

Episode 73: Reflecting on an unprecedented year

From work-life balance to spending their birthdays a bit differently than planned, students share how they have adjusted their lives to our current world.

Ethan Quezada and Yoko Vue

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MEGAN PALMER: 2020 has been a historic year, as I'm sure we've all heard it described. Last January, nobody could have predicted where we would be now. "In The Know" has been here through it all, covering the pandemic, the lockdown, George Floyd's killing, the summer of unrest, another remote semester and an election that left the world on the edge of its seat. We reported so much, and yet it still feels like there's so much more left to cover. Through it all, we are constantly searching for the student perspective, and how these local and global events affect the University of Minnesota community. So, that is how we'll be ending the semester — by reflecting on this unprecedented year with four fellow students. Here is Yoko and Ethan with their reflections.

INTRO MUSIC

YOKO VUE: Hello everyone, I'm Yoko Vue.

ETHAN QUEZADA: And I'm Ethan Quezada and you're listening to "In The Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

VUE: As we're ending this season and the semester, we spoke with four students on how they've adjusted. In a few words, this is how they would describe their semester.

ARMAN SARDA: I would say confusing.



MARYLENE WILLIAM: Insightfully educational.

AMY MA: I think I would say like yearning.

LOREAN MURRAY: Unpredictable.

QUEZADA: You just heard the voices of Arman Sarda, Marylene William, Amy Ma and Lorean Murray. We're going to hear more from each of these students about the challenges and changes they've adapted to this year.

NAT SOUND — FADE UP AND UNDER TRANSITIONAL MUSIC

QUEZADA: Amy Ma, the current student body president, is a fourth-year in Carlson majoring in management information systems and computer science. She's also involved in some cultural groups, as well as a business fraternity. Amy describes this semester as one full of yearning.

MA: I think a lot of this semester. I've spent my free time just thinking and, on one hand being grateful, and, on the other, being just really sad about everything that we left behind. I think there is hope, on its way. I mean, the vaccine is going through all the channels that it needs to go through. But it is just time lost and there is I think a sense of grief with that that's hard to describe.

QUEZADA: Along with that feeling of grief, Amy said she has newfound feelings of appreciation for the little things in life.

MA: Everyone had, not even if not necessarily like high hopes, but hopes that it would be a typical semester, And sometimes I look back at like, my pictures, and I'm like, 'Oh, shoot, I was so stressed about this.' But like, I was still able to see my friends and like to study in the library and sit in a coffee shop, right? And it's all those things that I think I never appreciated enough before.

I'm trying really hard to, I think to approach all this with a sense of empathy. Right now all of our biggest roles are still just to make it through this pandemic.

QUEZADA: As one can imagine, double majoring and being involved with student groups, while also stepping up to the plate as student body president, can be demanding to say the least. Amy mentioned work-life balance as being one of her biggest challenges this semester.

MA: I think the work-life balance piece is a really big thing. I think I often have too high of expectations, or I'm too hard on myself, so I feel like any moment that I'm not doing work, like I should be doing work. And I think the same thing happens with just all the aspects of your life is if you're out and about, you know, if somebody maybe goes like, 'Oh, like, we're gonna get together.' You want to come, but, no, I probably shouldn't. I should do my work. But then like, since it's there, you just go, or, suddenly you're like, 'Oh, food at home,' but they're going to restaurants so maybe I'll come with, and you have all those like spontaneous moments that are probably not good for you per se but also are so good for you just in terms of having fun and doing something that is not routine. And I think the hardest part for me right now is that everything feels so routine.

QUEZADA: An inability to relax is an obstacle to work-life balance that manifests itself in different ways, like a lack of spontaneity, or difficulty logging off.

MA: I feel like one piece of working from home and having your entire life just be at your desk is that sense of work-life balance or no matter what, there's always just more to do, and it's right there. So, I think shutting off has been really hard, especially during some of the really stressful times of the semester, like the election or when COVID cases have been really bad and continue to be really bad.

QUEZADA: Struggling to find a work-life balance is relatable to many students, including Marylene William, a third-year student studying management information systems.

WILLIAM: Two screens, twice the work, and I just completely need it. A lamp and like a little flower plant here just to motivate me and then my real plant, which I still need to water. But things like that, right. Getting yourself in the focusing mode in order to— cause you want to feel like you are not just chilling at home.

VUE: With a busy schedule, Marylene has made sure to prioritize time for herself.

WILLIAM: And for like mental health, I personally stand for that a lot, and I honestly think it's very important.

I just have a lot of self-time. I read books. I like getting to do face masks, like it's all over the place.

And I cook. So, I do a lot of things to spend time with myself when obviously I have so much going on.

VUE: As a transfer student, she's had to meet people in creative ways this semester.

WILLIAM: Starting a new school in a pandemic altered — also limits you socially. So, new people, new friends, new school, it becomes a challenge, so something I've really learned in my last few months, in this semester is kind of pushing myself out of my comfort zone, comfortably. I would actually meet people, make friends, you know, get their contact information. We would hang out, but pushing myself out of my comfort zone, I've been able to like meet friends who group meetings or through clubs or friends as friends, or like friends as relatives, you know.

VUE: Marylene turned 20 in October and couldn't celebrate like usual.

WILLIAM: I also couldn't necessarily celebrate my birthday because usually, I have a lot of people, I invite friends, I have get-togethers. But this year I've had to kind of hold off on that because you know, we're in quarantine. I don't know really — don't know where everyone's been.

VUE: If you celebrated a birthday during the pandemic, you may relate to having to change those plans. Arman Sarda, who has a September birthday, certainly did.

SARDA: Yeah, I was going to go on a climbing trip for my birthday, which we didn't get to do.

We were planning on going to South Dakota. There they have some cool rock out there called The Needles so we were going to go out there.

VUE: Arman is a third-year art major who enjoys photography, creating digital collages, and filmmaking. He's been making a short film for class and the lack of access to campus resources has made it harder to make a higher quality movie.

SARDA: Just like we don't get studio spaces anymore; we don't get lights or anything like that. So while I'm happy with how it's come so far, I feel like if I've been given access to like facility kits and stuff like that, I could have made something better.

VUE: Not getting all the typical educational benefits from virtual learning has been difficult for him.

SARDA: Since I'm an art student, most of my main classes didn't work super great for me. They required just like access to studios and machinery and stuff that I don't have access to outside of that.

VUE: His school life hasn't been the only thing impacted by the pandemic.

SARDA: I'm also a personal trainer at the Rec and that job has been affected pretty heavily by COVID as well. The RecWell just closed down again. So I meet online with my clients.

VUE: Given all of these challenges, he's learned about his needs and how to adapt.

SARDA: If I know, like I've been inside all day or something like that, then I try to make an effort to go outside, like at least once a day cause I know that just really helps my mood and stuff.

VUE: While Arman enjoys the outdoors, being able to go outside is also an important part of Lorean Murray's life as a track and field athlete.

MURRAY: In Jamaica, track and field is a big thing. So yeah, I've been doing it since I was like maybe seven.

QUEZADA: Lorean is a fourth-year student majoring in biology, society, and environment. Pre-pandemic, traveling was one of the best things about track and field.

MURRAY: Well, I like competing against other people. I think that's fun. Just like, especially at this level being a D1 athlete, we get to like travel a lot and go to different states and people, trying new food. Just experience, different environments, and different like scenery and stuff like that. I think that's really, really fun.

QUEZADA: For most athletes, including Lorean, things started to change once the pandemic became more prevalent.

MURRAY: So then we canceled our outdoor season for 2020. No practice, no traveling, no competitions. It was awful. I went from being so busy to not doing anything and then classes moved online. So, I was just inside. It was really hard to cope at first.

QUEZADA: The uncertainty of her future was a big stressor for Lorean during this semester.

MURRAY: Things have been changing and are still changing and like, it's hard to make plans for the future not knowing what's going to happen like tomorrow or next week.

QUEZADA: A resource that's been helpful for Lorean is the Sports Psychology Services, a counseling service for student-athletes and coaches at the U.

MURRAY: I met with like sports psych cause that was still going on and they really helped me to like, okay, although you might not have competition, I had to like find another motivation, like, you're still going to maintain fitness just in case it happens. It's better to be prepared than not to be prepared if we have a season.

QUEZADA: Lorean's coach took on a more familial role once everything went virtual.

MURRAY: To keep the team family spirit alive, we had virtual meetings every week to talk and play games or do some activities together. Yeah, cause he knew it was hard no socializing, no team dynamics. He was really trying to keep a family spirit alive.

QUEZADA: Although it's been a hard semester for her, one of Lorean's high points is becoming a direct care professional with ACR Homes.

MURRAY: What I do, on a daily basis, I administer medication to the residents that I take care of and basically I'm just a person of support and security and safety for them. And I help with like meal preparations, breakfast, lunch, dinner, ensuring that they're okay.

QUEZADA: Lorean was used to the fast-paced life, but she still found appreciation in her work with the elderly.

MURRAY: So just slowing down and moving at their piece is something that I've had to learn to do and it's a really humbling experience.

And it just makes me feel so warm inside like, oh my gosh, and when they smile, it's just the best thing ever. You're just like, wow.

QUEZADA: Students have encountered countless obstacles this year, but have managed to find comfort where they can.

VUE: Looking back, there have been many challenges during the first half of the school year, yet students have still found a way to adapt, and persevere.

FADE UP AND UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

PALMER: In other U news: Loring Pasta Bar in Dinkytown has revamped as a cafe-restaurant called Gray's; Mary Meyer, a pioneering Minnesota horticulturist of ornamental grasses is set to retire at the end of the year; and the University of Minnesota has approved a universal pass/fail option for all undergrad students on the Twin Cities campus. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you next year.