

COVID 19 DIARIES

Utku MURATOGLU

Introduction

This virus has no religion, no nationality, no skin colour, and no gender. It affected us all, regardless of these features. But, while we leave the staying at home period behind slowly, we are moving into a new normal where billions of people are now asked to wear a mask in public, while fears of a second wave of COVID 19 persist.

With the following diaries, one can see the experience of a flight attendant from a European airline company and see the struggles of the workers in the airline industry and how COVID 19 has impacted on their lives and livelihoods. Irmak B. explains how it is financially difficult to live when there are no flights and gives her perspective on why the airline industry did not stop flights immediately when the virus first came to Europe, even though flights to China were cancelled.

Across the Atlantic, Sinem Sakarcan, a doctor working on the front lines who lives with the threat of COVID 19 in the United States, the country with the most cases in the world. She explains how difficult it is to be in a house as a health worker around family and how this situation made her realise the importance of her profession and appreciate the work she and her co-workers do.

Two Irish individuals share their experiences during the lockdown and the financial and mental health difficulties of COVID 19 on them and their professions. Eugene Greaney, a restaurateur in Galway, shares his situation running a small business trying to survive in the middle of a pandemic. He says the situation is way worse than the last economic crisis in Ireland.

In Dublin, a national broadcast journalist shares her experience with reporting during a pandemic. Ailbhe Conneely was putting herself at risk to keep reporting and informing the public about the latest news. She gives her insight on how this situation will affect broadcasting and journalism in Ireland.

In Turkey, Serhat Erdem, a bank worker shares his perspective from a much more different perspective, from a corporate lifestyle. He explains how the lockdown made him think more about global warming and nature versus humanity comparison during the lockdown period.

Finally, Funda Savas Martinez, a real estate agent in Switzerland shares her perspective on how COVID 19 affected her family life and the real estate industry. She talks candidly about how her family and her children and the struggles of raising a family during the lockdown.

All these countries had different approaches towards the pandemic and had different restrictions on their citizens. While all these countries had different numbers and approaches, all these different people have been impacted by the pandemic both in their professional lives and in their personal lives.

These COVID 19 diaries are dedicated to every single human on this planet, regardless of their race, gender, religion, nationality, legal status, and financial status. While these interviews do not

represent all people in the same work or geographical groups, it is a representation of these individuals and their experiences. This project does not aim to generalise or discriminate any nations or any professions. While many suffered because of COVID 19, these are just a couple of individual stories among them.

Survival of the SMEs

Full Name: Eugene Greaney

Age: 34

Profession: Cook and the Owner of The Dough Bro's Wood Fired Pizza

Workplace: The Dough Bro's Wood Fired Pizza

Country of Residence: Ireland

Before COVID 19 seems a long time ago now, I was really busy working most of the days, time was flowing so fast. When it came to Ireland, everybody has forced to stop, which was good, everybody had time to reflect on life before.

Mentally, quarantine was like chaos for my brain. Although it was scary to think about if the business can open or not, there was a relief with the lockdown.

It made me realise that I cannot do that all the time, just sit and do nothing. If that turned into my life, I would go crazy. At first, I needed a purpose, and I cooked pizzas at home, I went running. I just needed something to keep me sane.

Once the restrictions started to ease, it was okay, but there was a period of time that challenged me psychologically.

While there were some negative aspects, there were some positive as well. As much as I like my business, when you are dealing with hundreds of customers every day, it can be tiring.

So, in a way, it was a relief that you don't have to deal with that pressure and stress. Also, as a result of the quarantine, I started to value the simple things, enjoy local areas, and appreciate family which we sometimes can ignore.

Financially it was a different case. It was devastating. Our restaurant went from one of the busiest restaurants in Galway, if not Ireland to being closed and will be shut until the vaccine comes. At least that style of doing business.

This means that all revenues were down to 30 per cent, and we are trying to get that up 50 per cent with a new style of business models. Revenue and income were way down during the lockdown.

That is why this new model of business is interesting, it is not that stressful and tiring, and you still can get the return.

We are also in a different situation than most of the other restaurants. Because we are a brand rather than just a restaurant, so we can continue with takeaways or DIY kits, without having customers physically at the restaurant. But it is not feasible for everyone, and some suffered more.

Having all of the staff together, everyone had to shut down in Galway to ensure the safety of your employees, but some people stayed open, and I was really angry about that because they were risking their employees and their families. Now the risk is much less, and it is a different story, but I would be very worried if there would be another wave.

The Government gave us the restaurants, no guidance. To bars, they said to close, but to restaurants nobody said anything. We had to make some tough decisions by ourselves. We were one of the first restaurants to close in Galway because we saw what was coming.

It was evident from the examples from Italy and Spain that a difference a day made was absolutely huge. Although the overall situation was handled pretty well in Ireland, I believe the Government put us in a very tricky situation.

Since the Government didn't force us to close and we took the decision to close, there was no insurance for loss of income. For all that income loss and being close for four months, we got no insurance paid out.

We had to close in a situation like this. If one of the staff got the virus, we and our families are all in danger, but we suffered financially, just because we cared about our health.

Some places on Shop Street and High Street, which has been there since my childhood are struggling, and some of them are already gone, it is so scary, and we are just trying to survive.

Most restaurants are small. Restaurants revenue down 70 per cent at least, but your fixed costs are the same, and already these restaurants were operating with a very small margin.

Another significant impact that people ignore is that all of these restaurants rely on tourism, including us. Going forward I think we will see some closures for sure.

It is a shame because Galway was booming in terms of the economy and tourism, and this year was supposed to be the year of the European Capital of Culture, but instead, it is about survival.

I believe we cannot go back to the state of business before COVID-19 until 2022 or even 2023. This year is survival, and next year is slowly building up, but it's going to be hard.

Things can get back to normalise, but it will not be the same. From seven days in a week being close to seven days a week being open was something not what we were expecting, but it is necessary to survive in these conditions.

I have questions about if we should go back to the way that we were doing things before, but at the same time from the business side, you kind of have to. The restaurant model is dead.

We really on packed restaurants with massive cues, but it is not feasible in these conditions. At least not until the vaccine comes, we cannot go back.

New arms of the business are developing in Galway. Takeaways increased as did the new DIY style packages. Although it is a lot of work after the quarantine, it is also exciting because it is a unique style. It's not as stressful.

Underrated heroes of the pandemic

Full name: Ailbhe Conneely

Age: 40

Profession: Journalist, social and religious affairs correspondent

Workplace: Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)

Country of Residence: Ireland

I got a new job at the same time that COVID 19 arrived in Ireland. My new role involves covering social affairs and religious affairs. It means that COVID 19 has impacted on my brief significantly. At the peak of COVID 19, on average I worked 12-14 hour days on call 7-days a week. That has reduced to 10 hours most days apart from Saturday and Sunday nowadays.

I have never been busier. I sat at a desk with five other people. There was a lot of discussion and laughter. My commute to work was very long by car because of the traffic, going to locations for interviews and returning to the office for a news bulletin deadline took a long time because of

Dublin City traffic. I went to the supermarket when I felt like it, and I did not have to plan or schedule my weekly shopping for groceries.

In March, however, I had a sore throat and a cough so I stayed at home for three weeks on the advice of my doctor. I found that period okay. I wanted to work, but I was advised not to. Once I accepted that I had no struggle. It was nice to stop. I quite liked being at home at first, but mentally I found myself anxious.

The anxiety came from coping with COVID 19 outside of work. I found the queues to get into the supermarket quite stressful as I simply wanted to get in and get out. I couldn't see my parents for five months, and I have not met my friends since 1 February. Even when we finally met, I could not give them a hug when I met them, which was strange.

Financially, I didn't spend as much which was good because my car needed a major service so the money was put towards that. So, I had to learn to be patient and started to listen to podcasts.

After that, I was equally glad to be able to return to the office when I could. Our managers recognised that we provided an essential service as the national broadcaster we had to inform the public. TV, radio and online audiences have all increased.

While online has increased dramatically there has also been an increase in the number of younger people (teens and early twenties) watching TV bulletins during the lockdown. There is a lot of delight in that because that age group has been increasingly turning to social media and online for their news.

I tried working from home but technical issues meant it was easier to go to the office where there have been huge changes in how we work particularly in relation to social distancing.

There are still too many stories for me to cover such is the impact of COVID 19, in my workplace, the key was informing the public.

Everyone worked so hard to ensure that happened but I think there is an element of burn-out in the newsroom three months on, so I often have to pass the COVID 19 stories to my colleagues.

Yet, the newsroom is very quiet now. If multimedia journalists are given the full range of facilities to work from anywhere in the field, they will never have to come into the office, unless they are required in the studio. Some journalists have not come to the office in 13 weeks.

There will definitely be more remote working in the future. Working with a camera crew requires social distancing. Holding a microphone does not happen anymore. You have to put it on a stand and place it in front of the interviewee - two metres from the camera.

The journalist has to stand two metres to the left or the right of the camera crew. We cannot touch the camera equipment in the past, we could help the camera person carry the equipment, we can't do that anymore. If we are doing any interviews indoors, we have to wear PPE.

For example, when I reported on COVID 19 in nursing homes and prisons and in a hotel, housing homeless people, management was alerted and I was reminded to follow public health guidance and told to wear PPE. I'm not sure if it will be so strict in the future but so far, these measures are continuing.

Thank You!

Full Name: Sinem Sakarcan

Age: 28

Profession: Doctor (Pediatrician)

Workplace: St. Christopher's Hospital for Children

Country of residence: United States of America

My name is Sinem Sakarcan and I am going to be starting my third year of pediatric residency (last year of residency) in July. I live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with my family. I was born in Texas and have lived in America my whole life. My father is also a Pediatrician, my mother is a nursing assistant, my younger sister in Podiatry residency and my brother is in college in Philadelphia.

Before COVID-19 my life consisted of going to work, hanging out with my friends and family, running outside, shopping, and cooking. That has changed with COVID 19 arriving in States.

Stay at home orders started on my birthday, 17 March. Everyone was fearful and in a panic. My brother came home from college. My residency program decided to keep residents who were not on essential rotations at home on a backup call in case there were residents who relieved from duty and would need to be on quarantine. We had to stay at home except to go to work, grocery store, gas station, or pharmacy.

In the grocery store, bread, flour, milk, eggs, cleaning products, and toilet paper were all empty on the shelves. The roads were essentially empty any time I did go out. Rules kept changing daily and everything was uncertain.

I was fortunately not affected financially and continued to get my pay check, but mentally I became more anxious not only from being in the house all the time but also because I and my other family members are in healthcare so I was extra anxious that we would expose each other to the virus if weren't careful enough. Especially because my parents are older.

Socially, I felt lucky to have my family in the house to at least talk to at times when I felt anxious or sad or even just to talk about my day. It was hard to get used to not being able to spend time with my friends. They are one of my biggest support systems. However, I am thankful for the technology we have and can still see our family and friends through Facetime or Zoom.

I would run around my neighbourhood in the suburbs when no one was outside. I spent lots of time cooking for my family, which I have always enjoyed. On one hand, it was nice to relax at home since I didn't have to be at work, but after some time I started to become more anxious while feeling locked up in the house and in my room. My family has a private back yard and I would find myself sitting on the patio a lot as well to get fresh air. I was constantly checking the news and numbers of cases and deaths daily.

Over time, however, in these past few weeks since the government lifted stay at home orders we have also become less stringent in the house. We have to wear masks anywhere we go and still don't feel comfortable eating out in restaurants or going shopping. We only go to the grocery store, gas station, and sometimes pick up food from a restaurant.

There were also changes in my professional life, our shifts were changed and staffing was reduced in the hospital to limit the number of residents working to reduce exposure. A lot of residents had to be quarantined due to possible exposure which strained a lot of people and some had to work more shifts to make up for those who couldn't come in. Since I work in a children's hospital, we had a dramatic reduction in the number of patients in the hospital. We had to use PPE sparingly and originally had one mask we had to reuse at all times.

After some time, the hospital came up with a system to disinfect masks after a few uses. I could no longer hang out with my colleagues. We had to maintain social distancing. Seeing patients was done in smaller teams and sometimes even done virtually. We had to learn how to do telephone consultations in outpatient clinics.

It's scary because there is still so much unknown about it and we are learning new things every day. It was also scary to be on the front lines putting not only myself at exposure but also the possibility of my family members getting exposed. However, at the same time, it is my job and I took an oath to take care of patients no matter what the circumstances are. It is unnerving to deal with a disease that is new even to your older colleagues who are much more experienced. It is a very different experience. It made me realise how valuable and honourable my job is.

I feel anxious about the future as we are currently seeing spikes in the number of coronavirus cases since easing restrictions in almost most of the country. I'm fearful of the increase in the number of deaths we are going to see. I am fearful of more sick children I'm going to see. I am fearful for my family. I am fearful of our economy and the healthcare system which is already struggling. I am fearful that we are not going to be enough for all of the patients we are going to see and the possibility of not enough resources. I am fearful that social distancing is going to go on for months

with no end in sight. I am fearful for my own future and job once I graduate from residency to find a job as I have seen doctors get laid off.

However, I do have hope that a vaccine will hopefully provide us with more protection. I have hope that all the hardworking scientists and doctors will continue to learn more about the virus and help the rest of us understand how to treat and manage it even better.

Data and the pandemic

Full Name: Serhat Erdem

Age: 26

Profession: Data Analyst at risk management department

Workplace: Deniz Bank

Country of Residence: Turkey

I am working as a data analyst and a part of the risk management desk at Deniz Bank. When COVID 19 first arrived, I didn't think it was going to affect our lives this much.

With the increase in case numbers, every day, I was worried not for myself, but I was afraid that I might be a risk for the ones I care about if I ever got the virus. I was wrong to take it so lightly, nowadays my thoughts about it and my daily life have completely changed.

Before COVID 19, on weekdays, my work was very busy. I was working between 9am and 6pm, and after that, we were going out with co-workers and friends to let some steam. On weekends, I had some time to myself, I used to go hiking and watching movies and series on TV.

I am an extrovert, I like hiking, walking and being with nature. Stuck in an apartment for most of the time was unbearable for me from a psychological point of view.

Sometimes I got angry for no reason and it broke my will to do something or productive, but I knew this could not go on forever like this so I found an escape.

I spent a lot of my spare time doing sports before all of this but during the lockdown, it became my primary activity during the day, or even during the night sometimes. Which is good, because a lot

of people complain that they got fatter during the lockdown, but I actually lost weight because of my extreme focus on sports.

After a while, I realised that this lockdown period is very good for nature and the greatest enemy of nature is humans.

In terms of work, I expected more from my employer. Not just economically, but psychologically and from a tech point of view. Not everyone has a fast broadband connection and not everyone has high tech equipment, but they expected everyone to work with the same efficiency as we were working in our offices.

I know my company is capable of providing that support because I know for a fact that banks were preparing for months in case of a situation like this. It had been foreseen by many very early, how the situation can affect global economics and the market.

This is how it has been for a while. Banking, in general, has changed for the better and stronger than 2008 and certainly than in the 90s.

Yes, there will be some effects on the economy and to some degree to people, but we tried to minimise that effect by helping SMEs and to the private investors. We know that it is a domino effect, so we all have a role to play to get through this with minimal loss.

The future can be predicted and we can prepare for the next step because of data. So, my work never stopped during the lockdown. On the contrary, I believe it was even more helpful and efficient. Being away from the loud work environment with all the calls and noise helped me to focus on the data more.

Honestly, when this is all over, all data analysts should work from home, we are more productive at home when you have the necessary equipment and broadband. While many other departments had problems and provided inefficient work performance, we provided more than the usual.

I think the lockdown helped executives to see the ups and downs of each position in a global bank. Not only the executives or the CEOs, but I believe the lockdown helped everyone to think about the future and where we are now.

For me, it helped me to realise the harm we have done to nature and we can do our jobs, live our lives without so much carbon emissions. This pandemic hurt us psychologically and biologically, but it will be much worse if global warming worsens and we start to lose the Earth.

Stuck at home after 15 years of flight

Full Name: Irmak B.

Age: 36

Profession: Cabin attendant

Workplace: One of the European Airlines

Country of Residence: Turkey

People around me always say Irmak has a disorganised life, but in reality, it was really organized but, yes not routine. I am a single woman in love with the sky.

Before this quarantine life, my life was really organised and exactly how I wanted. I want to be up in the sky, seeing new places and new faces, not sitting in my living room. In a way, COVID-19 forced me to have that routine, an ordinary life which is not for me.

I have been in this industry for 15 years, I have been a cabin attendant for 13 years and I am a certified pilot of single-engine planes. There are no standard wages in the airline industry, you get paid by the flights you attend. Therefore, what I do is always misunderstood by my friends and family.

This situation is harming me financially. There are no standard wages in the airline industry, you get paid by the flights you attend. Now, with flights reduced and cancelled all over the world, it has really hurt my income and puts me in a tough position. Before this, all my spending was aligned with my regular income, but now it is making it hard for me to pay my debts and bills.

In 15 years, it's the first time I have experienced something like this. I do not expect to lose my job, because I have seen many things and the industry itself has always bounced back, however like all jobs right now, there are always whispers around possible losses and that makes you fear, and that's psychologically very hard to cope with.

Seeing the planes and seeing your uniform on the dresser every day makes it really tough, but I am hopeful for the future.

I don't expect domestic flights to be affected, though international flights are likely to be impacted. Many routes have an alternative so, it will be easier in Europe but, some routes have no alternative and smaller firms definitely will be affected.

Yet, I think the airlines will be the ones who recover fastest, first because the world heavily depends on air traffic. Secondly, airlines are essential for the trade and even many airlines transformed some of their passenger planes into cargo planes.

Flights are global, even if one area is recovered from COVID-19 and opens air traffic, it will be a boost for all airlines.

Lufthansa and Qatar Airlines are starting back with only 100 planes at the moment, everyone is starting small and maybe they will get smaller in the long run because of its effect on airlines. It really depends on demand, if the demand decreases because of COVID-19, then getting smaller is inevitable, but if it stays the same, the industry will back up really fast.

The industry itself is always ready to change. As cabin attendants, one of the strengths you should have is to be ready for changing situations and adapt yourself to that change. Thus, in that manner, we were ready to do what is necessary.

I believe, airlines in Europe reacted very fast, and they stopped flights immediately and responded to this crisis as much as they could. There is some criticism around that the airlines did not stop flights immediately, but as a person who works in the industry, I can say that it is impossible logistically to stop all the flights immediately.

Hygiene and other measures are going to be very important of course, but in terms of testing and quarantine, in the beginning, it was not efficient and that has come a little bit late, there have been some cases both among cabin and cockpit personnel, but no deaths so far.

I think online education, flyers will increase for the flight personnel in general, especially in health and hygiene-related areas. Other than that, I really expect to have more strict rules in terms of compliance with regulations and safety, because it is a heavily human oriented job, and not all people do follow the rules and regulations all the time, to be honest, so I think there will be tighter rules, inspections, and evaluations from now on.

Family life during the pandemic

Full Name: Funda Savas Martinez

Age: 34

Profession: Project Manager, Commercial property management

Workplace: Domicim is in the real estate market through its management activities, individual and institutional brokerage as well as PPE administration

Country of Residence: Switzerland

I usually work 80 per cent of a week as the project manager in property management. I live with my husband and my children, but we are a big family, my parents and siblings are also living in Lausanne. So it was always, a case of seeing each other and gathering around the table with laughs and joy as a big family, but then everything changed.

I was very shocked by what the world was going through. I never thought I would experience something like this. I cried a lot at first, I gained five kg in three weeks, I was very afraid of what happened. Then I learned to live with this virus from what we heard in the media.

I miss my family very much, we are living nearby, but it's very difficult without contact. I am lucky to have my husband and my three-year-old children(twins) with me. We spend time doing various activities, we laugh a lot. Fortunately, we can often call our family to see and hear them.

We did not have any particular difficulties in our house. we explained the situation of their friends to our children in words. They understood that it is not normal, but I think they took it fairly well. Every day, I tried to offer them a new activity, an experience, something new. We also walk around the neighbourhood.

Children are prohibited from touching anything in the hallways of the building. Now they know it and as soon as they leave the apartment, they put their hands in their pockets. There is a garden a little far from us, we often go there to see the flowers and the birds.

Apart from the horrors of the situation, I tell myself that I am very lucky to share all this time with my husband and my children. A time that I never lived in normal times. I take advantage of it every second. We share a lot and I have seen my children improving psychologically every day for two months.

I am working only 40 per cent of the time since 1 April. As for my income, this had dropped by about 20 per cent, because regarding the search for apartments to rent or sell, we clearly felt a drop. However, people who have more time during this lockdown do a lot of research on the Internet. We have had lots of requests. At the start of lockdown, real estate brokers made several visits, which resulted in sales. However, the activities have clearly decreased while the lockdown continued.

We have been at home with my husband since 16 March. As soon as the children go to bed, I take advantage of the children's sleep and in the evening. My husband and I work alternately during the

day. My activity has decreased significantly since the second week of lockdown. the work is going well now. We feel that the situation is getting better and my work is getting busier.

It is difficult to predict the future today, but we believe there will be a sharp drop in demand for apartments. Although people will want to leave the city centre, there was already a drop in rural area sales and we believe that the demand for apartments in rural areas will further decrease. We believe that there will be more telework and less travel. People may want to buy a larger apartment and set up an office there.

But, from a personal point of view, COVID 19 has allowed me to focus more on my family. The job has moved to second place. I'm afraid to go out and I don't want to go back to work. We worked from home until the end of May and my boss has indicated that we will not be back in June. We are continuing to work from home still.

During the month of May, we refused to send our children back to day care, I hope to do the same in June as well. The mother of a friend died because of COVID 19, and it was very bad for us. We want to protect ourselves as much as possible.

My husband who is a teacher continued to teach this week, many colleagues, and many students, and as well as his parents were against him continuing the lessons. Unfortunately, they have no other options.

You have to take every precaution not to get sick and not to bring this disease home. I was very affected by this disease, but I got used to living with it in our lives, and it's getting better with time.

I am afraid for the future; I am afraid that life will never return as before. I don't want my kids to grow up that way. I hope we have a vaccine and get back to normal life. I think there will be a life after COVID 19, but it will never be the same again.