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## **Pandemic reflections: Stories of National FFA student leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Pandemic Reflections: Stories of National FFA Student Leaders During the COVID-19

Pandemic Oral History Project

An Honors College Project Presented to the Faculty of the Undergraduate College of Health and

Behavioral Studies

James Madison University

By Tess Seibel

December 2022

Author Note

The researcher served as a National FFA Officer during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nov 2019-Nov 2020). During this year, the officer witnessed firsthand the impacts on individuals as events were canceled and plans adjusted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one of five individuals representing the 760,000 students of the National FFA Organization during the pandemic, the researcher is aware of the personal and professional impacts and lessons learned because of this leadership experience. The experience of leading and being impacted by the same event as those who will be sharing their experience establishes rapport of the researcher with those who will be interviewed as part of this project. The author included a self-recorded oral history video as part of this project.

## **Dedication**

This oral history project is dedicated to all who led during the COVID-19 Pandemic: teachers, students, parents, staff, and supporters. Every letter written, encouraging text sent, late night put in, phone call to check in, moment spent watching convention in the living room, mattered. Every action taken has gotten us here, and that collective strength is something worth celebrating.

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## Preface

Annually, the National FFA Organization elects officers at the local, state, and national level to lead over 860,000 student members. These youth leaders help advance the organization and accomplish its mission: “FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 2022). Typically, the responsibilities of officers include conducting leadership workshops with students in middle and high school classrooms, hosting conventions and conferences and meeting with agriculture industry and education specialist stakeholders, among other tasks.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the role of National FFA leaders, and these individuals were tasked with leading in ways different than in the past. Notably, conventions, conferences and events were transitioned to virtual platforms, competitive events were canceled completely or altered in some way and stakeholder engagement was conducted online.

This project tells those stories, the stories of those who led the National FFA Organization through the COVID-19 pandemic, both at state and national levels. This collection contributes to a larger historical record of COVID-19 and the leadership efforts that were made. These are the stories of a younger generation, individuals aged 18-23, who were tasked to step up and lead others through an event that will impact most for decades to come.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Dr. Christina Lam, project advisor, and project readers, Dr. Erika Sawin and Mr. Blaze Currie. You all have helped tell these stories and your guidance is invaluable.

Thank you to Mr. Landon Arnell, Mr. Noah Berning, Ms. Stephanie Bushnell, Ms. Miriam Hoffman, Mr. Nathan Linke, Ms. Anna Mathis, Ms. McKenna Quirk, and Ms. Elizabeth Sturgis for sharing their stories and experiences as part of this project. It was an honor to bear witness to the strength, commitment and heart of these individuals that ultimately helped guide the National FFA Organization through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you to my family, teammates, mentors, friends, and supporters: you all have made me who I am today, and I am incredibly thankful for your influence.

## **Abstract**

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were felt by most every individual in the world, and the effects of the pandemic will have implications for years to come. Even still, it becomes necessary to capture the work and impacts of this life experience of those who lived and led during such a time. The National FFA Organization, with its student leadership, continued to deliver its mission of the organization during the pandemic. This project aimed to develop a digital narrative to contribute to the historical record of FFA officers' experiences in the National FFA Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals who served as an officer (must have served as either a State or National FFA Officer) during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years. Participants self-identified as interested in participating in this project via a survey advertised on social media platforms. Individuals were intentionally selected to collect a variety of experiences and stories.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded, and transcripts were reviewed for emerging themes. A final digital narrative was created based on the synthesis of themes across all interviews. Emergent themes included (1) initial sense of detachment and lack of relevancy to leaders (2) initial impacts and thoughts (3) emotional impacts (4) operational impacts (5) loss of a dream (6) coping and (7) lessons learned. The final digital narrative was uploaded to YouTube for public access. Further discussion questions and areas for future investigation were identified within each theme.



## **Background**

Presently, research and data around the COVID-19 pandemic is currently being conducted. Although the impacts of the pandemic on State and National FFA Officers, or the National FFA Organization for that matter, have not been conducted, there is literature surrounding potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Generation Z, those born after 1997 (Dimock, 2019).

In his book, *The Pandemic Population*, Dr. Tim Elmore examines both the negative and positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Generation Z (2020). Negative outcomes could include the normalization of isolation, the normalization of panic and anxiety, and the normalization of a scarcity mindset. Potential positive outcomes could include the expansion of resourcefulness and innovation, the expansion of saving and giving and the expansion of responsive service workers (Elmore, 2020). This project is a compilation of the experiences of Generation Z student leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, the themes that will emerge from the analysis of the oral history videos of this project are not defined currently. This gives particular importance to the work of this project, as it will contribute to a larger narrative around the impacts of COVID-19 on the youth of the time.

State and National FFA Officers are elected to serve their membership at the state association and national levels, respectively. Typically, these individuals are between 18-23 years old at the time of their officer year and represent the FFA organization at local, state, and national events, working with student members of the organization, engaging with stakeholders and hosting conferences, camps, and conventions.

This population was selected as they were the student leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. As they were in an elected leadership role, they were involved in the decision-making

process around canceling events, adjusting program delivery methods, and mentoring students. From an analysis standpoint, this group is particularly fascinating as they are members of the generation that will be shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, being tasked to balance their own understanding of the circumstances of the pandemic while also leading others through it. Elmore defines this subset of Generation Z as the “parentetical population” (2020). These are individuals who were coming of age (17-22) during the pandemic, many of whom feel that life was postponed just as they were starting out (Elmore, 2020). The intersection of coming of age while leading others through an unprecedented event is one that is of particular interest explored in this digital narrative.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Digital Storytelling**

This project employed digital storytelling, or the art of capturing described human experiences in a digital format (Geek, 2018), to capture the experiences of interview participants. It was determined that capturing video interviews (rather than just audio) would help convey the non-verbal language of the storytellers and best capture the lived experiences with their associated emotions. It was also important to the researcher that video files be produced, rather than de-identified transcripts, to maintain the humanity and personalization of each individual impact of the shared lived experience.

### **Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

This project was approved as exempt by the JMU Institutional Review Board. Inclusion criteria for the videos includes individuals who served as either a State or National FFA Officer in the academic years 2019-2020 or 2020-2021, ensuring that they were in a leadership position during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, individuals must be over 18 years old and agree to the terms of the consent form.

Exclusion criteria for this project is anyone under 18 years of age/minor and those not willing to consent to the audio recorded interview.

### **Recruitment Process**

The researcher utilized social media platforms to invite individuals to be considered to participate in the data collection project. A graphic outlining the overall goal of the project, “to record oral histories of individuals who served as State and National FFA Officers during the COVID-19 Pandemic” was included as were details about how to indicate interest in project participation. This graphic was posted on the researcher’s personal Instagram and Facebook

accounts as well as in a private group on Facebook with members who are present and past State FFA Officers. A survey was created on QuestionPro that interested individuals completed to self-identify to share their experience of serving as an officer during the COVID-19 pandemic per a survey on social media. This survey checks inclusion criteria (year of officer service, etc. as outlined previously) in addition to availability for a pre-interview date.

Those interested in participating in the oral history project completed a pre-interview to verify their eligibility to participate in this project and that they met inclusion criteria.

### **Interview Process**

After pre-interviews were completed, 10 individuals were selected to complete in-depth oral history interviews after care to include a diversity of experience and background. Individuals were asked to confirm their interest in completing the project by completing consent and deed of gift agreements. Eight individuals returned the consent forms and consequently completed an interview for the project. The researcher conducted a self-oral history experience to capture her experience serving as a National FFA Officer during the pandemic for inclusion in the project. She utilized the same interview template as the other participants and reflected on her personal responses to the questions. All nine individuals consented to interviews being made publicly available.

### **Initial Theme Analysis**

The researcher listened to each video and used a closed captioning feature on Zoom to generate interview transcripts. Interview transcripts were read individually prior to analysis. Each participant has the ability to review their transcript. The researcher created initial codes of interview transcripts and identified the following themes: (1) initial sense of detachment and lack of relevancy to leaders (2) initial impacts and thoughts (3) emotional impacts (4) operational

impacts (5) loss of a dream (6) coping and (7) lessons learned. Quotes from the video interviews were grouped by theme. The following section includes the emergent themes and discussion for each theme.

## **Emergent Themes and Discussion**

### **Overall Theme: Initial Sense of Detachment and Lack of Relevancy to Leaders**

Early on, individuals were detached from COVID-19 and its impacts. The pandemic seemed like a problem in another place and lacked relevancy to the lives of these student leaders in its earliest stages. Interestingly, in a time that was uncertain, there was a sense of certainty, that surely, the COVID-19 pandemic would not impact *us*. Due to its lack of impact on the day-to-day lives of the leaders, the seriousness of the pandemic appeared to be lacking at first.

#### **Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: “We tried to hold to that April 7<sup>th</sup> day, and I think it wasn't until midway through March that we finally had to decide, yeah, we can't do it, it's not going to happen, and so we pushed it back to a TBD date because we still wanted to have something in person. And I think that it wasn't until the end of April that the decision was finally made for us that we couldn't have anything in person, that we had to go virtual.”

ELIZABETH: “Now, COVID had started to be a thing, I guess, around that time, and so everybody was kind of chatting about it, and I remember texting with some different adults within the state about like, what do you think is going to happen with this event, with the boot camp? Are we going to have it still? And I specifically remember one adult text me back, and he had said, ‘I think it'll be okay, it'll be gone before then, there's no way that they cancel this.’”

STEPHANIE: “I think back in November, December, we were starting to look at other options of where we wanted to travel in the spring because typically that trip would take place in March, and so that was really the first experience we had with Coronavirus, and certainly we didn't take it very seriously because we didn't think it was going to impact our state officer year.”

ANNA: “I can't remember what state it was, but one of the earliest state conventions of the year had been moved virtually, and I remember sharing it on Facebook with this whole, big like, ‘I'm so sorry for these the officers, that's terrible’ without knowing that in 2 weeks, that would be the case for everybody, and me. So, it started off very like, ‘This isn't going happen to you, it'll all pass over in two weeks.’”

TESS: “It just seemed like this other thing that was in another place, and I wasn't too concerned about it.”

NOAH: “One of our bus drivers said like, ‘Hey? So, you guys know, like the COVID thing is getting serious,’ and you know, kid from Indiana, I really didn't expect a whole lot of things come out of that.”

## **Discussion**

The seriousness of events and happenings of the world may not be taken seriously until an individual themselves, or someone with whom they have a personal relationship with, is impacted. In leadership, leading with empathy is commonly discussed. Certainly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders were truly able to lead with empathy as those who they were leading were going through a similar challenge. According to Kock et al., (2019), leaders will have different degrees of empathy with different constituents; those who share similar life experiences may be able to lead more empathetically (Kock et al., 2019). This means that, in theory, more empathy was able to be applied from leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic

because of living through a similar life experience as their followers as compared to a typical year. The question is, then, how do organizations develop empathetic leaders in typical circumstances in which the leader does not share a similar experience as those who they are leading? Is this even possible? Further questions for investigation include: What is the benefit of empathetic leadership? Can empathy be a hindrance to effective leadership?

### **Overall Theme: Initial Impacts and Thoughts**

Change happened extremely quickly when COVID-19 started impacted citizens of the United States in March of 2020. For some, maintaining a sense of optimism, that things would improve, was the initial thought. For all, though, a sense of uncertainty hallmarked that time.

### **Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: “And so we pretty well just put everything on hold for that time and tried to figure out, you know, is an in-person convention even something we can have at this point?”

ANNA: “Then my college sent me home. So, we got the email like that morning and within 3 hours we were all being sent home, and so you know, as the COVID news happened, everything just started progressing.”

TESS: “In a matter of two days, I went from sitting in a hotel lobby eating some oatmeal, watching the news to being sent home and everything was being canceled. So, we went home.”

NOAH: “I think it was March 13th when they told us, like, ‘Hey, we're going to send you home for 2 weeks, you know, you're not going to see your teammates for a while.’”

NATHAN: “I suppose for a month there it was just kind of a wondering, “What are we going to do? What is going to happen?’ Because nobody knew it was going on. Nobody knew what the next month, or even the next year, was going to look like at that point.”

ELIZABETH: “We all just had a really optimistic outlook on COVID, and that it would be going away prior to state office starting.”

MCKENNA: “I wasn't sure what the future was going to look like and if we would even need a state officer team like, was there even going to be an election?”

### **Discussion:**

Typically, State and National FFA Officers followed a prescribed plan of operations and events from year-to-year. Although sometimes varied, officers are guided by an adult/staff member who sets their schedule, communicates details and prepares them for events. Some individuals thrive in this structured environment while others find it limiting. The rapidness of change that resulted from the COVID-19 Pandemic, especially in its early stages, created a sense of ambiguity and instability around the typical structure of the officer obligations. According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), trauma can be characterized by circumstances that impact an individual's way of understanding the world. Certainly, by this definition, leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic may have experienced a somewhat traumatic catapulting into a world in which everything was different, and nothing was certain. This begs the question, What was the impact of rapid change on these individuals? Does rapid change impact the ability to dwell and process what was happening? Further questions for investigation include: What is the impact of ambiguity on leadership? What about the materials and solutions that are produced during that time? Does ambiguity foster or hinder creativity?

### **Overall Theme: Emotional Impacts**

These leaders were elected to serve students, and clearly, the change in delivery of programming was emotionally challenging for them. Contrasting what is and what could be is



emotionally devastating. It wasn't just the leaders who were impacted by the changes of COVID-19. Every person was touched by the pandemic in some way, from teachers to students to parents. Leaders carried the emotions of those who they were leading with them.

**Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: "As we were watching it unfold, it made me proud to see that we were able to do as much as we did with the resources we had, but it's also kind of bittersweet, you know, watching it unfold on the screen still makes you think of, you know, those people that would have been watching it unfold on screen on live on stage."

ELIZABETH: "We were grieving the loss of a state convention that could have been and recognitions that were well deserved for our students that we weren't able to provide them."

STEPHANIE: "I actually really struggled to come up with the right message to deliver through my retiring address, because what kind of message of hope can you bring people when they're confined to their homes and when the world is so uncertain? I think I really struggled because I didn't know if the words I was going to say were going to mean enough to people watching from home."

ANNA: "Our students just need encouragement. I remember thinking to myself, like every day, 'How can I give people encouragement? How can I give people hope when I don't have any?'"

LANDON: "If I had a normal year, you could say, I could have been there in person for so much more, and it's like, could I have impacted more kids lives? Or could I have taught more kids about the impact that ag could have in their lives, or that it does have in their lives, every single day 3 times a day? And so that was the hardest part personally, is just kind of battling with myself."

MIRIAM: “Some days and I found it was often more difficult to see the value in what I was doing. I often base a lot of the how, of how I evaluate my success in an experience with students, often I would base on how I feel, or like the energy in the room, and that was a lot more difficult to do.”

TESS: "How do you continuously be okay with the fact that your hopes get up, you know, for a minute? Like ‘Oh, this is going to be over by this date,’ or ‘Oh, like you know, we're holding out like, come on like it's going to be fine in July. You guys. don't have to worry, right, like there's no way national convention going to get cancelled, that's never happened right? Besides world wars, but don't worry that was you know, 60-70 years ago, don't worry.’ But it was this constant state of being okay and hoping and then having it taken away.”

NOAH: “Literally like, whenever you go downstairs, you know at home. and you look in your parents’ eyes, and like they can literally just like there's like, ‘I literally cannot understand the pain that you're going through right now.’ it's just it's hard to kind of express.”

ANNA: “But at the time we had no idea what to do, and we were rewriting the playbook, trying to keep students engaged. And then another facet of that is, teachers were really struggling.”

TESS: “I realized that at the same time that I was losing my dream in some ways, like every state convention was a loss of something through national office for our team, these officers were losing that turn as well.”

MCKENNA: “We didn't want to focus too much on the pandemic at the time because we knew that that's all the students were thinking about. They were all online for their classes, they couldn't see their friends, they couldn't see their teachers and it was their entire life.”

**Discussion:**

Within FFA, the term “servant leader” is often used to describe those serving as officers. It has been argued by some, however, that these officers, in typical circumstances, are not truly servant leaders. According to “Servant Leadership: A Systematic Review and Call for Future Research,” “Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). This group exemplifies the qualities of servant leadership at its core. While dealing with devastating losses personally, the concerns of those who they were leading were also front of mind. The question that arises based on this is, beyond a devotion towards something greater than self, what qualities did these individuals possess that allowed them to continue to serve their constituents even in emotionally challenging times? Was it perseverance, passion, or fortitude? How do we foster and develop this quality within future leaders?

Related, leaders carry the stories of their constituents with them. What does honoring these stories look like? How do leaders carry the stories of those who they lead with them while also protecting their emotional well-being?

### **Overall Theme: Operational Impacts**

Typical officer responsibilities include hosting conventions, conferences, and events for membership, attending middle and high schools to deliver leadership workshops, and engaging with supporters and stakeholders to advance the organization and its goals. Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, these events all took place in person and were attended by tens of thousands of people. Life went virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what wasn't done virtually had to

be extremely thought out. Conventions were transitioned to online platforms, workshops were hosted via Zoom and restrictions were in place to maintain the safety of participants. Although the method in which content and programming was altered, individuals still found ways to keep elements of the events similar, if not the same.

**Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: “We had our virtual convention the second week of May, I believe, where we all came, I should say, the state officer team and then a skeleton crew of stage crew, came to Brookings. We went to a local community center and set up, like, professional video space where we videotaped our state convention there.”

Elizabeth: “So all of [the state officer selection process] was virtual, every piece of the process was virtual: interviews, stand and delivers, extemp speeches, stakeholder conversations, so preparing in that regard was a little bit different because it wasn't something that I was used to at all and now, I was doing it all the time for a really important part of my life.”

STEPHANIE: “Throughout the state they have different watch parties. Something I thought was really cool was a lot of chapters figured out a way to socially distance and still get together and come together as a chapter to watch convention. Although they weren't there in person, they were still able to be with their friends and other members of their community in order to watch it.”

ANNA: “Everything was very virtual, and so we really had to kind of rewrite the playbook because it wasn't just virtual, for I mean, we were virtual, we were sitting in an office like an empty office, which felt very like odd, but the students themselves were not. And here's where we came to a really odd part in the year, it was hybrid facilitation.”

LANDON: ‘We had to change everything, like masks, everyone had masks on, we pretty much couldn't do anything without masks. And then the workshops, the activities of the workshops, a lot of them we had to worry about, like, if the students were coming in contact, or if they were all touching certain items, or if they were really close to each other.’”

MIRIAM: "Our election experience was very different, and I was reflecting on that after watching elections at the 2022 convention just last week, and watching candidates run up on stage, and it was weird. I would almost have these moments where I was like, ‘Why don't I remember like that particular piece of that? I was like, oh, wait, it's because I didn't do that when I got elected, like that's why I don't remember taking the gavel picture, that's why I don't remember hugging people afterwards. But then, at the same time, I have some pictures up on my wall of when I was elected on a Zoom call and I had my state officer teammates right next to me in the camera, and I was in my brother's garage, because I was the only place that we had good enough connectivity for the Internet, and I had state staff and other friends and family there.’”

TESS: “To go from this year for national officers when we think about, like, speaking on a stage in front of 20,000 people to recording videos on top of trash cans in our yard and I'm not going to lie, a couple of times with pajama pants on instead of an official dress skirt, right? Because that's what people can see. From going to, you know, inspiring the remarks of, you know, thousands of FFA members to writing a note to a grandmother somewhere on an individual basis. You know, from these arena halls and workshops of 500 people to sometimes giving a workshop on Zoom for 2 people.”

MCKENNA: “We did cap attendance at about 450 people when normally, our state convention is about 1,200 people.”

NOAH: “You're instead of doing a session for 3,000 people, you're really doing it to 3 and a camera.”

**Discussion:**

Leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic talked about “changing everything” and “re-writing the playbook.” From an organizational standpoint, the transition to 100% virtual platforms was groundbreaking and had never been done before in the 95-year organizational history. From a longevity standpoint, it will be fascinating to observe if operational changes made due to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be in place in years to come.

**Overall Theme: Loss of a Dream**

Many of these leaders had dreamed of serving in these officer positions for years. COVID-19 and its implications were a loss of that dream in many ways, and these individuals had to cope with that loss while also serving others who were also experiencing a life that was very different than imagined.

**Exemplar Quotes:**

ELIZABETH: “By that end I think we were all little disappointed, not in what we were able to do, but more so in what we were able to give to our members, and so a lot of the conversations that happened within my team were, ‘Are we letting them down? Are we letting the members of Kansas FFA down? Are we really serving them in a way that they deserve to be served? There were students that had just finished their senior year, not gotten recognized for their proficiency awards, their state degrees, all the accomplishments that they had, and we felt like as a team of 6 we didn't serve them well enough because we weren't able to have an in-person convention.’”

TESS: "... and ultimately was selected to serve as a National FFA Officer. So, at this point, this was a dream come true for me that had been 10 years, literally in the making, and because of the timeline of how old we are in FFA, literally half of my life."

MCKENNA: "We weren't going to get to have an in-person convention and we were all heartbroken. We didn't really know how to handle that because it was something that we'd been holding on to for so many months."

NOAH: "But you think of, like, the worst thing that could possibly happen. You never think that like, well, when I was running for state office, I'm like, you know, the worst thing that could happen to my dream is to not get state office, but you never dream that you know you're going to, that your goal is going to happen, and then one of the things that like is you know, the capstone, is just going to be ripped out from underneath."

NOAH: "My mom was a state officer, I went to state convention all the time, and you dream of being a state officer for 10, 12, 11 years, and it's like it didn't feel real you know you're out there and you have all these dreams of getting up on stage and being able to express what you're saying."

### **Discussion:**

One leader brings up an interesting point, the almost cruel idea that an individual might accomplish a dream and then must live through losing that dream a little bit every day. So much in life, the accomplishment of a dream is the goal. According to "Young adults' experiences with loss and grief during COVID-19," grief can be experienced by both tangible and intangible losses, and losses without understanding can lead to unresolved grief (Weaver et al., 2021). This begs the question, if these leaders experienced grief, how did it manifest within their lives? What will be the impact of that sense of grief and loss in their development as young adults? If

understanding is needed to avoid unresolved grief, then how does society support the understanding of an extremely ambiguous time?

### **Overall Theme: Coping**

There are a variety of coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive. Everyone coped with the changes that accompanied COVID-19 differently, but everyone had to find ways to cope.

### **Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: “I think the biggest part of that for me was keeping myself busy. On the family farm, you know, with the cow-calf operation that time of year is calving season, and so there's definitely lots to do there and, you know, keeping my mind occupied and not sitting idle was definitely a big help in doing that. Being able to go out and, you know, seeing baby calves was always something that lifted my spirits and doing whatever else needs done on the farm, so there's always something to do. But staying busy was definitely the number one thing.”

ELIZABETH: “During that year was one of the first times that I had looked into going to counseling, just because I needed somebody to talk to. One of the things that really helped me was finding those people to invest in and to be able to talk to, and not necessarily try to find solutions to it, because none of us had solutions to it, right? But instead, just someone that would listen and try to sort through all of the emotions that I was bringing forward.”

ANNA: “That's good but that brings me to my next point having my team there. They are my best friends in the whole world like I love every single one of them so, so, so deeply!”

LANDON: “Definitely my teachers, I mean they're the ones that got me into it in the first place, and they're like my parents away from home, I mean, you know how it is, constant phone calls, constant texts, even through my retiring state convention, I mean, I was constantly on the phone



with my ag teacher. He was talking to me through it and just giving me kind of the confidence when I didn't have it myself.”

MIRIAM: “My teammates, we all supported each other in that. And then we also would support each other by, even if we have really long days that weren't super fun on Zoom calls, and we'd go out to eat together, or like we get somebody a cake to celebrate the end of FFA Week, or you know if somebody did something they're really proud of we'd write each other notes and leave them for each other in our officer cubicles that we stole from FFA staff who weren't there in the office anymore.”

### **Discussion:**

According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), coping after a traumatic experience eventually must include acceptance of loss to cognitively process the event. With this, individuals often find their own methods of processing and coping with events in their lives. The question thus becomes, why do some individuals choose certain methods of coping than others? Are some methods more effective with processing loss than other types of stress?

### **Overall Theme: Lessons Learned**

The lessons learned because of this experience are vast and vary with everyone. Even still, elements of posttraumatic growth are evident in this population already. According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996), posttraumatic growth leads to changes in perception of self (increases ideas of self-resilience), changes in relationships (more self-disclosure, leaning on support systems) and impacts on life philosophy (increased appreciation for life).

### **Exemplar Quotes:**

NATHAN: “Knowing that, whatever happens, you'll get through it and in my case, you have 5 teammates around you to help you get through it, so, leaning on those people as well, remembering that your teammates are there, not just to be teammates, not just to talk to members, but for you to lean on as well and to utilize those when you need it.”

ELIZABETH: “At times we even said like, ‘Do you really think that there do you think that they know that we're state officers?’ ‘Do you think that they know that we were elected to state office?’ But that wasn't the point, the point wasn't that these students knew that we were state officers. The point was that these students knew that we cared about them and we wanted to celebrate them, and we wanted to help them in any way possible, because that was what our job was, was to make it not about us, and make it about the students.”

STEPHANIE: “You have to get creative in your leadership style. And sometimes I found for me the best form of leadership in those situations where everything feels pretty hopeless is just bringing positivity to other people, and allowing people to kind of express their frustrations, and just being able to be a light in that time of need.”

ANNA: “I've learned that we cannot trivialize another's experience, especially judge them for their feelings and emotions, and so I remember on anything that I would put forward I'd be, like, ‘You can talk to me. I will not judge you. You can like rage at the world. I will not judge you. I will listen and I will not through my phone, because, wow.’”

LANDON: “I made a promise at the beginning of my year, and that promise was, no matter who I'm in front of, whether it's ag teachers, students, leaders, at anything, I'm always going to give 110%, no matter how tired I am, no matter how sick I am, no matter how much I don't want to wake up in the morning, no matter how physically exhausted, I am, no matter how much I hate

masks, no matter what the circumstances are, I'm going to give a 110% because they deserve that.”

MIRIAM: “Everything that I'm given as an opportunity is a gift and that I'm not entitled to those things, and that the attitude that you have about the experiences you have shapes the experience more than the experience itself. And how to, how to, manage expectations, really, which I think a lot of people hear ‘manage expectations’ and it's like, ‘Oh, so you know you're going to be disappointed.’ ‘It's like, no, like I'm going to decide to be content with the bare minimum. And I'm going to decide to be happy with that and then if I get anything more than that, that’s just extra happiness on top.”

TESS: “I think purpose always is showing up, being broken and bruised and confused and still having all of these questions in our heads but trusting the fact that by showing up and doing what we can in that moment, that is enough, and that's what that's what makes our life worth it.”

MCKENNA: “One of the biggest lessons I think I took from my state officer year was that you can be a leader no matter where you are in your life and no matter what situation you're thrown into; It’s all about what you do when you're in that situation.”

NOAH: “We talk about being adaptable and stuff, but I'm talking, you know, beyond just like, ‘Oh, maybe we'll move our calendar from a paper to Outlook calendar, which I just learned how to do a couple of months ago. So you know, we're getting technology driven. But I think that the bigger thing was understanding like it's okay to not just think outside the box but it's okay, to find a circle instead. You know, just completely upgrading what you've known and doing something different and realizing that, you know, you may have these plans and dreams that you have there, but you can have the same core dream, but you need to understand that sometimes it's going to be delivered differently.”

**Discussion:**

Serving as a leader during the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the view of self, others, and life for these individuals. The continued impact that this experience has had on their development and philosophy of life and leadership will be unfolding for years to come.

## Conclusion

After categorization by theme, a 10-minute video was created by splicing the full-length interviews into segments to capture the emergent themes and exemplar quotations within one video.

I think that Noah said it best: that sometimes in life, we don't just go outside the box, but we must find a circle, and that is certainly what these leaders did. They led in a time that will come to define a generation, a time that was uncertain, and called upon a level of leadership that was different from years past. These leaders pivoted, shifting events from in-person to online, while maintaining the heart behind the events. They carried the emotions of those who they represented while also experiencing emotional losses personally, including the loss of a dream that had been years in the making. They led, and albeit maybe not perfectly, they led in a time that the world desperately needed them to.

It is an honor to be a vessel of these stories and the others that I have been witness to over the past few years. It is the opinion of this investigator that the collective strength that clearly resulted from leading during a pandemic will propel the world into a future that honors showing up, even if it is not easy. These stories challenge us to place an emphasis on people and the purpose of the work that we are doing. They challenge us to live graciously and honor the experiences of others. They challenge us to lean on those around us and admit that we can't do this on our own. Most importantly, they challenge us to arrive to the world, broken and bruised and confused, but to arrive anyway, and to trust that when we arrive because of something bigger than ourselves, arrival is the first step toward greatness.

### **Implications for Further Work**

Each emergent theme presents topics for further discussion and investigation. The discussion and questions that have resulted as part of this project have implications for the future of youth development and youth leadership programs specifically. As a relatively recent experience, the COVID-19 pandemic is just beginning to influence work and research, with research needed specifically to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young adults in the formative years. Areas for further investigation include: (1) the development of resilient youth leaders and (2) the impacts of leadership in adversity among youth leaders in their formative years.

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