

Adrienne Alvarez, who was then a Grade 11 Accountancy, Business and Management student at Mater Carmeli School, said that she was disappointed when class suspensions got extended because school was her safe space. *“I felt sad because school is honestly one of my escapes. It makes me forget problems that I have at home and with my personal life. It got really tough for me because of that.”*

Erin Kraft, who was then a Humanities and Social Sciences student at the University of Santo Tomas (UST), was excited at first, but then her excitement turned into disappointment and sadness. *“At first, I said, at least I’m in the province, parang pahinga ko kuno... I thought we’d be back in school by August...Sobrang disappointing and draining lang.”*

A LOOK-BACK: 2020 LOCKDOWN, IN A NUTSHELL

With everyone forced to stay at home, paired with the mandatory closing of all schools and non-essential businesses, Filipino citizens indeed faced a lot of struggles during the past year. Struggles that grew and grew as time went on, and as the number of COVID-19 cases continued to rise.

SCHOOLS AND ONLINE CLASSES IN 2020

Several small schools closed during the pandemic due to bankruptcy. With the ban on face-to-face classes, online classes were the only option of delivering academic related services. This posed a huge problem, especially to public schools which do not have sufficient equipment. According to a report from the Department of Education, the enrollment rate drastically dropped by 27.3 percent.

“Moira”, a student on her gap year, said that she chose not to enroll because she didn’t find it practical. “Hindi naman ako sanay sa module-based learning. Baka bumagsak lang grades ko and ang mahal pa ng tuition namin, saying lang.” she said.

Moira isn’t alone. Many students had difficulty adjusting to this mode of learning, not only because it’s new, but also because they do not have the necessary gadgets, nor a stable internet connection.

I was fortunate enough to have taken a year of the home study program of UST Angelicum, so I at least had the overview of what to expect during online classes. Some of my batchmates went in blind, not knowing what to expect from this new mode of learning. While some adjusted quite well, unfortunately, those who had really poor internet connection and lack of gadgets could not keep up and decided to drop out or take a leave of absence for the remainder of the academic year. Other students also had to deal with their own mental health struggles.

MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES OF STUDENTS

In a research conducted by the National Center for Biotechnology Information on the effects of COVID-19 lockdown in the Philippines to its citizens, it showed that 16.3 percent of respondents rated the psychological impact of the outbreak as moderate-to-severe; 16.9 percent reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms; 28.8 percent had moderate-to-severe anxiety levels; and 13.4 percent had moderate-to-severe stress levels, most particularly youths and students.

The Samahan ng Progresibong Kabataan (SPARK) reported that they have been monitoring incidences linked to online learning. As of October 2020, they've reported 17 cases of suicide, while one was due to a vehicular accident and another, to electrocution. A sophomore Criminology student from Capiz, Kristelyn Villance, died in an accident while looking for an internet connection to submit her report online.

The National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP) said in their official statement *"Though no one willed this accident to happen, this unfortunate happening underscores the need for an educational system that is compassionate and sensitive to the plight of student and families amid the COVID-19 pandemic."*

UNEMPLOYMENT PEAK

The unemployment rate in the Philippines reached its highest in 15 years. The government estimates about 4.5 million Filipinos lost their jobs due to lay-offs and the shutting down of businesses.

According to the Department of Trade and Industry, over 90,000 businesses remained closed because of the pandemic, most of which are micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) which comprise the majority of businesses in the country. Some of these businesses were forced to close due to their services being dependent on face-to-face settings (such as small salons/barbershops and small family-owned carinderias just to name a few) and inability to integrate their services online due to lack of resources. Most of the businesses that closed near the university belt (where I live) are privately owned food stalls, stating that they closed because despite having online delivery service available, the income they generate isn't enough nor comes as close to what they would earn in the availability of the face-to-face settings, thus resulting to them not being able to sustain their business. Another factor was the issues of food supply coming from the agriculture and aquaculture market chain.

PHILIPPINE AGRICULTURE AND AQUACULTURE

In a study conducted by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on their assessment of their impact of COVID-19 on the food supply chains of the Philippines, they stated that *"Measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have severely affected livelihoods and the ability of households to purchase food"* adding that *"Some farmers and fisherfolk reported difficulties in securing inputs owing to the closure of agro-trading shops. The closure of banks and non-operation by*

financiers also affected some farmers and fisherfolk". Some fishermen reported that they have incurred massive income losses from fish spoilage due to the closure of several ice plants. Farmers also faced similar challenges as their fruit and vegetable goods started to rot as they could not send their produce to major cities due to nationwide pause on public transportation.

THE MEDICAL FRONT-LINERS IN 2020

As our country went back and forth on what kind of community quarantine each city would be placed under, in August of 2020, over 60 medical associates asked the government for a "time-out" as the nation's healthcare system has reached critical level due to the increasing number of patients that are being admitted every day. Medical front-liners were reported to have experienced extreme fatigue, insomnia, high levels of stress, depression and anxiety, all the while being in constant exposure to COVID positive patients. Hospitals were also severely understaffed due to the sudden influx on the number of patients that they now had to tend to compared to their usual numbers. Hospitals also experienced a shortage of medical equipment and necessary protective materials such as face masks and PPE's. By the end of 2020, the Department of Health reported that 13,629 front-liners had been infected by the virus, with 76 of them resulting in death.

ONE YEAR LATER

A year into lockdown, Valerio said that she still feels unsafe, *"And that's what scares me. That we may live our lives getting scared most of the time because we'll never know what might happen next. One day it's normal, the following day, it's not anymore."*

Kraft feels both nostalgic, yet also disappointed. *"Who would have thought that one month would turn into a whole year? And we're not even sure kung isa pang taon. Hopefully not! It's funny how none of us never thought things would turn out this way. We were so happy at first because we all thought it as a chance to rest. If we only knew it would turn out like this, sana sinulit ko pa lalo"*

In the span of one year, a lot of things have changed, but at the same time, a lot of things remained the same. As of this writing, there are 603,308 COVID-19 cases, with 546,293 recoveries and 12,545 deaths, and the numbers just keep growing and growing every day as quarantine guidelines started to become more lax in some places in the country. In February, new strains of the COVID-19 virus were found to have infected Filipinos.

VACCINE ARRIVAL, FINALLY!

On the bright side, last March 1, 600,00 doses of Sinovac vaccine arrived in the Philippines from Beijing, China, while 487,200 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine arrived last March 4. Pfizer vaccine is expected to arrive by the second quarter of 2021.

The first rollout of the vaccination has started for the medical frontliners.

THE STATUS OF OUR FRONT-LINERS

As the number of cases continue to rise, front-liners are pleading for people to remain in their homes and avoid unnecessary travels in order to stop the spread of the virus. Hospitals, especially smaller ones in the provinces are still short of personnel and protective equipment. Fortunately, generous people and organizations have donated funds, PPE's, facemasks and even food in order to help front-liners stay safe while tending to patients. Mental health organizations and clinics have also launched free mental health assistance and services for COVID-19 front-liners, in order to provide them emotional comfort and mental health care as they serve the people and put their lives on the line to save others.

SCHOOLS ARE STILL CLOSED, BUT THE STUDENTS ARE STANDING UP

A year later, here we are, still stuck at home, still taking classes online, with some schools already announcing that they will continue to hold online classes for the upcoming academic year, which starts on August. With the uncertainty regarding the opening of face-to-face classes, various student leaders and youth-led, non-government organizations (NGOs) have launched initiatives in order to help students who are in need of mental health assistance. From webinars to free guidance and counseling sessions, a lot of options have been made available for students for when they are feeling anxious or depressed.

Monetary and gadget donation drives have been rampant all-over social media as well, aiming to help students who are in need of gadgets and internet connections in order to proceed with their online classes. Some of which are students seeking to help out their fellow classmates who do not have functional devices for online classes, and even fundraisers to help those who are financially struggling to pay their tuition fees. But not only are these young leaders also aiming to provide help to their fellow students, but to their school management staff who were affected by the pandemic as well.

An example of which is The Kabalikat Initiative (@TheKabalikatPH on Twitter), a youth led organization whose goal is to conduct projects and donation drives for different communities. Some of their notable projects include "Project Servire", a monthlong donation drive for the non-teaching staff of Mater Carmeli School in Quezon City, who lost their jobs due to the pandemic; and "Project Kabalikat", which was launched during the aftermath of Typhoons "Ulysses" and "Rolly."

Not only are student leaders rising up to provide help in the education front, but also in the agricultural and aquaculture front as well.

HELPING OUT THE FARMERS AND FISHERFOLK

While the current situation and issues of farmers and fisherfolk remain the same, youth leaders have started initiatives in order to provide them assistance. An example of which is Proyekto Para sa Magsasaka't Mangingisda Malabanan and Opresyon or Proyekto Para Sa MAMA MO (@ppsmamamo on Twitter), a student-led fundraising initiative that aims to elevate and promote the rights and welfare of our Filipino farmers and fisherfolk by providing them the equipment they need. They are currently raising Php 120,000.00 in order to provide carabaos for 27 farmers from Barangay Pio in Porac, Pampanga.

THE RISE OF ONLINE BUSINESSES AND ONLINE EMPLOYMENT

Since everything is now online, business owners shifted their products to cater to this new setting in order to generate income. Food owners set up their menus on food delivery apps such as Grab and Food Panda, in order to reach more customers. While those who wish to sell other products such as school supplies, clothes, gadgets etc. set up their online shops on Shopee, Lazada, and Facebook Market. With the availability of online businesses and services, also came openings for online jobs. Openings for social media managers, online tutors, and other work from home jobs such as copywriting and art services have become rampant the past few months. While it isn't enough to cater to the millions of Filipinos who lost their jobs, it's a good sign that there are at least a couple of options that are starting to become available to those whose employment was affected by the pandemic.

WHEN WILL IT END?

Alvarez hopes that the pandemic would end soon and calls for better action from the government. "When will all of this end? We've been stuck in our homes for a year and things are becoming harder for some people. Opportunities are wasted, people are losing jobs, healthcare workers are tired, please for everyone's sake, let's do better."

HOPING FOR THE BEST

As of the moment, with the unpredictability of the virus, a lot of things are still uncertain, especially how our society will be able to adjust to the so called "new normal"; But looking back at the events of the past year, I am certain of one thing: that the Filipino people cares for their fellowmen; That no matter what crisis we face, we will always help each other and work together in order to obtain success. For now, the best that we can do is reach out to those in need, stay indoors where it's safe, and hope for the best; and that one day, hopefully less than a year from now, things can finally be as they were before.