

Lockdown diaries: Cat, university administrator & mother of two in Seville

Cat Gaa is a Chicagoan and remote worker who is coordinating the outgoing communication for an American university in Madrid while raising two bilingual hell raisers in Seville. The higher education and study abroad industries have been severely impacted by the ongoing crisis and Cat is using her digital toolkit to keep students and their families closely informed on new developments in real-time.

What was your life like a week ago vs. today?

My life ago was vastly different: my two boys, ages three and eight months, got dropped off at daycare around 9 AM, and I had a coffee at a neighborhood bar in Seville where I live before sitting down at my home office to work. When the Comunidad de Madrid decided to suspend classes, my workplace was immediately affected. I felt so disconnected and unable to help with the avalanche of calls from concerned parents, study abroad partners and prospective students. But it helped me see that the same would eventually happen in Sevilla, so I stocked up on necessities like formula and diapers, bought some craft material and new toys and started planning homeschooling lessons.

This week, my husband is taking over the child-minding while I work ahead as much as possible. Even though I've been remote

since returning from maternity leave in December, my coworkers are trying to carry on away from the office, which has presented a few challenges, but we're making the best of it. My family is quickly realizing how much food we eat, how many loads of laundry we put on each week and that toddlers have very, very short attention spans.

What does the street look like?

I live on a quiet street at the heart of the *barrio* de Triana. Most of my neighbors are elderly. My home office has a clear line of site to a bus stop, and we live in front of a tobacco shop. The whoosh of the bus helps me keep track of time because I've given up wearing a watch – nearly every bus is empty as it passes by. There's usually a short line about four or five people deep at the tobacco shop, and I find myself looking out the window any time I hear someone on the street. Usually, it's someone on their phone, breathing in orange blossoms and chattering while walking their dog or toting groceries. At the moment, I haven't seen many masks because the rumor here was that the forthcoming heat would burn off the virus in time for us to burn incense. But both Holy Week and the April Fair are canceled and postponed, respectively.

Seville is a city that claims the street to be their living room. It's odd to not have the white noise at all hours.

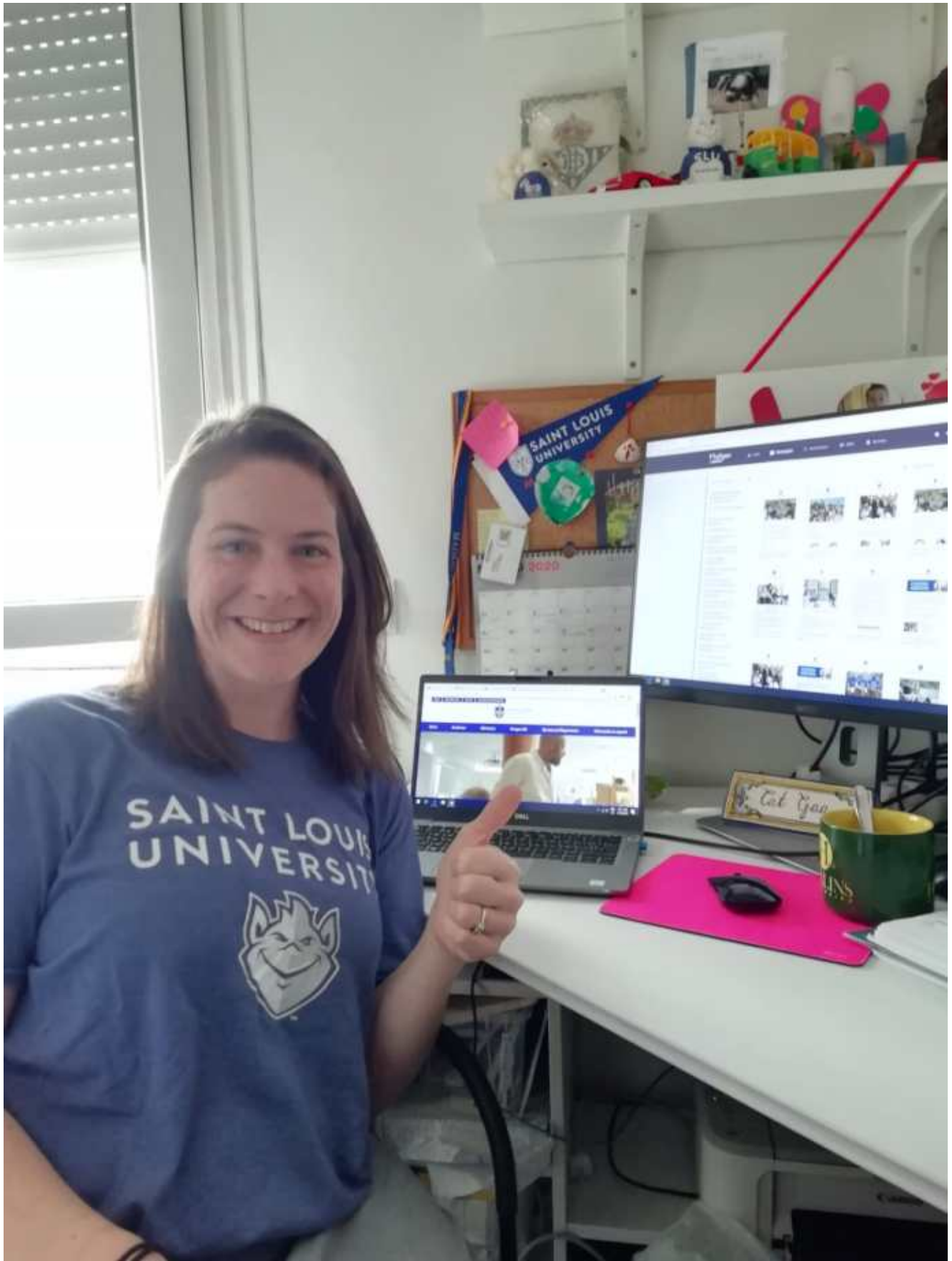


Have you noticed any random acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?

I am part of a WhatsApp group with the other parents at daycare; in a class of 18 kids, two are medical professionals and have offered video consultations to rule out anything that doesn't merit a trip to the ER. Others have sent along material and games to keep this age group busy; I have helped some of the older children with English homework. Compassion for one another was severely lacking on a societal level, so I hope this situation brings people together. I have hunkered down in the house and not yet ventured out, and I live in a home rather than a *comunidad de vecinos*.

How are you coping?

So far, just fine. I haven't left the house since getting the boys from their last day of school on Friday the 13th. We have a patio and a terrace, and I am used to being at home – really, it could be worse. But I worry about the psychological effects that this might have on a growing toddler who will likely remember this. We've made s'mores and dressed up in old costumes and had family members back in Chicago read bedtime stories to us. It's a great time to bond and work on some of those *tareas* that I was saving for the summer, like learning to get dressed or roll over. I am trying to keep things as normal as I can with schedules but letting my toddler's creativity and free play take over.



Next week will be different, I'm afraid: my husband is a civil servant and considered essential services. He got a free pass

during the first week of lockdown but will have to return to Madrid for at least six days. This means I'll be alone with the boys – working in the pockets of time I have – at 6 AM, after they've gone to bed, or whenever they're calm and occupied. Handling the cooking and cleaning. Homeschooling as much as one can. I'd love to use this time to finally dust off my French book or organize my drawers but I know I'll soon be on survival mode.

What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?

Although I'd like to take an *exedencia* from my life for 48 hours and just go sleep in a hotel or have a few beers in Plaza Salvador, I think I will take my kids to see their *abuelos* when it's safe. They equate non-school days with spending time outdoors and with their grandparents, so explaining this situation to a small person has been difficult. I may just mandate that we see them outdoors, and preferably at one of those playgrounds next to a bar.

If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?

No more knee-jerk reactions, and please make decisions on the whole. As a communications professional, I had to scour the news for the most current information, and many of the decisions seem reactionary as opposed to proactive. In times like these where bad or incorrect news travels quickly because of the technological resources we have, they need to step back and assess, and then use better channels for information.

See all [Madrid Lockdown Diaries](#) here