

HERE IN SPIRIT

Cornell celebrates its first-ever 'virtual Reunion'



REMOTE, YET CLOSE: Student singers from the Glee Club and Chorus (above) join their voices on Cornelliana Night. Below: The weekend's events included (clockwise from top left) a book reading by Arts & Sciences Dean Ray Jayawardhana, reminiscences by well-known alumni including Kate Snow '91, a teach-in on racism and social justice, and a tour of the Vet college. Opposite page: Scenes from the "virtual 5K."



In June, more than 10,500 alumni from the classes of 1937 to 2020 participated in Reunion—a record-breaking turnout. Attendees enjoyed a Chimes concert, a tour of the Botanic Gardens, class happy hours, and much more.

And they did it all online.

For the first time since World War II, Reunion wasn't held far above Cayuga's waters. Following the University's transition to remote instruction and the postponement of Commencement due to the coronavirus pandemic, Alumni Affairs announced in late March that this year's gathering would be virtual. "Initially there was some skepticism, particularly from those who had experienced an in-person Reunion," notes Kate Freyer, director of Reunion and volunteer engagement events. "It was hard to imagine those connections feeling the same way over a screen." But by the end of the weekend, she says, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive—and thanks to the virtual format, many alumni who wouldn't have been able to travel to Ithaca for logistical or health reasons were able to participate. "While Cornellians certainly missed campus, I think this experience opened a lot of people's eyes to the idea that connecting isn't just in a place," Freyer says. "It's really about the community, no matter where you are."

The 100-plus events included presentations on topics ranging from University history to meteorology to mental health. The Cornell Black Alumni Association (CBAA) held its annual Reunion party, with members and guests dancing in their living rooms and backyards.

PHOTOS: PROVIDED

In lieu of the traditional on-campus 5K, many alums donned Big Red swag and ran or walked their own version. There was even a Big Red trivia game styled after “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” where contestants competed for bragging rights via Zoom. “Reunion had that Cornell feel, like there was just something for everyone,” says Valisha Graves ’85, who participated in the game and other events from her home in Brooklyn. “For those of us who are still pretty much stuck in the house, it really made you forget that for a while.”

This year, as at past Reunions, a number of offerings addressed current political and societal events. University leaders—including President Martha Pollack and Weill Cornell Medicine Dean Augustine Choi—hosted discussions on navigating the challenges of COVID-19. In the wake of anti-racism protests across the nation, a teach-in featured speakers reflecting on the history of social justice movements, the importance of listening to members of marginalized groups, and the actions allies can take to make an impact. One of the speakers, CBAA president John Rawlins III ’06, says the conversations gave him “some glimpse of hope.” He adds: “We talk often about how Cornell is ‘any person, any study,’ and we want to make sure that our institution lives up to those values.”

This year’s Cornelliana Night—a gala evening of Big Red songs and celebration typically held in Bailey Hall—included Zoom performances by members of the Glee Club and Chorus as well as a tribute to President Emeritus Frank H.T. Rhodes, who passed away earlier this year. The event also featured pre-recorded messages in which some well-known Cornellians

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named their favorite spots on campus. While many cited the usual suspects—Libe Slope, Schoellkopf Stadium, the Suspension Bridge, the Dairy Bar—“Science Guy” Bill Nye ’77 recalled a lecture hall in Uris where he attended Carl Sagan’s astronomy course. Actor Jimmy Smits, MFA ’82—known for roles on “L.A. Law,” “NYPD Blue,” and “The West Wing”—spoke about the theater in the basement of Willard Straight Hall where he performed works by Shakespeare and Shaw, adding that he’s “forever loyal to the Big Red, forever grateful to Cornell.”

While some of the smaller-scale events hosted by individual classes were by invitation only, most Reunion programming was available to all, free of charge. (Many can be viewed at live.alumni.cornell.edu.) “Anything that can break down barriers to getting in touch with one another—whether those be geographic, accessibility, or scheduling—is very important,” says A’ndrea Van Schoick ’96, president of the Cornell Association of Class Officers, who notes that more online programming will be incorporated into future alumni events. “These virtual opportunities allowed people to share experiences, perspectives, and best practices, which is truly how we learn and grow.” ■

—Alexandra Bond ’12

