

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 Lee Field bleachers.

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 St. John's 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 taped on the floor.

Sophomore Annika Hensel participated in both choir and band last year. Band rehearsals were always split into different instrument 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. “They make me more eager to do well. There is a reason there's home-field advantage in sports – we do better when there are more people cheering us on.”

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— ASHLEY LE GRANGE

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

“Because I was wearing a mask, I picked up a really bad habit of sticking my tongue out every time I swing,” Rice said, “so this summer when we were doing batting practice, we didn't wear masks, and I was sticking my tongue out.”

Many students recognize that masks and other regulations are still needed and appreciate the School's efforts to maintain a safe environment. The Spirit Club only coordinated online events last year, but on Aug. 27, they hosted their first pep rally on the Great Lawn in two years.

“Pep rallies are usually so much fun,” Spirit Club co-captain Evie Barrett said, “but everything the school did was necessary, and they tried to provide alternatives for things that were canceled.”

Administrators and medical advisers continue to regularly assess case numbers and vaccination rates, adjusting protocols as needed.

As November approaches, the School will “likely make masks optional for Upper School students and teachers,” according to a campus-wide email on Oct. 18 from Head of School Dan Alig. Beginning the week of Oct. 25, “the Upper School will gather together as one division” for Chapel and assemblies, although masks will still be required.

Clubs struggled to gain members last year, especially among freshmen, after the format of Club Fair was changed from an in-person event to a Google Slides presentation.

“There were a lot of clubs I wanted to join,” Godbold said,



PHOTO | Sarah Clark

“but I didn't want to be on Zoom the whole year, so I only ended up joining one club, Sports Management.”

After a year that began with no food service for students, only faculty, and ended with limited boxed lunch options, the cafeteria has reopened with a full menu. Students are also no longer required to eat in assigned lunch zones. The new chef, Pablo Peña, has overseen the reintroduction of hot lunch.

“Everyone has to wear a mask and gloves,” Peña said. “At the salad bar, for example, everything is pre-packed in plastic.”

Last year, in lieu of attending Parents' Night in person, teachers recorded videos for parents to watch.

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, she “still found some silver linings in the format this year.”

“[A] parent mentioned that she was taking extra detailed notes so that she could communicate everything to her husband,” Amley said. “Another mentioned that fewer parents that night meant that hallways were less congested and it was easier to get to classes.”

Katie Nguyen, whose daughter Emma is in 10th grade, said, “I was able to meet my daughter's teachers in person, see her classroom and experience her rush to get to class on time, all of which gives me a good insight into her day.”

English teacher Mary Mitchell appreciated the opportunity to “have parent interaction.”

“It felt very normal this year,” she said. “It was nice to have people in the room, rather than talking to a camera.”

In one of the most significant changes, the modified five-day schedule is gone, and the School has returned to the seven-day rotation that debuted in 2016.

After spending a year in modified classrooms in the Campus Center on the North Campus, the eighth grade has moved back to Georges Middle School.

Senior Country has yet to reopen, functioning as an English and economics classroom.

“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.”

Armadillo scurries through Plaza

By Emma Chang

Around 7:20 a.m. on the morning of Sept. 30, English teacher Warren Rawson spotted a creature scurrying past the carpool circle flagpole by the Quad. As Rawson drew closer, he could hear the animal's claws scratching the pavement as it headed toward the double doors of the Upper School Office.

“I initially thought it was a cat, or an opossum, or even a giant squirrel,” Rawson said. “As I pulled out my phone to take a picture, I saw the bands of armor around its midsection and realized it was an armadillo.”

The armored mammal was spotted a second time that morning running around the edges of the Plaza. Sophomore Carys LeBlanc and her friends, who were sitting outside at 8:39 a.m., saw a “very fast” brown blur.

“We were studying when we saw an armadillo run through the Plaza,” LeBlanc said. “It looked like a huge rat with a shell.”

From the Plaza, the armadillo made its way into a bush beneath the Parent's Desk window. After students approached it, the animal scampered into a hole in a fence.

Armadillos are normally nocturnal creatures, so its scuttling about in broad daylight indicates that it may have been rabid. Yet rabid armadillos also generally approach humans to infect through direct contact – which may also spread leprosy, salmonella and tapeworms. This armadillo fled from the people who drew near or attempted to photograph it.

According to Richard Still, Director of Safety and Facilities, armadillos do not stray very far since they are territorial.

“It likes to stay where there's a good food source,” Still said. “The trees along the fence line and the landscapes have plenty of grubs and worms for it to eat.”

Because LeBlanc had never seen an armadillo before, watching the ‘dillo roam the campus seemed surreal. Still regularly sees it on campus in the early morning.

“The armadillo has been around ever since it was a baby, and now, it is fully grown,” Still said. “I've seen it almost every day since then.”

After about an hour and a half of bustling around campus, it disappeared into a gutter.

Armadillos are known to burrow and tend to inhabit areas with cracks and crevices for protection from predators and harsh weather. They are occasionally active during daylight hours after rainstorms and in cooler weather, ideally under 85 degrees Fahrenheit. This campus visitor had ideal weather conditions for its excursion because the temperature was 75 and it had rained the previous day.

“I smiled while I watched it scurry through the bushes,” Rawson said. “Who doesn't enjoy seeing the ‘official state small mammal of Texas’ on a Thursday morning?”

Additional reporting by
Lucy Walker



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