

## Brother Brandon Wenzel, '21



As I sat staring out the window of my train as I headed for Bologna the similar sound of a message played in Italian over the loudspeaker. The conductor announced that the train system was doing everything it can to sanitize the trains and prevent the spread of Covid-19. This included skipping the next scheduled stop on the train line, Codogno.

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A week earlier as I headed for the Carnival of Venice, Italy was like many other countries with isolated Covid-19 cases from those travelling back from China. As we arrived on Friday, there were three new cases in Italy, one in Venezia and two in my home province of Lombardia. By the end of Saturday night, we had found out that the amount of confirmed cases was rising rapidly, especially in the province of Lombardia. We learned the government had taken some drastic steps to prevent

the spread of the virus by cancelling the Inter Milan game we were supposed to attend the next night as well as the start of our instruction at the University of Pavia that Monday.

When we got back from Venice we were able to find out why. The city of Codogno had gone from a city many Italians had never heard of to a place described as “The Wuhan of Italy”. The town, located a mere 30 miles from my home in Pavia sent the region of Lombardia into a panic. A 38-year old marathon runner from Codogno became the first known person to be infected with the coronavirus in Italy. This “patient zero” unknowingly helped in the spread of the virus throughout the region causing local shops to close and families to stock up at the grocery store.

The spread of the disease was quick to affect my quaint town of Pavia. Pavia, renowned for its hospital, began treating coronavirus patients from around Lombardia. Additionally, a resident of Pavia was one of the first to contract the disease in Italy. He was a doctor working in Codogno and did not have proper protective equipment while first diagnosing those who had fallen ill in the town. Pavia’s vibrant town square began to see fewer locals enjoying the bars and restaurants. The majority of the University of Pavia’s international student population began to evacuate. Friends began to return to their home countries of Canada and India as

their home countries began recommending evacuation from Italy. University canteens began closing with the few open canteens requiring takeaway service.

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Still, as my train chugged along past the locked down town of Codogno passengers continued along their lives like normal. Few Italians outside of Lombardia were very worried. So, as I arrived outside Bologna's twelve gates almost everything seemed normal. The government had taken a few matters into their own hands such as the cancellation of all sporting events as well as the closure of Torre Degli Asinelli. Yet, as I took in all the historic sights related to Kappa Sigma throughout Bologna it seemed as if nothing had changed. Italians were still going on with their day by going to work, shopping, eating, and just enjoying life. Many took their daily stroll after work, walking the streets with no purpose in mind but just to enjoy themselves and engage with their community.



As I reconnected with classmates the next day as we visited Florence we began to hear of more and more peers who had decided to return home early with fears of the virus in Italy. We would subsequently find out that we were soon to follow. By the end of the weekend University of Illinois was requiring all study abroad students in Italy to return home immediately and self-quarantine.

As my peers and I rushed back to the states from Italy in hopes to beat any travel ban, we were surprised to not encounter any advanced security measures upon reentry. While we were excited to be back many of us could not reunite with family due to family members having underlying conditions that would put them at severe risk if they encountered the virus. It was a scary time for all of us as we did not want to spread the disease around our communities and had heard of a SAE returning home from Italy who had tested positive for coronavirus. Luckily, we all came away healthy at the end of our self-quarantines just in time to receive the shelter in place order from the state of Illinois.