A LIFETIME BOND WITH ALMA MATER

By Thomas G. Burke, Ph.D. ‘88C, ‘71G

When I stepped onto the Queens, NY, campus of St. John’s University as a 17-year-old freshman in the Fall of 1964, I had no idea that the University would still be an important part of my life more than five decades later. I have discovered that no matter where you go or what you do, the St. John’s family bond is forever. I grew up in Queens, and like most of the University’s students then and now, was the first in my family to attend college. I was very active on campus as a founding brother of the Epsilon Theta chapter of the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity and involved in a host of other activities. I earned an undergraduate degree in psychology from St. John’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and a master’s in clinical psychology from the College’s graduate division, later earning a Ph.D. and an additional master’s at other institutions.

I had a wonderfully satisfying career in higher education, beginning as an adjunct instructor at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) in Old Westbury, NY, and eventually being named Senior Vice President for Student Services. After 27 years at NYIT, I decided that it was time to return to the University that had given me so much. In 2004, I joined St. John’s Division of Institutional Advancement as Senior Project Manager. I had a wide range of responsibilities, from crafting speeches for the President and senior members of the University’s administration, to creating print and electronic solicitation messages, to writing the majority of articles for the St. John’s University Alumni magazine.

Being back at alma mater was absolutely terrific. It felt like I had never left, and it was fun to interact with some of the professors that I had as a student. Having the opportunity to work closely with people on all levels, from the President to students, reinforced for me the uniqueness that permeates every aspect of the University. St. John’s is truly a special place.
As the global health crisis continues, we have all been forced to think differently. Differently in a way that has been challenging but at the same time rewarding. I say rewarding because of how the entire St. John’s community came together during the fall semester to ensure that we could safely welcome our students back onto campus for a new academic year, albeit in lower numbers, and stay open for the entire semester. I wish to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to our students, faculty, administrators, and staff for their resilience and commitment to our University.

There is no question that the Fall 2020 semester was very different from our usual Fall semesters. Students traditionally immersed in classroom activities on campus with their fellow students found themselves taking a mixture of in-person courses, rotating hybrid courses, and online courses from their homes. Despite this mixture of course modalities we are proud that we were able to provide almost 70% of our students at least one in-person, on-campus experience during the Fall in order to foster the community spirit that is so important. This speaks to the hard work by faculty, administrators, and staff and we have continued these efforts so that students were also able to select a spectrum of different course modalities for the Spring 2021 semester.

Health and safety is our primary focus as we continue through the Spring semester. To this end we have established a clinical laboratory on campus offering extensive COVID-19 testing for students and employees so that we can identify and trace any new infections. This is not a simple task but such an important one as it instills a sense of security and peace of mind within our campus community.

This Spring marks a new beginning at St. John’s as we welcomed our new President, Rev. Brian J. Shanley, O.P. to campus. His wisdom, expertise, and vision will set a new and exciting course for our University, bringing us to new heights. We are so thankful for Fr. Shanley.

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I administered the COVID-19 Readiness (Preparedness) Assessment between September and December of 2020 to assess the preparedness of constituents in some of the hardest hit communities in Queens, NY: Corona, Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights. The survey was disseminated to residents in the community by elected officials and other community leaders through social media posting, newsletters, emails, and word of mouth.

Of the 651 participants who responded, 516 were qualified to participate in the study, and 306 completed the survey (totaling a 59 percent response rate). The results reveal that there is a significant association between the lack of preparedness in these communities. Some of the shortfalls include limited COVID-19 prevention health education, food insecurity, restricted isolation capacity, limited medication access, lack of social support, and inadequate sanitation resources. A large majority of participants (62 percent) learned something new about preparing for the pandemic by completing the survey, which suggests a wide gap in COVID-19 health education and information targeting residents living in crowded, urban housing conditions.

Furthermore, significant preparedness disparities were discovered among racial and ethnic groups. The results showed LatinX participants were drastically less prepared for the second wave of COVID-19 than other racial groups. In addition, study participants who were not prepared in one area for the pandemic were more likely not to be prepared in other areas as well. For example, the results noted that “participants who do not have someone else to run errands were 2.5 times less likely to avoid preparing foods when sick.” The disparities uncovered were due to social determinant factors such as low income, and a lack of education and social support in the community.

There was a clear indication that health information and other pandemic prevention resources were not getting to the community. Now that we have passed the one-year anniversary of the pandemic, more strategic health education and resource-driven efforts must be tailored to specific communities to enhance preparedness.

Note: Dr. Gunnness formerly served as Senior Officer with the US Public Health Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he conducted disease surveillance and epidemiological investigations on highly infectious communicable diseases, such as MERS-CoV, MDK-TB, and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.