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'Doing My Part to End the Pandemic': Students and Alumni Step Up

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RWU community members have found all kinds of ways to support others through the COVID-19 pandemic, and even to work toward ending it.

We recently spoke with a student and several alumni about what they're doing to make a difference, at work or as volunteers. Though their expertise differs, each spoke of their drive to do whatever they could during this time of great need.

Planning Ahead for Emergencies

From 2013 to 2017, Christopher McGrath '07 developed state and local plans for a widespread emergency vaccination program for the Rhode Island Department of Health. In 2020, McGrath, Operations Support Branch Chief for the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency, became the COVID-19 Deputy Channel Lead for Municipal Vaccinations and put his plans into action.

“I specifically worked with all 39 of our state’s towns to plan how they would vaccinate the entire population if we ever needed to do anything,” said McGrath. “I was really thankful that we had been working with all of our municipal partners for so long at developing these plans. Beginning in December we put every single one of those 39 plans into play, utilizing the facilities, staff, and all of the concepts we had taught, drilled and exercised over the years.”

Without established plans and relationships with state and local leaders, McGrath says the pandemic response we've seen for the past year would have not have been possible.

“In emergency management, the time to exchange business cards isn't when the emergency happens, it's beforehand,” said McGrath. “It's vitally important to know all the players and the partners to call upon for times of emergency such as this.”

McGrath studied Criminal Justice at RWU, a time he described as "the best four years of my life."

Bristol's First Vaccinations

Senior Public Health Major Lea Peterson has been [on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) since it began. As a Volunteer EMT for the Bristol Fire Department, she works at Bristol's COVID testing and vaccination sites, and even helped plan and launch Bristol's first COVID vaccination clinic.

“The COVID testing feels really routine at this point. Being part of the vaccination clinic has felt bigger to me, because in my opinion it's the only thing that will really get us back to normal,” said Peterson.

Peterson is grateful to be able to help her community as she gains skills and perspectives that will serve her career goal of becoming a Physician's Assistant.

“I’ve learned how important it is in healthcare to collaborate with the community,” said Peterson. “I’ve been happy to see that a lot of people are coming in to get tested and that people who are eligible for their vaccines are getting them. It is important to have these services locally available to control COVID in Bristol.”



RWU student volunteers for Bristol's COVID-19 testing and vaccination clinics, with Bristol First Responders. Pictured from left to right: Sergeant Michael Vieira, RWU students Lea Peterson, Emily Lane, Samara Pinto, Fire Chief Michael DeMello, RWU students Madison Fuller, Jake Amendola, Kyle Stuart, vaccinator Brad Palmer from the Bristol Division of Emergency Medical Services, and Bristol Police Lt. Steven St.Pierre. Not pictured: RWU students Joshua Simons and Patrick Griffin.

Processing COVID-19 Tests for RWU and Beyond



Katherine Stockless '20

Every day, the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard processes over 100,000 COVID-19 test samples from across the country, including tests from [RWU's COVID testing program](#). Katherine Stockless '20 and Spencer Babst '17 are part of the team that works round-the-clock to process them.

“I see the samples coming in from RWU and I think, 'Here I am, a freshly graduated Roger Williams student, already giving back to the University.' It feels good,” said Stockless.

Babst and Stockless apply the lab skills they learned while studying biology at RWU to work in the high-paced, high functioning lab. Working 12-hour shifts, including overnights, is a big commitment, but knowing how much this work impacts the community makes it all worthwhile.



Spencer Babst '17

“I always wanted to dedicate my life in some way shape or form to helping others,” said Babst. “This is the most urgent and the quickest way I could help others, and I was lucky to be hired by this company to do my part to end the pandemic. I wake up excited to go to work because I am making a difference.”

“At first, when people heard I was doing this job, they were afraid because I am working with COVID samples. Then, they started to understand how important this work is, and how it is bigger than just my career. This is a global pandemic. This is a way I can help,” said Stockless.

COVID-19 Case Support at the RI Department of Health



Mackenzie O'Neill '20

As a case investigator at the Rhode Island Department of Health, Mackenzie O'Neill '20 contacts people who have tested positive for COVID to help them handle their diagnosis and protect those around them. She collects the names and contact information of their close contacts and provides information they need to get through their illness and isolation period.

“Sometimes people are really panicked when I call, because they are just finding out they tested positive for COVID. Being able to talk them through it, calm them down and give them options, is rewarding to me. I can help them feel better,” said O'Neill.

O'Neill was attracted to this job because she loves talking with people. Her Anthropology + Sociology major helps her hone in on the diverse cultural needs and differences among the people she calls, who are located all over the state.

“It helps to understand what kind of jobs people might have, who might be in their household, and what urgencies they might have,” she said. “The information on the pandemic is constantly changing, and it’s hard for people to get all the information they need. At the Department of Health, we work to get the information out there.”

Making Face Masks Accessible

Ash Aliengena '12 hand-sews face [masks with clear plastic windows](#) for their community, giving lip readers much-needed access to view peoples' mouths. They studied English Literature at RWU and now work as an Adult English as a Second or Other Language Literary Specialist at Holyoke Community College, where they were inspired to create accessible masks by one of their students.



Ash Aliengena '12, right, and their student, Jackie Santana, who is deaf and relies on watching the mouths of people who don't sign.

“Jackie, my student, is deaf. She advocated for herself as a deaf woman and got me aware of this need for accessible face masks,” said Aliengena. “When the pandemic started, she lost her means of communicating with most people who don’t sign. It is amazing how much speech readers can understand from watching a mouth. I kept thinking it would be so simple if it was just automatic to wear masks with windows.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, accessible face masks quickly sold out. Aliengena, a hand-quilter, designed a pattern for a windowed mask through trial and error and used it to create and distribute masks

for their community. They've given masks free of charge to teachers, caregivers, people who work in mental health, and more.

“The coolest part is the increased awareness. People will see me wearing my mask when I am out and about getting groceries. They will say they want a mask like that,” they said.

Starting a Senior Care Business



McKenzie Finnerty '20

McKenzie Finnerty '20 recently opened an in-home senior care business, providing essential services such as meal prep, mobility, and memory care assistance for this high-risk population. Her business, East Bay Senior & Home Care, opened in February and already has a waitlist.

“With the pandemic, so many seniors are really reluctant to go into senior care and assisted living because of how vulnerable they are as a population,” said Finnerty. “I go grocery shopping for them and do

small things that they may have done on their own before the pandemic. It is nice to be able to help and see my efforts go toward something bigger.”

Finnerty loves running her own business because it gives her the opportunity to follow her passion and pave her own path. She applies the skills she learned as a Psychology major to connect with her clients.

“I don’t feel that I *have* to do my work. I *get* to do it. I get to help these seniors every day,” she said.

Previous Stories of RWU Community Stepping Up During Pandemic

- [On 'Hyper Alert': RWU Students are EMTs on Front Lines of Pandemic](#)
- [RWU Professors Fabricating Face Shields for Frontline Workers](#)