

COVID Conversations

Living in unprecedented times, we desired to chronicle how our members' service changed during a global pandemic. We joined Brittanie G. of Evanston, Maya D. of Waukegan, and Robin G. of Hawthorn Woods for a COVID Conversation.

COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

How has working at home changed how you approach sustainability?

In my role, there's been a lot of attention on how people can stay actively engaged in climate action and sustainability while being at home. We no longer have in-person meetings, you can't go to conferences or do communal outdoor activities. So, we really have to be thinking about how we communicate important climate topics and also how we're implementing policies at a local, municipal level – and also making sure that we are doing that in a way that's appropriate and sensitive to the ongoing pandemic. People are very scared and worried in this time. There's a lot of different pieces in the balance that people are having to think about, like not only the climate crisis, but more people are now facing unprecedented unemployment levels, they have to worry about their kids being at home and doing e-learning, and that's a challenge. More people have to be worrying about how they're going to pay their bills. Especially with businesses, I've been working a lot with our sustainable business program. Businesses are just trying to survive. There are so many different crises that people are thinking about, so we need to be very mindful of how we approach our topics and the work that's important to us. Everything is so interconnected, and we want people to see that, but also be mindful of their pressing and immediate concerns.

Also just in terms of the way that I've been thinking about sustainability is that in Evanston, our Climate Action and Resilience Plan focuses not only on climate mitigation (reducing our greenhouse gases), but also resilience. A sustainable community looks like one that obviously is taking steps to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, but also is a community that prioritizes servicing their community equitably with programs and policies to help their residents and community members live healthy lives.



COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

But now more than ever, I need to think about the work that I'm doing, is it really impacting the community that I'm here to serve? Am I reaching them where they need to be reached? Are the things that we are working on currently resonating? Are we upholding our commitment to amplify the voices of our most vulnerable residents and taking steps to decrease inequity within our City? We're here to serve the public, and so that should be our first priority.



How has working at home changed how you approach sustainability in your personal life?



In terms of how I think about my own sustainability at home, it's given me the opportunity to explore the ways my family can be more sustainable. We started composting this food and yard waste season, so that's been fun. I like to show them what I've been learning at the city. Also, my brother and I have been getting crafty lately and doing DIY projects. My brother made a bench out of old wood outside. I made a makeup storage container out of old hair product containers.



Besides the location of your office changing, how has your work itself shifted?



At my site location, there are always a ton of things going on in the Office of Sustainability. For me, I don't think any of my direct tasks have changed to be solely COVID-19 related. One of the projects I was working on has been put on pause because of the implications of COVID-19. I had been working on the Sustain Evanston program. The program was launched last year by another fellow GRCorps member. However, it's on hold because businesses are trying to figure out finances and stay afloat. We thought it was best to delay this year's launch while people are dealing with more immediate concerns. Some of the things I've been able to do is touch on projects that haven't been able to get as much attention. Our team has been working on policies related to the plastic bag ban ordinance that needs some reworking. We've been looking at how other communities have done it, trying to come up with a way to implement it, and coming up with branding and marketing ideas for it. Additionally, I've been getting to look at data that I'm not as familiar with, such as data for EVs and benchmarking for energy and water. That is how my work has shifted.

COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

Were you also working on an Experience Climate Change project?

Experience Climate Change was one of the larger projects I've been working on since starting in Evanston. Lucky for us, the curriculum was taught in the local middle schools before we had to start e-learning. With the Experience Climate Change activity, we wanted to share with the community the effects of climate change locally in Evanston. The City has data that shows how the amount of precipitation and days of extreme heat will change. We wanted to use this activity as a tool to get feedback from community members on what they thought the effects were and hear about some of their own encounters with climate hazards and environmental issues. The four areas in the activity included: 1. Extreme heat 2. Water 3. Waste 4. Air quality. A lot of questions come up about – What is the city going to do about it? This was a good time to show residents what we wanted to do to mitigate effects of hazards such as extreme heat and flooding. It was an opportunity for people of all ages to be educated on those climate facts and share what mitigation solutions were most important to them. After going through the activity, students become knowledgeable about a topic and then create a solution that mitigates a climate hazard. Last year hundreds of people attended the fair to see their projects. This year, it will look different. We're trying to do a virtual fair. It was a really great experience for me because I got to interact with super brilliant students and listen to what they had to say. It was also a great professional development opportunity, being in the classroom getting to teach this content.



COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

What do you miss most from your service?

I miss all in-person interactions, coworkers, getting out into the community and seeing the kiddos. We get to really be involved in a lot of different groups and talk to different people. That has always been a highlight of my experience working in the GRCorps. I also miss the GRCorps peers.



Do you have any words of hope or motivation that have been helping you along?

Seeing the strength of my community, seeing so many groups lend helping hands to neighbors – sewing face masks or donating meals to elderly – I'm really loving what I see. It's heartwarming to be a part of a tight-knit community like this. It's great to see people stepping up and caring for each other. More or less, people are staying home. The future has the potential to look radically different. Decreased health and wage disparities, lower emissions – all of those things are at the forefront. I think there's potential for there to be change after all of this is said and done. I'm looking forward to seeing progress.



We caught up with the GRCorps members in late June when the state was beginning to reopen to see how things had changed.

What does going back to work look like for you or what will it look like?

For me, the rest of my time in the GRCorps will be fulfilled mostly from home. Only essential City workers are on site currently, and while safety protocols are being worked out, it means I'll be working from my dining room table. A lot of our in-person engagement opportunities have shifted online, so that's definitely a challenge as we continue to do outreach and education in the Evanston community.



Did you notice the symbols in the margins of the newsletter?

Each symbol represents a category in the Greenest Region Compact and is placed around actions that depict a GRCorps member working on that category.



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