’t usually care about hugs, but right now, I really need a hug from my friends. We’re all kind of depressed, but we try to talk on platforms like Skype... My friends and I organized a sort of dinner tomorrow. We’ll all be in our individual kitchens and eating dinner, but just trying to be together. Trying to feel normal. Because it feels like we’re in the apocalypse.”

She said that she tries to stay positive by keeping her mind off the global crisis terrorizing the minds of so many. “The people who know how to take care of it will handle it,” she said. “All I can do is listen to them.” She went on to describe what her typical day in quarantine consists of walking in the garden on sunny days, playing the piano, watching Netflix, and working out. She’s read four books in four days, books that she’s always wanted to read but never had the time. It sounds like an ideal life to many, but according to Eleonora, it’s no fun when she knows she must do it alone and indefinitely.

Continued on page 5



Top: every shelf in every market is bare in northern Italy, where finding the necessities of life is an increasing challenge. Middle two images: typical streets in downtown Ferrara, Italy, with virtually no foot traffic of any kind as residents hunker down in place to stem the spread of the pandemic which continues to take an unprecedented number of lives. At left, a computer-generated representation of a microscope picture that is the Corona Virus, which causes Covid-19, the disease itself. Except for the image at left, pictures are by Eleonora Signorini, who was interviewed for this story by internet.