

# COVID-19

## A Personal Recollection

BY NICK WILLIAMS

### A Pandemic Begins

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization office in China was informed of a new respiratory illness of unknown origin. On January 15, 2020, the Japanese Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of the same illness outside of China. On January 17, 2020, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began screening passengers for symptoms of what was identified as a coronavirus. The first case in the United States was confirmed by the CDC on January 20, 2020. The media reported on the newly named Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a potentially serious health problem. I think the public had the belief that this was another health issue that the medical community would get under control, and all could quickly move on.

A community meeting that I planned to attend on Sunday, March 15, was canceled, and a board meeting on Wednesday, March 18, was canceled, both because of this new virus. The lease on my car was coming due on Friday, March 20. Since I had several hundred unused miles on the car, I decided to visit with my son and his family, in Minnesota, for a few days and return to turn the car in. I left on Thursday March 19.

That weekend, I learned that the number of COVID-19 cases had exploded in Michigan, while Minnesota was mildly threatened. On Monday, March 23, I learned that my car dealership was closed until further notice, canceling the necessary end-of-lease return.

Early in April, the number of cases in Minnesota started to catch up with Michigan's case count. Learning that my car dealership would reopen, I left for home on Sunday April 12. I planned to make the drive with one stop west of Chicago. The Oasis rest stop, usually full of travelers, was empty and the food vendors closed. The highway through downtown Chicago was empty; I made that drive back to Ypsilanti in record time. My lease car was returned to the dealership on April 17.

## The New Normal

I was introduced to Zoom videotelephony software for a board meeting on Wednesday, April 15. A volunteer road cleanup was canceled as was a sporting event scheduled for April 19 and a breakfast for volunteers. On Monday, May 4, I contacted the Ypsilanti District Library to help me with an organizational Zoom account, and it was expected that this would be the future of meetings.



Children go to school at home, 2020

Sporting events were either canceled or went on with empty grandstands. The Ypsilanti District Library closed as did museums and businesses that were not critical. Schools closed and children were now learning in front of a computer at home. Employees worked from home when their offices closed. Many stayed closed for up to sixteen months. To survive, restaurants offered drive-by pickup.

I employed the same person to cut my lawn for many years, and I got to know him quite well. One day, a different person arrived to cut my grass. When Daniel again didn't show up the next week, I asked the crew leader where he was, and he told me Daniel was sick. When the lawn crew arrived the next week, I learned Daniel had

died of COVID. He was fifty-some years old.

At about the same time, I learned that an over-sixty friend I worked with had also died of COVID-19. Two of my sister-in-law's ninety-plus family members also died from COVID in quick succession. The United States eventually reached one million reported deaths from COVID on May 17, 2022. Expecting that many deaths were not reported, the real number at that time was probably much higher.

Closed signs appeared on many Ypsilanti businesses. Board games and puzzles were hard to find in stores. In March of 2020, employees started working from home either part-time or full-time. Not being able to spend money in other ways, homeowners planned upgrades to their homes. What was in high demand during our normal economy was no longer in high demand. "Logistics" became a household word as the movement of goods slowed down locally, nationally, and internationally. Shortages appeared in grocery stores. You were never sure what you would be able to buy. The availability of paper towels and toilet paper was always uncertain.

Human contact while grocery shopping immediately became an issue. At the

beginning of the pandemic I shopped at Ypsilanti's Food Co-op, which offered drive-by pickup. Instacart, an online grocery shopping service formed in 2012, suddenly became very popular. I found I could sometimes get same-day delivery with Instacart, but other times I had to wait until the next day. People became fearful that home delivery of food would bring



Empty store shelves, 2020

the virus to their homes. It was first recommended that purchasers leave the food on their front porch for a specified time to allow the virus to lose effectiveness. This was quickly discovered to be unnecessary, with people realizing it posed a minimal risk.

The United States closed its border with many countries, including Canada. Canada did the same to the United States. It wasn't until the summer of 2022 that both borders were back to normal.

Mask wearing became the primary protection from COVID-19. The virus exploded so fast that commercially produced masks were in short supply. Those with sewing skills made cloth masks for their family members. Some expanded their production of cloth masks and started small businesses.

An N95 filtering facepiece respirator became the most desired mask because it met the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health standard for air filtration. It filtered at least 95% of airborne particles. A KN95 mask, made in China, was expected to do the same and became the second choice.

## Hope Appears

When COVID-19 first became a pandemic, the news media reported that it would take years to develop a vaccine. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use on December 11, 2020. It was marketed by Pfizer, Inc., and called the Pfizer-Biotech COVID-19 vaccine. A second Moderna COVID-19 vaccine received emergency use approval on December 18, 2020. Both were two-dose vaccines. Pfizer's wait for the second dose was twenty-one days, and Moderna's wait was twenty-eight days. A third Johnson and Johnson one-dose vaccine received emergency FDA approval later.

After FDA emergency approvals, the Pfizer vaccine was the first to become available,

early in 2021. The Washtenaw County Health Department, St. Joseph Hospital, and local pharmaceutical chains accepted names to be put on a list to receive the vaccine. Senior citizens and immunocompromised people were given priority for the first shot.

I got my name placed on the Washtenaw County, Lenawee County, CVS Pharmacy, and St. Joseph Hospital lists. I waited while many of my friends were



“Mask on Ypsi” yard sign, 2020

called for their first dose. Some called in for the vaccine were younger than me. The worrisome wait for that first dose was frustrating. One day, a work colleague who lived in Livonia and was already vaccinated called to tell me he had found out that he could make an appointment for his first dose, and did I want the appointment? I would have to drive to Northville to a pharmacy in a Meijer store. For me, being unvaccinated was like having a terminal illness. Receiving my first Pfizer shot on February 9, 2021, was my idea of a miracle cure. I got my second Pfizer dose on March 2, 2021. The CDC Vaccination Record Card became a ticket to events that limited attendance to those protected with two-dose vaccinations!

Like the traditional flu, COVID-19 became less of a problem during the warm weather summer months. I planned a European trip for September 2021 to visit friends. It was reported that the protection provided by the vaccinations would wear off over time, and the CDC announced a first booster would become available in late August or September. It appeared the first booster would be too late for me. A friend, who also planned to travel by air in September, told me it was available at an Ann Arbor Walgreen pharmacy in mid-August. I jumped at this opportunity and boarded my Europe-bound plane much relieved.

During the summer and fall of 2021, the European Union required proof of vaccination for entering all countries. The United States required documentation of a negative test within twenty-four hours of a return flight. Getting ready to return home, I found a laboratory that tested and returned results in less than twenty-four hours. Knowing tests sometimes returned false positives, I spent an anxious twenty-four hours before I boarded my return flight.

I received my second booster in April 2022. Early in May, my nephews and a niece in Plymouth invited me to lunch. Like most extended families, we do not see each other

often. It was an enjoyable lunch, and it extended to four hours! Two days later, I came down with a mild fever, sore throat, and I felt very tired. I tested positive for COVID-19! The mild fever disappeared after one day, but exhaustion continued well past testing negative. I was to present a eulogy for my brother-in-law at his memorial service five days after testing positive. Thanks to technology, I was able to eulogize him via Zoom.

After seven days with COVID, I started daily testing. On the tenth day I was finally negative. My case was mild, and I was thankful that my vaccinations had kept the worst of COVID at bay.

During the summer of 2022, life for the most part returned to normal. Approximately 75% of shoppers gave up wearing masks. I made a reservation online to visit a historic site in Pennsylvania. The reservation did not mention COVID-19 precautions. The night before the visit, I was in a Pennsylvania motel and thought to check their website for up-to-date news. I was surprised to read that proof of vaccination was required for entry into the site. Fortunately, I was able to call a neighbor and have her enter my house. She found, photographed, and sent me my proof-of-vaccination card. I entered the historic site relieved, only to learn that their website was out of date and proof of vaccination for admission was no longer required.

### **An Uncertain Future**

I see my primary-care physician early in the fall every year for an annual checkup and to get my flu shot. My October 2022 visit included my third COVID booster shot. Also, during my semiannual visit with my pulmonologist, in October 2022, he said the future of COVID is unknown. More severe mutations could show up or it might slowly disappear. The medical community cannot predict what the future holds.

Currently COVID-19 symptoms are mild for the vaccinated but can be serious, even leading to death, for the unvaccinated. For protection people must continue to wash their hands and it is advised to still wear a mask in some circumstances. Most important is to make sure your COVID-19 vaccinations are up to date. Approximately 79% of the U.S. population has received at least one dose of the vaccine. This percentage varies slightly depending upon the reporting agency.

### **A Note on Sources**

All images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

### **About the Author**

Nick Williams is a longtime Ypsilanti resident.