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ILLINOIS VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
CENTER FOR ACCESSIBILITY & NEURODIVERSITY  
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SPOTLIGHT

# Transitions

## Staying in Tune: Finding New Rhythm During a Pandemic

For Michael Pecherek, 2020 wasn't a year the music died, but it did lurch decidedly off-key.

The pandemic's sour note thrust the Illinois Valley Symphony Orchestra, where Pecherek is principal cellist, into indefinite intermission. It also unraveled the IVCC music instructor's face-to-face tether with students and left them all dangling by an internet cable. **(Page 2)**

Even as the pandemic threw Pecherek and other faculty and students' lives out of step, they rallied, sustained by resilience and optimism and buoyed by faith and family. Today some of them look back over the past two years and how a pivotal year changed them.

**Soccer had always been a part** of Itzia Casas' life – until suddenly it wasn't. The pandemic kicked sports events to the curb and sidelined team spirit, but gave Itzia some new goals. **(Page 3)**

**It was going to be a year of celebrations** for instructor Mary Black's family: wedding anniversaries, a wedding, college graduations, a birthday. Nothing went as planned, but it was still unforgettable. **(Page 4)**

**Covid changed Stacy Law's life as a care-giver** at work and at home, but she wasn't about to let a pandemic undo a fresh start for her family. **(Page 5)**

**Math tutor Trisha Loger had to figure out a new formula** for her life and her job. Even as she faced her own struggles, she learned how much she meant to students puzzling through theirs. **(Page 6)**

**Nursing students couldn't practice a personal touch** on computers that didn't talk, feel pain or squirm, so instructor Ann Bruch and her colleagues came up with creative ways to resuscitate a vital part of the program. **(Page 7)**

**As if attending college for the first time** wasn't hard enough, the pandemic complicated Sharon Zambo's life and education even more. But she took a deep breath and is pushing through. **(Page 8)**

# Michael Pecherek, music instructor

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Pecherek resisted teaching online until the pandemic forced the issue. "Live music is kind of magical. It needs to be shared. It's the same with teaching. The best teaching and learning is 'guided.' I didn't want to relinquish my role as guide."

He went into overdrive to quickly develop a complete online curriculum. "It was really hard being out of my comfort zone and having to try to still be somehow a good music teacher online. I'll say I was in a bad mood for about 5 months!"

Ultimately, he struck a satisfactory balance delivering lessons virtually. "I'm the teacher and this is my material. I made it for them and they can email me and get clarification."

In a season empty of live IVSO concerts, it was tough even to practice. "(Musicians) like to have somebody to play for. When you have a whole audience, you feel a lot of energy!"

Eventually, performers pieced separate individual performances into a video, then performed together -- masked and distanced -- for a video sent via link to subscribers.

**How are things now?** "I'm ecstatic to be back in school. I missed working for a living outside my home, seeing and saying hello to people and having conversations. I missed my students and they missed me."

**What was a low point for you?**

"Coming back this fall and still having to be masked. Masks are an inhibitor to communication, and teaching is all about communication."

**What would you say to the old, pre-pandemic you?** "Know that this is a fundamental shift in the course of American education; it's not a temporary condition. Don't try to hold on to the past."

**What words best describe the last two years?**

"Convolutd. Uncomfortable in every way. Dishonest. For the most part, as a society, I think we lacked grace."



Michael Pecherek

## Itzia Casas, first-year student

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Even after schools reopened in-person classes, Itzia stayed online, seeing it as a contribution to her family's safety.

"In some subjects (online) it was harder to pick up concepts, especially when a lot of it was on other programs, not the teachers teaching it. But in other classes, the concept wasn't hard; it was more the workload and the motivation."



Itzia Casas

Besides taking a time-out from a game that had been part of her life for years, socially, "I definitely held back a lot hanging out with friends. If you're not hanging out with people, you just slowly pull apart. But ultimately I feel better about what I did to protect myself and the people around me."

This last year saw reunions with old friends, and she met new ones when she started in-person classes at IVCC. "(In the classroom) if I have questions, I can ask teachers then and there. Also, you get to build off what other students are saying, which helps me understand the concepts."

The pandemic gave Casas "a second to step back and view everything I was doing. (I discovered that) everything is not as big as I once thought it was. I was able figure out who I wanted to associate with and that some people before weren't really what was best for me."

This year looks brighter after last year's darkness. Then "I was doing every precaution and seeing that so many around me weren't and were putting others at risk, which meant we'd be in the same situation longer." Now "I do feel I'm in a much better place but it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't taken a step back!"

The result: "I got to spend time with my dog! The relationships I had grew a lot closer. I realized it's OK to ask for help, especially when everyone is going through things and needing help."

### **What would you say to the old you?**

"Don't worry so much, because it's OK to be in the situation you are. Don't be so hard on yourself, when you realize how vulnerable and precious life is. You're always learning and growing."

### **What words best describe the past 2 years:**

"Guilt. Fear. Hopeful. Understanding. Learning the value of things."

*"It's OK to be in the situation you are. Don't worry so much." -- Itzia Casas*

## Mary Black, math instructor

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When Black and her mother reunited after pandemic enforced separation, “she hugged me so long and so tight! I had been able to see my kids and she hadn’t been able to see either of hers. It reiterated the need we have to physically touch the people we love.”

Everything about the year they’d planned happened, but it looked different.

Her daughters graduated – virtually – and one got married. “It didn’t look anything like we’d planned, but Plan B was as beautiful as Plan A. For my (milestone) birthday, my husband and kids and family and friends created a video birthday greeting. It was amazing, the span of my life that got covered! On our 25th anniversary, we helped our daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law move into a house and start their life together.”

Today, things are “GOOD, like, all caps! We’re doing some of those things that were on hold indefinitely. Now the ‘indefinite’ part feels more removed.”

Black taught out of her home, reaching students in living rooms and kitchens in theirs. As virtual classrooms ballooned, so did distractions her students faced. They crammed class into crazy work schedules, around children also learning at home, around elderly parents they were caring for, around younger siblings they supervised. A few even attended from work, with employers’ support.

She relaxed some hard and fast rules, like due dates and testing procedures. She switched to a Virtual Class Meeting format (classes met together at a set time, but virtually), so students could interact with her and classmates. She recorded her lectures so students could watch when they were able, and held Zoom office hours in the evenings after the children were in bed.

By midterm of Spring ‘21, “I was counting down the days to when Zoom was done and we came back to the classroom!” Despite her efforts, “not everybody thrived, and that broke my heart.”



Mary Black

Still, students’ resilience and determination “helped keep me going. I don’t know if they realize how their motivation was contagious!”

### **What would you say to the old you?**

“Hugs are important. Being able to physically be with people is important. I need my people time, but one thing Mary of today is able to do that Mary pre-Covid was not is, I am able to take just some ‘me’ time.”

### **What words best describe the past two years?**

“Unpredictable. Interesting. Netflix (I watched sooo many shows!) Another word: unexpected blessings.”

***"Hugs are important!" -- Mary Black***

## Trisha Loger, ASC tutor

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The pandemic wrenched tutor and student apart physically and ultimately brought them closer. Loger's "office hours" became fluid. "Home work" took on new meaning. For the first time, tutors and students exchanged direct contact information. She learned Zoom and other new teaching tools and set about untangling the technology knot created by spotty cell phone reception and spacey internet connection.

Students texted her problems they were stuck on and she'd look over the work and correct it, take a picture of it and send it back. She kept on showing students how to solve math equations, only now she juggled a cell phone in one hand and a pencil in the other.



Trisha Loger and husband Justin

When she borrowed a white board and set up her camera on a tripod, students could watch her teach and they could interact. "Once I discovered that, it went really well!"

There were other adaptations and new equipment. Tutors were "embedded" in courses through Blackboard. Once back on campus, they blended in-person and online services. "There's definitely been a lot of good coming out of the pandemic, because we'd always wanted to create a virtual presence."

During the pandemic, Loger moved to a new house. Her office, the Learning Commons, moved too – and became what is now Academic Support Center in the library. Both moves brought excitement and sadness.

Students returned to campus glad to be back, and glad to see their tutors again. "Several said they wouldn't have made it through if they didn't have us, both for scholarly support but also just to have someone to talk to who understands. We gave them our time. We listened. We supported and encouraged them."

As the pandemic dawned, Loger welcomed the slower pace ... "for the first two weeks! After that, it was hard being alone. My husband was working insane hours, and everything I ever did was canceled. It was depressing."

The year taught her "how not to give in to things. I allowed myself to be depressed and decided not to do that anymore." Faith, family and friends got her through.

### **What would you say to the old you?**

"Oh mannnn! I don't ever want to change things because that's how you learn, going through things. Maybe I'd just reach out sooner instead of letting myself get into a depressed mood by keeping things in."

**What words best describe the past two years?** "Challenging. An opportunity to learn and grow. So much good has come out of it. Try to be positive."

# Stacy Law, second year student

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In 2019, Law enjoyed going out every weekend and hanging out with friends. She enjoyed taking her fourth-grade son on mother-son "movie dates." "When the pandemic hit, that all landslided to a stop."

The pace has picked up in 2021. She and her son attended a drive-in movie over the summer and she's been busy as a Cub Scout den leader, working as a CNA in long-term care, and going to college. She still tries to talk, text, chat or get together with friends regularly.

During the pandemic, her fourth-grader boomeranged into classrooms and out again. When in-person classes resumed this year, he didn't want to go. "He'd asked why he couldn't keep doing things on his computer; I told him not everything can be done on electronics."

She hopes seeing mom doing homework will encourage him to do his own. Her youngest son's schedule didn't change much, but he's now in kindergarten and getting used to a new routine.

As the pandemic started, Law started back to school after 10 years.

"I started off online. I did one class at a time to ease my way back into school. I came back in person in August 2021.

"I got lost in the school many times! I realized how out of shape I was! But I'm actually going for my goals!"

As a CNA, she saw Covid first-hand. "It was hard just seeing what Covid did. It took a lot out of us mentally and emotionally. My mom's a nurse, and I'd go home and talk to her about how I feel. I talk to my mom about everything, she is my coping mechanism!

"I try to stay positive. I know that I need to provide the best life for my children. My kids are my high point, the reason I do what I do.



Stacy Law with Zayden and Josef

Watching my oldest riding his dirt bike and seeing the big grin on his face is my whole world!"

Now, "for the most part, I'm in a good place."

**What would you say to the old you?**

"I'd tell myself to concentrate on my mental and physical health, to do something for me, not for everybody else. School is for me."

**What words best describe the last two years?**

"Depressing. Heartbreaking, for sure. A lot of joyful times. A lot of stress."

*"Now, for the most part, I'm in a good place!" -- Stacy Law*

## Ann Bruch, nursing instructor

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Daily headlines provided Bruch with plenty of examples to instruct her IVCC nursing students.

“How should we react to this situation? How does this lockdown phase affect the clinical setting? What would you do differently? We talked a lot about the personal protective equipment challenges, how to safely adapt and keep everybody safe.”

Giving students a feel for medical equipment and supplies they couldn't touch was tougher, but instructors got creative – and so did students.

“We brought supplies home to demonstrate on Zoom, and students demonstrated from their own homes. When we practiced inserting catheters, students used cups, a doll – one of them even had a Halloween mannequin!”

In search of interactive activities, they created virtual escape rooms. “Students loved them! We made a scenario and locked them onto a page until they answered questions correctly and got a numerical key that would take them to the next page.



Ann Bruch

“It's a different way of delivering the same material and evaluating, and breaks the monotony up.”

The department continues to use simulation programs that help with critical thinking. But computer simulations aren't human.

“You can see students' actions as they analyze, but a computer can only give so much information. Those (human) pieces were definitely missing. On a computer, you're just pushing a button to put an IV in and not actually doing it.”

Bruch worried whether her students could apply what they were learning.

So this year, returning second-year students began their semester with refresher lessons and a chance to sharpen their clinical skills outside class in a new lab in the former Math Learning Center.

As an instructor, Bruch's computer fluency soared. “My teaching had never been challenged like that in 21 years. It made me step out of my comfort zone -- I know I can do it again; I may not like it, but I can do it! I'm more open to doing different things now.”

But her anxiety as a mother soared too when she sent her college freshman daughter off to school – just before things shut down. She came home, only to return to campus and to online classes.

“That was challenging for me. She was very isolated. We learn so much by interacting and questioning and bouncing ideas off each other.”

Bruch felt her outlook change. “I look at things, opportunities, differently. I think my priorities have changed. I used to love going all the time and doing and buying things. I still do like to go places, but in a different way. All those material things, I don't really need anymore. Relationships are more important than material things.”

**What would you say to the old you?** “Change is not as difficult as you make it in your mind.”

**What words best describe the last two years?** “Unbelievable. Progress. Change. Different.”

## Sharon Zambo, third-year student

When stress threatens to overcome her, Zambo takes a deep breath. Several. Breathing exercises and meditating have been soothing, a way to get through the stresses of college and the isolation of a pandemic.

"I'd talk to myself. What should I do with my thinking? I had to have a way to control it, to bring it around. I try to look for the good in all the bad. It just helps me."

Covid complicated Zambo's life and education as a new college student.

"I learned how to go to class online. How to Zoom. I had no choice: go to Zoom or don't go, and I couldn't see not going or taking at least one class.

"But I'd rather walk up to a teacher and say 'Hi, my name is ...' That's the way it should be, talking to people and not texting or emailing."

Zambo struggled, but says IVCC tutors, the Student Help Desk, and Tina Hardy in CAN were lifelines. "Otherwise I might have dropped out."

These days, things are looking up. "I'm better than when this first started. I'm more at ease. And meditation helps me a lot."

A high note during the year came when "I found a job that I like that works well with school!"



Sharon Zambo

Her lowest point came during a health scare. "I was low physically and mentally. I was afraid I'd have another heart attack; it made me afraid to go to sleep or leave the house."

**What would you say to the old you?** "Hang in there, it's worth it. There were times I wanted to give up (college). But it's been well worth it."

**What words best describe the last two years?** "Frustrated, pleasing (I did better than I thought when grades came out!)"

## A More Social You in 2022!

*Let's face it, the pandemic and all the transitions related to it have really made it hard to build and sustain friendships and connect with others.*

*If you want to expand your social circle, NOD is here to help! NOD is a new app that will help nudge you toward taking some small social risks, and empower you to build authentic social connections.*

*You can learn more at <https://heynod.com/>, and download the app in the [App Store](#) or [Google Play](#).*

