



## A Look Back at My Year Living Through a Pandemic

By Educator Barnes – March 12, 2021

A year ago today, Governor Holcomb announced that school buildings in Indiana would close due to the coronavirus. Education in our state changed, and we still haven't returned to how schools were prior to the pandemic. We have been living through a crisis. No, we have been trying to survive a crisis. Although a light of hope has begun to emerge since vaccines are available, this does not change the fact that many of us have had our lives turned upside

down and are struggling to figure out what normal will be all in the midst of trying to educate students.

While I'm trying to coach teachers and impact students, I have been in an emotional freefall. How far do I have to fall until I finally hit the bottom?

I don't know because I'm still falling. As I try to grasp onto any ledge, cliff, or edge, another boulder hits me and pushes me farther down.

I need a break, a pause, but education is relentless. There is always another task to complete.

"Shawnta, you don't seem like you want to be here."

"Shawnta, I know you have a lot on your hands right now, but could you have this done by the end of the day?"

"Shawnta, when are you going to snap out of it? We need your old self back."

## **Wrapping up 2020**

2020 was a year unlike any I had ever experienced before, but it was not a bad year for my family. No one close to me had gotten nor passed away from Covid-19. Even though I had not seen many of my family members in-person, I felt closer to them because we talked more either on the phone or via video chat.

When December 31, 2020 finally arrived, I was ready. New Year's Eve is my late maternal grandfather's birthday and my cousin's birthday. I counted down to the end of 2020 while thinking of those birthdays, I had high hopes for 2021.

The celebration continued at midnight. At midnight, my family all rushes to text my younger sister who was born on New Year's Day to wish her a happy birthday, and we think about our paternal grandmother who also was born on that day and whom my sister was named after. Just as many Black people I know, I made a huge pot of black-eyed peas to ring in the new year. I also whipped up a pan of cornbread, and some other sides. I was ready to rock this year.

## **My rocky 2021**

On January 2, 2021, I went to my room to take a nap. I said to my husband, "Make sure I wake up in a few hours so I can call my dad." He never had the opportunity to wake me up because a phone call from my mom woke me up instead.

"Shawnta, the paramedics are here. Your dad is unconscious on the floor. I did CPR on him until they arrived. They are trying to jump his heart."

I grabbed my husband and put my mom on speaker so I could text my younger sisters in our family group chat.

My dad was still unconscious when they got him into the ambulance and his pulse was faint. My mom followed the ambulance to the hospital because she was not allowed to ride inside due to the pandemic.

Once she arrived, the ER doctor found her, and she called me. I then called my sisters and added them to the phone call.

"There's tissue damage. If he recovers, he might not be the same."

*Wait. What?*

"We haven't been able to stabilize him. We are using medicine, but we can only keep his pulse for a few seconds at a time."

*Excuse me? This doesn't make sense.*

"We need to talk about options."

*What options. There is only one. Save! My! Dad!*

"I need to know if you would like to continue care."

Silence.

"How long will you try to help him?" I asked.

"Hold on. I'll be right back."

*What's going on? Why did he leave? He better be helping my dad and not getting distracted by anyone else.*

"Hello. Is everyone still on the line?"

Collectively, "Yes."

"I'm sorry to inform you that your loved one has not had a pulse for ten minutes. His body temperature has dropped. Your loved one is gone."

*Gone?*

"We will get him ready for you all to come say goodbye."

*Goodbye?*

I was supposed to see my dad on Sunday, January 3, 2021. I had seen him in-person for the last time the Sunday prior because Sunday was our day. Prior to that Sunday, I had not seen my dad in-person because I had a medical procedure and had to quarantine, so Sunday, December 27, 2020 was the last time I saw my dad alive. I didn't know it would be the last time.

We didn't get to spend Christmas with my dad, so my boys opened up their Christmas gifts on that Sunday. Since my family has never done the Santa Claus thing, my dad had them write down what they wanted. After they opened their gifts, just like the prior years, he had them double check to make sure he hadn't missed any purchases.



Sunday, December 27, 2020 – James Stockton with his grandsons, Jeremiah and James

“Granddad, I’m missing something.”

My son showed my dad, and he ordered it online. The package arrived days after my father passed away.

My father was more than a provider; he was my best friend. He worked seven days a week during a significant portion of my childhood so he could live debt free and so he could pay for our college. Even though we received free tuition due to him earning the Purple Heart award during the Vietnam War, he knew there would be other expenses such as housing and books to cover.

We had so much in common. We were the organizers and the main researchers on a family history book for his maternal family. The book was 200+ pages when it was finished. We were currently working on the updates. A few weeks ago, my mom gave me a folder. It was his notes on the research trails he was tracking. I couldn't take it. How do I research without my research companion?

Early during the pandemic, my dad reviewed with me his final wishes. This was an annual occurrence for us and not triggered by the pandemic. My father had no debt, and all of his final wishes were in order. All I had to do, when the time came, was execute. I didn't know I would be executing his plan merely months later.

## **Pushing through**

"Shawnta, when are you coming back to work?"

"I'm not sure."

"Let us know by...." The deadline passed and then another.

How was I going to return back to work when I was not sleeping for hours and days at a time? How was I going to return when I had been crying uncontrollably for hours at a time? How was I going to return, when I was having flashbacks of the phone call when I could hear the paramedics trying to resuscitate my dad in his home?

I had no appetite. I had no will to eat. I was rapidly losing weight. I had no will to do anything but cry and wonder why.

My dad survived Vietnam. My dad survived a white man pulling a gun on him when he was a child because the man mistook him for another Black boy. How did this heart attack take my dad away from me at 71 years old?

“We miss you Shawnta. We want you back as our supervisor. Please come back.”

I would start to type responses and then delete them. I didn't know if I had the strength to take on the work that I left behind before I had a surgery. I was already barely staying above water before I had my surgery. How was I going to manage work when I could not even manage my emotions? I had dated my husband for two years and we have been married for 14. Crying isn't an action I do much. He had only seen me cry less than the amount of fingers on one hand. He even once joked, “Are you tear ducts broken?” He found out that they worked, but this time, I could not shut them off.

I talked to the doctor who performed my surgery. She asked how I was doing, and I let it all out. She had known me for ten years so she knew I didn't like to take medicine if I could avoid it, and I preferred natural remedies.

“Shawnta, have you ever taken an antihistamine before?”

I had. I always have a bottle because I have sensitive skin and tend to break out in rashes more frequently than I wish. She explained how they could be prescribed to help with mental wellness. She already knew I would resist an antidepressant or any medicine along those lines.

I agreed to take it. I knew the side-effects that I had with this medicine which were sluggishness and being a bit drowsy. Once I took them as prescribed, I was able to stop crying. I was able to focus, but I was numb. This isn't the 2021 I had envisioned, and there was so much to do.

## **A path forward**

In the midst of helping my mom with my dad's final affairs, I decided to return to work.

“Shawnta, you don't seem like you want to be here.”

“Shawnta, I know you have a lot on your hands right now, but could you have this done by the end of the day?”

"Shawnta, when are you going to snap out of it? We need your old self back."

I know my story is a tragic one, but I am not alone. How is one to look after her father died, and how am I supposed to snap out of it? Too many of us have struggled mentally during the pandemic. We have struggled to meet the demands placed upon us by our schools. We have struggled to push forward after loved ones have died. We worry nonstop about our family members who are out of work.

Some days, I feel as if no one cares about my mental state. I feel as if people only care about me getting the tasks done.

"Push through, Shawnta."

"Grief will heal in time."

How long will that take? What will my new normal be? Do I want to stick in a profession that seems to have no love for me?

Every single morning, and I mean every single morning, I ask myself, "Barnes are you doing this?"

Something down deep tells me that I can do this one more day. What happens when that will is gone? What happens as the will to stay in the profession, the fire that lights our passion keeps being extinguished? What will happen to our students?

If you asked me a year ago, if I would be here today. I would have said, "Hell, no!"

When a person you love suddenly dies from a heart attack and that person had not even retired, you begin to question how you are spending your time.

As I look back over this year, and as this pandemic seems to finally be coming to an end, the question that drives me forward is, "What is your next move?"

Luckily, I have a great therapist who is helping me process that question. I am in too much despair to figure it out on my own. If you need help finding mental health support, you can start by visiting the website [mentalhealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov).

In closing, I'll leave you all with [the words](#) I said about my dad at his funeral. Hopefully something from that video or from what I have written today will resonate. Please, if you are struggling like I am, don't be afraid to take a step back and seek some help and support.

**It's only so long for now, Dad... 'til we meet again.**

