

PUBLICATION

A Conversation Between Our Editors: Pandemic Partners to Rely Upon

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We have all been facing historically unprecedented times as so many challenges and pressures have converged in 2020. Everyone has been impacted in some manner and one thing that everyone has struggled with is how to remain positive when stretched and tested. The theme of this special issue of *Strive* is "Breathe." The simple act of breathing has become so much more meaningful as we confront COVID-19 and various issues of social injustice such as the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and countless others.

As working mothers, we understand that delicate balance between our legal practices and caring for our families. During these tumultuous and sometimes scary times, there are additional challenges, stressors and tough decisions that must be made almost daily. Do we send our kids back to school? Should we let them do after school activities or spend time with their friends? How do we talk to them about difficult topics like racism, political division and other issues facing our country today? One thing we have found that has helped tremendously is talking to each other and to other parents about these hard decisions and conversations with our kids. We both have eleven-year-olds – Kristine has a son, Sebastian, and Dena has a daughter, Jenna. Kristine also has an eight-year-old, Olivia. We thought we would share one of our conversations that we have had recently as our children have returned to school. We encourage everyone to find a "pandemic partner" upon whom you can rely and into whom you can pour so that you can breathe more easily during these stressful times.

Kristine: Sebastian and Olivia are so excited about this year for sixth and second grades, but COVID-19 has demanded difficult decisions. Our children's school gave us the choice of whether to attend in-person or virtually, with the option to switch to either format with one-weeks' notice to administrators. We have started the school year with virtual learning, and will closely monitor COVID-19-related developments. I realize how fortunate we are to even have options. At the same time, though, this decision has given me some angst and we debated the topic quite a bit as we approached the time for final decisions. In speaking with others, I have seen that there is no blueprint, no one size fits all, and the final choices can be deeply personal. I know that your daughter, Jenna, has started school and is also in the sixth grade this year. How has the school year kicked off for her?

Dena: She is so happy to be back and is doing great. We had the same choice for Jenna, but for us, we didn't struggle with the decision to send her back to campus. As an only child, we saw the impact of her being isolated and felt that she did not do as well academically with virtual learning. Our normally happy child was much more somber, and she didn't enjoy school like she normally does. Once we saw the efforts the school was making, particularly with small classes that stay together all day, we felt sending her to campus was the right decision for our family. She missed her friends and school so much.

Kristine: Sebastian and Olivia have also been missing the in-person interaction with friends, classmates and teachers. We have concerns about the effects of protracted online learning on them. But, we are also concerned about the unknown aspects of COVID-19, as scientists and health professionals report on the concrete facts about the disease process, but also acknowledge the varied impact across populations with

respect to symptoms and outlier cases with "unexpected" results. We are simply uncomfortable with the unknown.

Dena: I completely understand that. Although we were very confident in our decision, I cried when Jenna walked into middle school on the first day. I would normally walk her in and watching her walk in with a mask brought up all kinds of fears in me. I think parents always have the "first day fears" but that, coupled with the question of whether I was sending my child into something unsafe, was even more daunting and overwhelming.

Kristine: Of course, having Sebastian and Olivia at home takes a significant toll on us as we manage coordinating daily schedules and carve out parts of our workdays to instruct and academically support them, particularly Olivia who is only eight. Our children's school has put much time and effort into planning and implementing procedures to ensure a safe environment. We are hopeful that, in time, our children will be back at school.

Dena: I worry sometimes about what Jenna is facing as an eleven-year-old. I want her to understand what is happening in the world, but also want her to still be a carefree kid. It is a delicate balance, particularly given recent conversations we have had about the protests, racism and antisemitism.

Kristine: Our interactions with our children over the course of these months have been complicated as we determine the best ways to frame and discuss the race issues that are unfolding. My mother immigrated from Guyana, South America in the mid-1960s and my father immigrated from Grenada in the late-1960s. My husband is Korean, and he immigrated to Northern Virginia in 1981 when he was six years old. We have always told our children to be proud of their rich, diverse heritage.

Dena: What do you say to them about recent events in this country?

Kristine: It has been challenging. My children are half Black and half Korean. So, we have had to witness and address with our children some of the prejudiced sentiments directed against Asians recently in the wake of COVID-19. We have also had to confront with them the past and ongoing realities of the Black experience in this country. As a mother who has experienced racism, observed racism and witnessed its demoralizing effects, these recent events have uncovered old wounds and forced me to have difficult conversations with my children.

Dena: Can you tell me about those talks?

Kristine: Difficult. As parents, we want our children to be prepared, and to that end, we always strive to provide a genuine and honest picture. At the same time, we recognize their innocence and have a natural longing to shield them from things that are graphic and can profoundly impact their understanding of the world and their place in it. In our interactions with our children each day, we are reminded that prejudice is taught and learned. As we explain the current state of affairs, our children look at us with disbelief and often raise the question, "How can this be?" But we are hopeful as we feel the constructive energy that surrounds the current discussions in our society. We are hopeful about the upcoming generations when we observe our children's confusion. We are hopeful when we hear the incredulity in our children's voices. We are hopeful that the trajectory can change for the better. How have you been talking with Jenna in today's climate?

Dena: It has been difficult finding the right thing to say and the right way to say it. I read, listen and watch a lot. Jenna does not understand how anyone can hate, period, let alone hate someone they do not personally know. It breaks my heart that I have to explain that type of hatred and bigotry to her, but she is old enough now to have some frank conversations. I read her *Ruby Bridges Goes to School* when she was little, and we

recently watched the "Time 100" interview with Ruby Bridges during which she discussed the recent protests and the "clean hearts" of children. Jenna said to me, "It is so sad that she is grown up now but still has to see people being racist." We also talk a lot about standing up for what is right and just. Last year, she learned about the Holocaust for the first time and we have discussed the dramatic rise in antisemitism in the U.S. We are a Jewish/Catholic family and she was frightened when we discussed this again, because she simply cannot understand that type of bigotry and intolerance.

Kristine: One thing that gives me hope is what Ruby Bridges recognized about children having "clean hearts." She is right and we are seeing that in the responses of our own children.

Dena: I feel we are all being tested as human beings and as parents. We are all afraid of making a wrong step. But it helps to be able to talk about it with each other.

Kristine: I too am glad that we have each other to lean on.