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Sylvanna Gross ’23

Reflections on the Fall 2020 Semester

At 9 a.m. on November 2 I found myself laughing harder than I thought possible during a Torts class. We were discussing strict liability for animals, and one of our classmates had experience with exotic species and was explaining the high probability there was a tiger within fifty minutes of us. I wasn’t laughing at the content—I learned quite a lot that day and found it extremely useful for my exams—but at the absurdity of where I was and what I was doing. Not once in my life did I expect to be living in Williamsburg, Virginia, attending law school online while in my pajamas two feet away from my bed and listening to someone’s experience on cost internalization for zoos.

It was the moment that I fell in love with where I was and what I was doing.

William & Mary Law School exudes a quiet charm that permeates your core being. It is a feeling of comfort, support, gratefulness and pleasure at being surrounded by some of the kindest, strongest, and most intelligent people I have ever met. Adjusting to this new world has been challenging on so many levels, and attending law school online is less than ideal. But the resiliency of character that my classmates exude fuels my ability to approach the circumstances with (leveled) optimism. I think we all are immensely struggling to balance this new normal while (attempting) to understand introductions to our complex legal system, but my classmates and their experiences and their thoughts and their perspectives and their approaches to problem solving make the situation more palatable.

Starting law school in of itself is a challenge, but starting online law school during a pandemic seemed insurmountable. I am so grateful for the community my professors cultivated and the undying respect I have for my classmates. I was told before matriculating that William & Mary Law is known for the community, and I can’t wait to tell future students that this couldn’t be more true.

How did you keep yourself healthy and grounded?

I did two very important things: I shut off all communication for at least an hour every day, and I developed my ability to accept an unfinished “to-do” list.

The former was physically important. Having to take classes inside your room necessitates actively forcing yourself to make it outside your home at least once a day. Whereas if we were
in person we would all at least be taking the time to get dressed, go to your car, drive to the school... even those five minutes you may spend walking to or from your car really matter. So either running or pilates was necessary to get out of your chair, and if I was feeling tired, reading a book for fun also helped break up the monotony of sitting at your desk all day. My only requirement is that I had to spend at least one hour not looking at a screen.

The latter was mentally important. Lots of law students struggle with the vastness of information that they must read, learn, digest, process, and then reflect on each day. By reducing the pressure to “finish” that process every day, I let myself breathe and actually enjoy what I was learning. If I only read, but didn’t quite understand, I would push that until the next day. Giving myself space to recognize I couldn’t always get everything done ensured I could remain mentally alert to tackle each day.

**What are your hopes for spring semester and beyond?**

If this past year has taught me anything it’s that anything is possible and what you expect can change in an instant. I hope for the smaller things: getting to take a class in the law school building, getting to shake my professors’ hands, having the opportunity to meet my classmates in person and so forth. I hope for the larger things: a summer internship I love, good grades in my classes, and good health for everyone in the William & Mary Law School community. Regardless of what I hope for the spring semester and beyond, I know that even if everything changes again I will feel supported by my professors and classmates to tackle the new challenge.