Campus amid Covid: How student life has changed after a chaotic year

By Annie Jones & Lillian Poag

After a year of acclimating to life in a pandemic, St. John's is slowly returning to normal. Gone are the plexiglass barriers and one-directional hallways; back are pep rallies and the student section in the Skip. Upper School Counselor Ashley Le Grange has witnessed it all — especially how the last year has contributed to social isolation.

"Of course, it depends on the teenager; there are some who thrive in introverted environments and some who really struggle," Le Grange said. "When we stop building social skills, it can create a default isolatory state."

When masks cover facial expressions, Le Grange says that it can be difficult to connect with new people — though she also emphasizes their importance in keeping students safe. A study in the journal Nature found that masks significantly affect the ability to recognize and empathize with people, especially for students who are new to the school or teachers getting used to a new class.

"We don't feel approachable; there's a wall up," Le Grange said. "I can't read your face, I can't read your expression, so if you're already new, that makes it even harder to read the social cues."

Last school year, students in ensemble classes dealt with modified rehearsals and performances as Covid-19 infection rates rose and fell, choir groups either practiced in St. John the Divine or outside. Students in band and orchestra rehearsed indoors, where students sat in six-by-six squares.

Sophomore Annika Hensel participated in both choir and band last year. Band rehearsals were always split into different rehearsal groups, which allowed students to focus more on their individual parts, but the full band was "never able to play together until right before the concert."

At the height of the pandemic, athletes had to choose between not playing the sport they loved or potentially exposing themselves to Covid-19. Since many restrictions were lifted this year, athletes no longer have to remain masked during practice, and spectators are allowed back at all games.

"It's more fun to play when I have friends there in the stands," sophomore volleyball player Zell Godbold said. "But everything the school did was to make me more eager to do well. There is a reason there's a home/field advantage in sports — we do better when there are people cheering us on."

Parents' Night returned this year; although only one adult per child was allowed to attend. Head of Upper School Hollis Amley said that, while conditions were not ideal, "they tried to provide alternatives for things that were canceled."

Sophomore softball player Mackenzie Rice saw some "comedic" downsides to the relaxed guidelines.

"I understand the reason behind it," Barrett said. "It's frustrating, but at the same time, we never had Senior Country, so we don't know what we're missing."

"Through it all, rules have been tightened and loosened. Events have been planned and canceled. Yet the campus has remained open for in-person learning — a constant in this year of chaos."

"No one really knows what normal is anymore," Godbold said, "but being with friends and getting out of isolation has already made this school year so much better."