

THE ONES WHO STAYED BEHIND

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

AFTER ROOMMATES LEFT AND THE
NORMAN CAMPUS CLOSED,
THE UNIVERSITY REACHED OUT TO
ANXIOUS STUDENTS TRAPPED
BY TRAVEL BANS AND ECONOMIC
UNCERTAINTY.

ANTONIETA HERNANDEZ KNEW SHE COULDN'T GO HOME.

While most of the 4,200 University of Oklahoma students living in residential housing had already returned to their families by the March 18 announcement that OU's classes were going fully online during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hernandez realized that was not an option.

"When we received the e-mail, I was in disbelief and worried about what this would mean for me and my other international student friends," says the Caracas, Venezuela, junior. "I come from a country in crisis, so of course I knew that whenever the virus reached Venezuela, it would likely be catastrophic. And there is currently no stable Internet connection in my city, so that would make online classes impossible."



One of roughly 170 “special circumstances” students living in OU housing throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Caracas, Venezuela, junior Antonieta Hernandez is sheltering in place at Dunham College.

OU became a refuge for students like Hernandez, caught up in the uncertainties of a global pandemic. More than 170 students are sheltering in place at OU’s residential colleges and student housing throughout the crisis under “special circumstances.” They represent a mixture of international and domestic students whose situations make it extremely difficult for them to return home.

The OU housing situation evolved rapidly as spring break ended and administrators weighed the best path forward, says ShaRhonda Maclin, assistant dean of students and executive director of Housing and Residence Life.

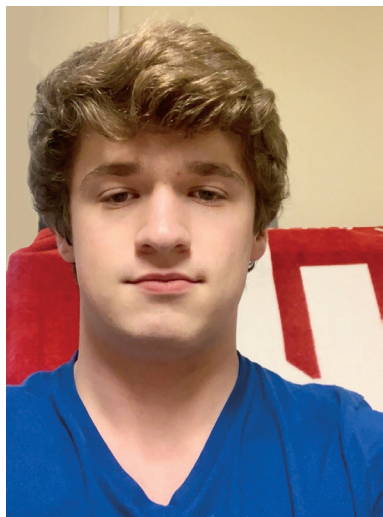
“In observance of social distancing, we elected to just ‘be still’ instead of moving forward with our initial plan to move students to one location. This allowed our special circumstances students to remain where they were living as much as possible,” she says. In some cases, students were moved to OU’s two residential colleges to reduce the number of students in all residential facilities.

Maclin says OU Student Affairs did their best to help students deal with the ever-changing landscape.

“We are very grateful for OU making the decision to move instruction online and encouraging students to remain away from campus. This assisted us in reducing the likelihood of community spread,” she says. “But there was a lot of anxiety about the unknown for our students—‘What does this mean for me?’ On top of switching to online instruction, loss of on-campus jobs, and transitioning home, there has been a lot of uncertainty for students,” she says.

“We tried to focus on what we could control,” adds OU Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt. “Making sure that students have food and housing available to them, especially those students who had nowhere else to go. It comes down to really thinking about what we can influence, listening to our students and what their concerns are, and addressing those as proactively as possible.”

Surratt says he has heard from the parents of international students relieved that OU is looking out for their children while their own countries are dealing with the COVID-19 emergency. “A parent from West Africa e-mailed us and said, ‘Thank you for taking care of our two sons. I know that



Hartford, Conn., freshman Matt Lavoie says that a job loss caused by the COVID-19 shutdown had the unexpected benefit of forcing him to slow down.

they're safer there.'"

"I think OU has been really good at handling the situation by comparison to other universities," says Hernandez, a psychology major who came to Norman as a Davis United World College Scholar. OU is home to 242 Davis UWC Scholars from 88 countries and has won the Davis Cup six times for having the nation's largest freshman class of scholars.

"My professors have shown me so much humanity and compassion," she says, explaining that she has been encouraged to reach out if she has any needs or simply wants to talk. "And I've heard from UWC alumni at universities in big cities like New York and Boston that their schools had to shut down quickly because of the high rates of infection. I know a lot of international students wound up being homeless for a couple of days and had to couch-surf. I'm really glad that OU had the chance to properly think about us."

Deanna Douglass was part of that thinking as resident director of David L. Boren Hall. The Denton, Texas, graduate student in adult and higher education typically oversees 15



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student resident advisers, or RAs, living in OU's residential colleges and residential housing. Douglass became the point person for students submitting requests to stay on campus due to special circumstances. She also helped Maclin roll out a process to keep 87 RAs now dispersed across the country in touch with hundreds of former floor residents through an online student management platform, social media and Zoom meetings.

"They check in and see how people are doing, make sure that they're connected to OU in some way," Maclin says. RAs also were provided with a list of resources for student referrals. "We're still going to have students who have mental health concerns, or students who have questions about what's next for them. RAs are our frontline people."

"I've built relationships with my RAs," Douglass says, relating that resident advisers are experiencing the same stress and displacement as the students they are trying to help. "I think they are coping well, but you want to fix things for people. With the circumstances that the world is in, we can't. That's the hardest bit of all."

During an online meeting with RAs, Maclin apologized to the group. "You are students and you're going through a transition, too," she said. "Is it fair of me to rely on you this way?" She says their overwhelming response was, "How can we help you?"

"What I realized is that they saw themselves in a leadership role—that's their identity."



Resident adviser Keshawn Wallace's days normally are packed with activities. Now, the "social butterfly" strives to keep himself busy and entertained in his Adams Tower room.



Wambui Gachunga is nearly 9,000 miles from her family in Kenya. She is one of more than 600 students appealing to OU alumni and supporters for help through Sooners Helping Sooners.

Among them was Adams Tower RA Keshawn Wallace. Before mid-March, his days had been packed with classes, RA duties and a hefty volunteer schedule.

"I had student organization meetings Tuesday through Thursday every week," says the sophomore, who is vice chair of the Campus Activity Council's Spark leadership development program and

serves both on the programming advisory board for OU's Gender and Equality Center and on the executive committee for OU Student Orientation Weekend.

Wallace's life was vastly different by early April. He only ventured out of his room for meals at Couch Restaurants, where staff kept a rotation of several hot, to-go entrees, sandwiches, cereals and snacks available for student pickup.

Fewer than 10 of 42 residents remained on the two floors of

Adams Center that Wallace oversaw. Most were international students from places as far-flung as Russia and Tanzania. Wallace shares that online studies filled a few hours of his day and he kept in touch with family and friends through texting, social media, online Netflix parties and online games.

But an abundance of free time and isolation were challenges for the admitted "social butterfly," who decided that sheltering in place was safer than potentially introducing illness to his large family in Tulsa, Okla.

"I'm usually that friend who has everyone come over to hang out in his room," says the psychology/pre-law major. "I have an Xbox and karaoke machine. I've been trying to keep my energy up, which is hilarious, because the other night I was doing karaoke in my office all by myself. I even went to the store to get art supplies and was painting canvases in my room."

"Honestly," he laughs, "I don't know what day it is half of the time."

Meteorology freshman Matt Lavoie chose to stay at OU's Couch Tower rather than make the long, solo drive home to Hartford, Conn., where COVID-19 was even more prevalent. The OU shutdown meant that Lavoie lost his job as student supervisor of 25 employees at the Norman campus Taco Mayo restaurant.

"I was working 20 hours a week, along with taking classes," he says. "There was not a minute in the day that I wasn't doing something."

Though he is now living off savings and concerned about a parent's possible job loss due to the COVID-19 economic crisis, Lavoie says sheltering in place has forced him to relax. He thinks keeping up with assigned readings on OU's Canvas portal, a daily Zoom lecture and homework was an easy transition when compared to his normal routine.

"I can focus on academics, and I don't feel stressed by school anymore," he says. Downtime is rounded out with hours of video games and online streaming. "I don't think I've



Travis Caperton

The sidewalks in front of Walker Tower normally are crowded with students, but once most of OU housing closed in March, a student walks alone after grabbing a takeout meal at Couch Restaurants.

ever watched so much TV in my life.”

When he can't stand staying in his room any longer, Lavoie says he jumps into his car and goes to a drive-through restaurant or grabs a snack at a convenience store.

“My mom was looking at my bank statement and called me earlier this week to ask, ‘Why are you living at 7-Eleven and McDonald’s?’” he admits.

Wambui Gachunga doesn't have that route of escape as an international student without access to a car.

The biomedical engineering sophomore's typically disciplined routine has been turned upside down. She finds herself sleeping late and completing daily online work during afternoons. “I've always been an ‘education first’ type of person,” she says. “I enjoy my classes, and I really like my professors.”

After an evening study session, Gachunga streams movies into the wee hours of the night—typically lighthearted or classic children's animated films. “Because,” she says wryly, “I need a little Disney in my life right now.”

Gachunga is 8,600 miles from her family in Nakuru, Kenya. She traveled home in December for the first time since starting college and wasn't due to return to Kenya until the summer of 2021. But with summer school going online and her campus job as a Couch Tower RA ending in May, she will have no income or prospect of a job, as her student visa only permits her to work on campus.

Gachunga says her parents are worried about their daugh-

ter being so far away during a pandemic. “And things are getting worse in Kenya every time I talk with my family,” she says, adding that COVID-19 is marching across the African continent as well. She would feel easier returning home to be with her family rather than being helpless so far away.

Added to those worries is the fact that Kenya may soon be closing its borders to both citizens and non-citizens alike. “It's a very unpredictable situation,” she says.

Gachunga is one of more than 1,000 who have applied for a grant from Sooners Helping Sooners, a crowdsourcing effort ramping up to address challenges faced by OU students. By late April, OU administrators had already distributed in excess of \$205,000 in grants on the three campuses. Norman-campus gifts helped cover rent, food, utilities and travel for some 450 students. (*See Shelter From the Storm on page 21*)

While her grant application is being reviewed, Gachunga remains with the 170 other “special circumstances” students continuing to take refuge on the Norman campus during the pandemic. Each is relying on an OU network of faculty, staff, alumni and supporters dedicated to making sure that their educational and personal needs are met in the midst of an unprecedented crisis.

For now, she waits. “There's not much else I can do,” Gachunga says.



Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.