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NARRATOR: Hello, and welcome to "We Roar." With coronavirus still disrupting our lives, we're asking Princetonians on campus and off to share how they're living and working through the crisis, how everyone is staying together from afar, and how so many of us are working to serve the wider world. In this episode, we hear thoughts about grief and resilience, closure and continuity, as Princeton heads into its first-ever virtual commencement.

IRA DOUNN: Hi, everyone. My name is Ira Dounn. I'm one of the rabbis at the Center for Jewish Life at Princeton University, and I feel really privileged to get to work at Princeton with other extraordinarily colleagues at the Office of Religious Life. Uh, the students are absolutely extraordinary, as you — as you might imagine. I am routinely inspired and impressed by them — not just by their intelligence, but also by their compassion, their thoughtfulness, their empathy.

And so that's what I do. I really focus one-on-one on building relationships, um, and being a part of people's lives as much as possible. I mean, you can maintain so much connection and closeness — even over Zoom. In fact, I might say that either the fellowships or those moments with emailing or Zooming with or speaking with, on the phone, students are the highlights of my week, because it's hard to be in isolation. It is just very hard, especially for people who are extroverted, who get their energy from being with other people.

And so for extroverts like me, I find that being in community via Zoom, via phone, via text, via all the platforms and media that we have at our disposal, has been a source of inspiration and energy, and I'm grateful for it.

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Grief is just so challenging. And especially, it's challenging when we don't have a community at our side. In the middle of March, my uncle passed away — of blessed memory — my uncle — my uncle who I was very close with, who didn't have a family of his own, and who I was sort of in between nephew and son to, in the sense that he didn't have children, and so I stepped up as much as I could. And when he passed away in the middle of March from cancer, we were only able to visit him one at a time, because they were trying to socially distance in the hospice that he was in.

When he passed away, we had to tell people they could not come to the funeral. We had a funeral with six people, all the immediate family — my parents, my wife, my child, and his sister, my aunt, and one aunt who dialed in by FaceTime — and it was devastating to tell people they couldn't come.

[SIGH]

The instinct is, when people are sad or grieving, to come together. It's one of the most productive parts of sadness. And that is not possible in a time of social distancing. The other things — is that

— there's always opportunity for people to go above and beyond. And the above and beyond really makes all the difference in the world. I really appreciated, when my uncle passed away, the people who reached out and then reached out again a couple of days later.

I think everyone processes grief differently. Given social distancing, a screen just — does just fine for noticing how someone's doing. Just notice how they're doing in the screen. And be there with that person in active listening. And that will do a world of good. It has done a world of good for me.

[MUSIC]

I've reached out to a lot of students. And one of the things I've asked especially some of the seniors is: "How do you get closure?" — that it is unlikely that you will have the closure that you have thought you will be having. And so how does one remain Princeton away from Princeton? That's the question. And I asked them that because I want to know how they were processing that for themselves.

They're, as I said, extraordinary people with extraordinary empathy and compassion and insights. Some of them really were unwilling to move on, saying, "I can't have closure. I can't move on until I do walk through that gate, until we do have that commencement."

Another person, really, on the flight back home to Oklahoma, was writing in their journal and said things like, "Maybe there is a silver lining in all of this, that our last memory of Princeton will be as Princetonians. We couldn't dwell on how to spend the last weeks. We didn't have to have to ask how many hours to spend with which people. We weren't forced into protracted goodbyes. Our emotional well-being didn't depend on a Step Sing or a graduation dinner. By happenstance, our last few weeks at Princeton looked like any other." And I thought that was especially beautiful, too.

The other thing which came up in some of my conversations with students, again, similarly, is that it's not closure but continuity. At Princeton, to its great credit, does an excellent job engaging alumni, and that — there is an opportunity at reunions to come back and come back and come back again. And so instead of closure, what the students might be looking for is a sense of continuity, that their time at Princeton isn't over.

Their time as a student at Princeton might be over. And the way that it ended might not have been how they expected it, but that there will be a lot of time to come back to campus and to experience being on campus with the people who are in your class, again and again, thanks to Princeton's recurring tradition of reunions and its focus on being a Princetonian not just for your four years as an undergrad but throughout your entire life.

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The other thing I would just say, also, is that some students really appreciated having things in perspective.

And this goes to the compassion and the empathy that they feel, that sometimes it's not about them and their Princeton experience, but actually — and this is embodying the informal motto "in service of the nation and humanity" — that people are not actually that worried in some cases about their own closure but are really worried about the devastation that's happening in our

country and around the world, that people and families are being devastated both through the illness itself and economically, and not only just people out there but also their fellow students and sometimes themselves — they themselves.

But for now, the focus for many of them is on the most needy. And that is inspiring. But at the end of it, we will come back to Princeton, and we will rejoice in the end of the ‘Princeton diaspora,’ so to speak, when we all come back together.

And in the meantime, what rituals can we create? What can we do together to maintain what we had? I’m going to maintain those relationships. I’m going to put in the effort. I’m going to put in proactive effort to reach out to the people I want to continue to have — to be in relationship with.

It’s not as easy as being in the dining hall. It’s not as easy as going into class or seeing them on campus. But it’s important. We can make it work. And we can make it work beautifully, even though we’re not together, and all the while hoping that one day, one day soon, we’ll be back in exactly that wonderful place that we were once in.

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