

Mary Kohlmann: In search of a flat white and a surprise

During a lockdown, how does a campus community cope?

A series of vignettes from different members of the LSE community



In search of a flat white and a surprise

Mary Kohlmann, an MSc (IDHE) student in the LSE Department of International Development, ponders the irony of studying about emergencies while living through one



Hi, my name is Mary Kohlmann, I am an MSc student in International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies and I am home in Swansboro, North Carolina, in the South-East United States.

Which part of your day to do you most look forward to?

The part of my day I look forward to most consistently, I would say, is a walk that I take after dinner. I am in coastal North Carolina, as I said, and it is so beautiful here in the springtime, which I usually don't get to see, I've usually lived elsewhere. So I enjoy taking a few minutes after dinner to go for a walk with my music in, check out a little bit, and enjoy spring. I also really like spending time on Zoom with groups of friends, that in some cases I haven't lived in the same place as for a number of years, you know, we get to have drinks together every week now and that's been really, really lovely. So I think it's been nice to balance out, you know, reading about all the horrible things that have been going on, and doing some work in relation to those things, with just very simple, in-the-moment stuff, on the days that I've been able to make that happen.

What have you found challenging during lockdown?

The first thing I've found most challenging, I think, continuing my work and trying to deepen my work as we move into the research part of the year, without social support has of course been really difficult. I chose this programme partly for the amazing people who would be studying it alongside me and doing this without daily interaction with classmates, with faculty, with just people generally, who aren't my quarantine buddies, is a little less fun, and a little bit less engaging. It's hard to remember why you are doing research, why research about specific things that are not happening now matters, at a time when the things that are happening now seem so rigid. So I think that has been tough, I've been trying to pace myself, and to keep in touch, where I can, with people who are

doing similar work, as a reminder that it doesn't feel like the things outside this house are real, but they are, and there will be – the work I am doing will hopefully serve that in the long-term.

How do you keep in touch with the LSE community?

I've kept in touch with the LSE community by reaching out where I can, I've spent a lot of time with people I'm doing projects with, we've tried to dig deeper into those projects rather than pull back from them, mostly because honestly they're an excuse to get on zoom and talk about something of substance with other people. That has felt as important as the content of the work on some days, so finding reasons to keep showing up in conversation with interesting people and keeping to those commitments has felt important. I've been on a couple of text threads where people have been sharing photos of things that they're baking and cooking, a lot of extremely enthusiastic amateur cooks among the LSE contingent, as with everywhere else right now, so I'm really enjoying all sorts of baking photos.

What do you miss most about being on campus?

I miss flat whites, we do not have them in America, so even if I could go to a coffee shop, that coffee shop would not serve me a flat white, pour one out for Garrick, pour one out for the Australians, if you guys made that up – they're wonderful and I miss them. On a more substantive note, I miss being in a community with other people, you can't really be surprised when your only conversations come via Zoom. You don't have that element of running into somebody without meaning to, and having a conversation that changes the way you think about something. Anything that you get in terms of conversation or connection outside of your quarantine circle you have to be so intentional about seeing out, and there's something kind of boring about that. It's just not as interesting as walking around the world and seeing what happens. So, I feel incredibly lucky to be home and safe and to have my loved ones mostly in the same position – knock on wood – but, you know, I think there's a lot we all miss.

Would you like to share some words of advice or your personal mantra that gets you through lockdown?

I don't know that I have a lot of advice. I need some advice if anyone would like to send some! But I think what I've found helpful on a personal level is honesty. I think that most of us are a little bit more open than usual to being honest about what we're thinking and feeling and experiencing, just because we're all going through so much and the days that I've been able to call up a friend and just really lay out the good, bad and ugly of where I am, that's opened up more space for connection and has made me feel a little bit more functional. On the work front, I think that finding concrete ways to help the community that I'm in and communities far away from me, when I've been able to do that, that's felt helpful. I think for those of us especially who are doing service-focussed degrees, this is a horrible situation that none of us could have predicted, but it's the kind of thing that our education is for, and finding ways to contribute even if they are not drawing on that education in any specific way, just finding what is needed, and trying to do that thing in the immediate circles that you are part of, those are the days when I've felt best, for sure. And, you know, we're all going to keep going and see what happens!