

## **The View From Here**

**By: Justine Chichester**

*"Covid-19 will reshape our world. We don't yet know when the crisis will end. But we can be sure, by the time it does, our world will look very different. How different will depend on the choices we make today."*

– Josep Borrell

On January 21, 2020 the CDC confirmed the first case of Coronavirus in the United States. The first death from the virus, in America, was reported in Washington State just one month later. As we meet and surpass this grim one-year anniversary, the death count for this pandemic in America has soared beyond a truly unimaginable number of 500,000 souls lost to this deadly disease.

While business shutdowns have varied from state-to-state due to the virus, Florida is currently open for business. However, as a recent Breast Cancer survivor, still on the estrogen blocker Tamoxifen, and as someone living with a spinal cord injury and, yes, hydrocephalus on top of it all, I have chosen to stay home since last year. March 7, 2020 was my last outing, without masks, to my husband's old high school, Christopher Columbus High, for their "Reverse Raffle" fundraiser event. There was a little discussion of the Coronavirus at the time, however it was still a real mystery to us and when one of our friends that night refused to eat or drink anything at the event and stayed far away from us all, we thought it was a little extreme. Little did we know how right she was. Little did we know how different our world would look one year later. During this past year since that event at Columbus High, I have attended one small wedding, wore a mask and socially distanced, but still felt very uncomfortable as not everyone there was following the CDC guidelines. It was a lesson learned for me, which could have been potentially dangerous, given my pre-existing conditions. Other than that wedding and a couple of brief trips to the grocery store with my husband, I have been home.

The decision to stay home hasn't been an easy one for me. And sometimes it has felt as if I'm the only one. I've missed a year of physical therapy, although I have been working hard on my recovery on my own. I've missed dinner parties, brunches, weddings and just plain being with my friends and family. I get the "Life goes on" phrase shoved in my face or "You shouldn't stop living your life" is another one I hear quite a bit. None of my husband's friends can believe he's not going out to restaurants or happy hours. They're shocked we're staying home. The thing is, I know what it is like to be really sick. I mean, in the hospital, for a long time, really sick. When I suffered my spinal cord injury and hydrocephalus at the same time, I was in and out of the hospital and rehabilitation for over a year. If I could have stayed home to prevent ANY of that at the time, I would have done so in a heartbeat. That is why I stay home now. I understand that all this is temporary and potentially lifesaving. I think that most people who say those types of things have never known what real sickness and suffering is. And I hope they never have to find out.

The good news is that there is good news on the horizon. Two vaccines are now available and a third one is on the way to being approved soon. The vaccine rollout was rocky at first, but it seems to be getting straightened out. My parents, who are both over 70 years of age, and have also been staying home for the past year, have received both of their shots. And I am so happy to report that I have received my first shot of the Moderna vaccine at the Miami Cancer Institute a couple of weeks ago. I will now go for my second shot in mid-March. I was so excited when I got the call to go in for the vaccine, that I started to cry. It was a call of hope and a solution for me to get back to life once again .... safely this time.

I've been thinking so much about what will be the first thing I do once I receive that second shot? FINALLY get to the hair salon to repair this long, long grey, shabby hair? FINALLY get out with my friends to a restaurant? FINALLY get back to physical therapy? Yes, all of those things, I've missed them all. But most importantly, truly the first thing I want to do is, give both of my parents a big, huge hug. Because it is definitely the hugs I've missed the most.