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August 02, 2020 12:04 AM

Amid pandemic, to open or not is not the only question

LAILA HMAIDAN



reporting intern



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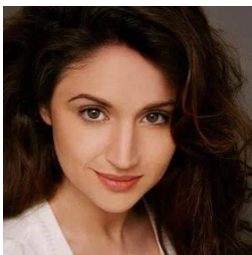


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Laila Hmaidan is a student and a reporting intern for Crain's Detroit Business.

I recently took a flight from one major city to another, and what I witnessed got me thinking about all this talk on when and how to reopen the economy during the coronavirus pandemic.

I am a reporting intern for Crain's Detroit Business, working remotely from New York City. When things got bad and New York shut down in mid-March, I flew home to Toronto for a few months until cases declined, and then returned.

I arrived July 15 via an evening flight to LaGuardia Airport in Queens, once an epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak. As I was standing at baggage claim, I looked around at the various carousels; there were only two operative at the time.

The one I was standing around had travelers socially distancing, wearing masks, some had a clear visor over their mask, as did I, and surgical gloves (courtesy of Air Canada). There was the occasional person in a hazmat suit (literally). It was clear people were nervous. So was I.

Then something interesting happened. A second group of travelers arrived and surrounded the carousel next to ours. Masks on chins, groups gathered more closely together, it was the usual hustle and bustle. There were a few travelers who had their masks on properly, but it didn't feel like it was enough.

I began walking toward the passenger pickup area when I was approached by a driver who asked if I wanted a ride. His mask was covering his mouth, but his nostrils were exposed. I politely took a few steps away from him as he approached my personal space. Just 15 minutes on the ground, and already it felt like I was walking through a minefield.

You see folks, it's not just about you, or even what your politicians are doing, it's about what everyone is doing. We have spent the past few months looking to our governments, waiting and wanting them to make decisions on our behalf. The truth is, a big part of this is up to us. There is so much talk about the damage done to the economy, and I get it, we all want our lives back.

I flew in from Toronto, Ontario, a province with a population of 14.7 million, which as of July 30 had a five-day rolling average of 89 new cases of COVID-19 a day. The flight at the luggage carousel next to ours came in from Atlanta, Ga., a state with a population of 10.7 million, with a seven-day moving average of new cases of 3,717 as of July 30. I Googled the numbers because of what I observed at the airport. (Michigan's was a little over 700 late last week.)

Ontario has been effective so far in tracking and tracing cases. The province reported its first two cases on Jan. 23 and has been making an effort to trace travelers coming in since then.

The airport process is rigorous. If you are coming into Canada and have no symptoms, you are required to quarantine for 14 days — and believe me when I tell you, authorities will follow up. If you are arriving and have symptoms, you are pulled aside for further assessment at the airport. So far, 97 percent of newly reported cases have been reached within 24 hours, and 100 percent of newly reported contacts have been reached within 24 hours, according to the city of Toronto's website.

You may not pay much attention to your friendly neighbor up north, but we are not so different from you. We have a democratic system where Liberals and Conservatives vie for office once every four years. It is not exactly a two-party system, but close enough. And we love our freedom and liberties, too.

But I want to say, the whole situation has not been politicized in Canada. Regardless of what political party a politician belongs to, they have been working together to contain the coronavirus. In some instances, they have been praising each other's leadership; as polite as Canadians are, it still surprised me. My point is, if there was ever a time to be united on a front, it's now.

I reside in Manhattan, where I attend school. In my neighborhood, I have observed everyday New Yorkers continue to be responsible. They wear their masks while walking on the sidewalks, everyone seems to respect the rules. Businesses want you to wear a mask in their space, and we do.

So far, New York City has been successful at managing the numbers, with a seven-day rolling average of 291 new cases a day as of July 30, with a population of 8.4 million. We have come a long way from being an epicenter.

But it's not over.

As the days went by, I settled back into my beloved New York City and began feeling safe enough to meet friends in outdoor spaces.

I set out to meet a classmate I had not seen in months. I figured, what could go wrong? I trusted him. We arrived at the park, grabbed our coffees and sat down to chat. He proceeded to place his mask on his chin so he could sip his coffee and talk; fair enough. As we were about 15 minutes into our conversation,

he casually slips in that he was going to get tested for COVID in a couple of days because he had been exposed to individuals who had the virus. He also casually added that he had experienced a sore throat.

Excuse me, come again? Didn't it cross his mind that perhaps he should have mentioned that before deciding to meet me? Shouldn't I have the right to decide if I wanted to risk it over a coffee? I became angry, but didn't want to show it. So, I jokingly moved my seat back a few feet away and then politely found a way to end our meeting. He jokingly responded that he shouldn't have told me.

As a reporter, I have been talking regularly to business owners in Michigan about the stress they are facing with keeping their businesses afloat. But you know what else they are concerned about? Keeping their staff and customers safe. Even as they were in the eye of the storm, trying to reopen, figure out their financials and keep track of the regulations, they also talk about how much they are concerned about your safety when you visit their business. And those in doubt about whether they could achieve that decided to remain closed or rearrange their opening plans, even at the cost of their business.

Let's put our personal perspectives and political differences aside and care about each other's safety, because many are already doing that, even when they have a lot to lose.

Laila Hmaidan is a student at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York and a reporting intern for Crain's Detroit Business.

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