

Amber's Story: Reuniting Thanks to the COVID-19 Vaccine

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By

Some families may have felt stuck together during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not mine.

Thanks to unfortunate timing and strict regulations, my husband Eric and I have lived on different continents for almost 2 years.

We were so stoked when he got a 2-year job offer in Macao, a 43-square-mile island just west of Hong Kong. It felt like our dream had come true. We'd been wanting to live abroad since we met in college more than a decade ago, where our mutual love of adventure drew us together.

When Eric headed to Macao in January 2020, the plan was for me to join him as soon as China approved a spousal visa for me. It should've taken just 3 weeks.

I put our most precious belongings in storage, sold the rest and leased our house to another family. In the meantime, our dog, Barkley, had traveled to Macao. So, there I was, with only my suitcases, ready to join Eric and Barkley for our adventure.

When we heard about a disease called COVID-19 in mainland China, we didn't think it would affect the U.S.—let alone our plans.

We were wrong.

COVID-19 and China

The pandemic spread through mainland China, and the country locked down immediately—so well that in Macao, they've had less than 100 cases with no deaths since.

It was comforting to know Eric and Barkley were safe due to strict control measures. But so much was unknown at that point, and it was still frightening.

By March 2020, my family had been apart for 2 months and COVID-19 was officially a global pandemic. We had no idea how long it would last, how bad it would be or when China would reopen its borders to foreigners.

As the pandemic dragged on month after month, I realized everything was beyond my control. I felt anxious, scared—even hopeless.

I tried everything I could to rejoin my family. My ember of hope was a loophole that allowed foreigners to enter mainland China. It quickly was extinguished because it required a visa. China wouldn't budge, despite my efforts through the U.S. Embassy in Hong Kong and Chinese consulates in the U.S.

I felt abandoned, like no one cared what was happening to us.

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Amber Oliver

My husband and I are originally from Oklahoma, so all of our relatives live out of state. I was reluctant to travel to them out of fear for their safety—plus I kept expecting to get a call that I could get to China—and I wanted to be close to an international airport. That's when a couple of friends and I decided to live together, for what we thought would be a few weeks.

Along with a friend who was a doctor, this became my “quaran-team,” the only people I saw for many months.

I really struggled emotionally. Sometimes I would stay in my bed for 80 percent of the day. I was feeling so down that I couldn't even listen to pop music without full-body sobbing. Every song had lyrics that affected me.

I felt like my whole world had ended, because it kind of had. It was a terrible feeling to be unable to control my own emotions, not to mention the world around me.

Thankfully, I went to a therapist and a psychiatrist, who helped me cope and prescribed anti-depressants. Getting help gave me more control over myself and made my lack of control of the world around me less daunting.

Long distance love

Eric and I have learned to make the best of a tough situation. Though we're in vastly different time zones, we FaceTime so we can see each other at any moment.

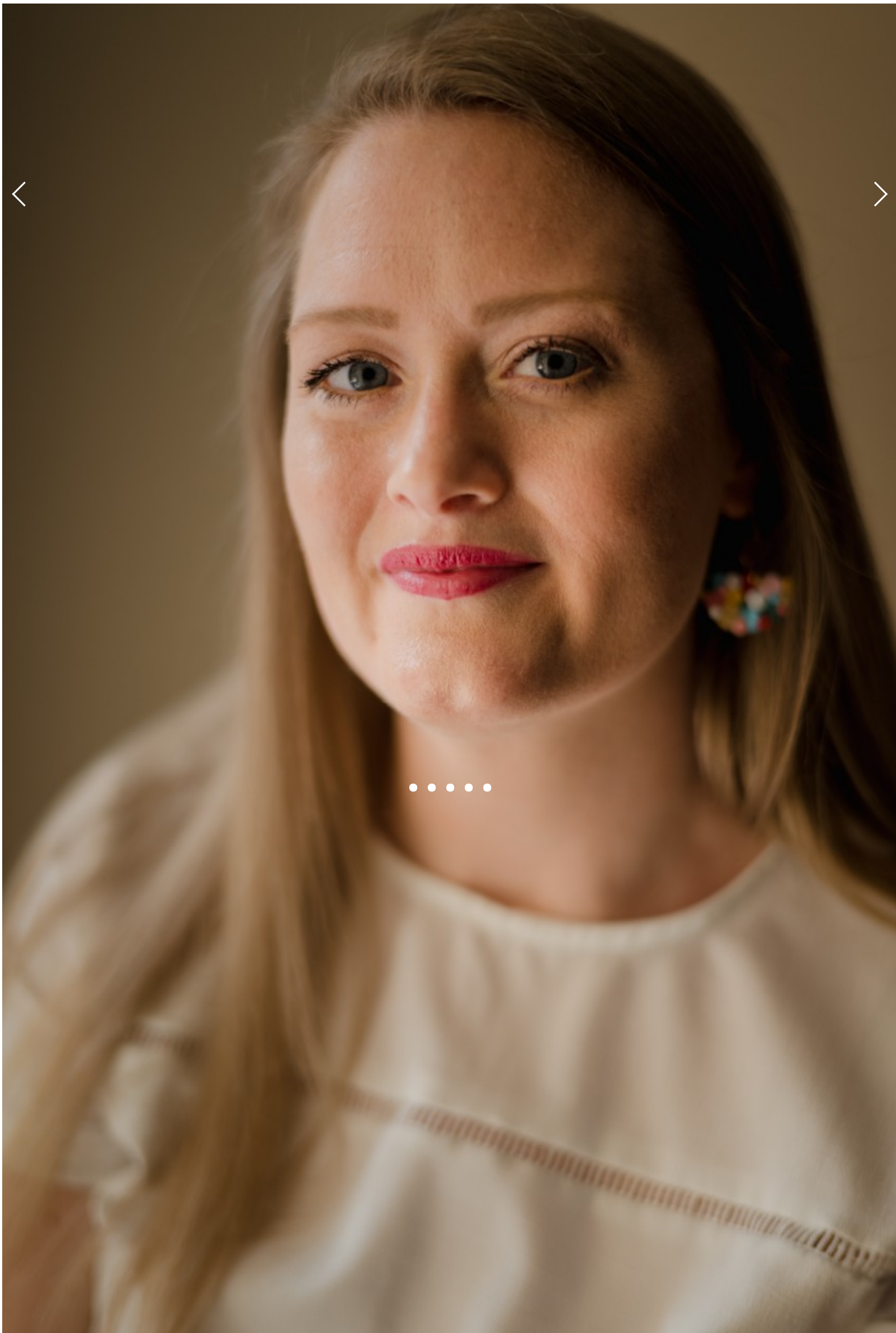
Since he's asleep most of the time that I'm up, we also use WhatsApp to stay connected.

I'll share whatever I'm doing throughout the day: what I'm eating for lunch or watching on TV. Or I'll share a funny passage from a book, because I've done a lot of reading in the last year. And he does the same for me. Of course, his photos are a lot more interesting because he's in an exciting new place.

Our expat pup has his own Instagram account, [TailsOfBarkley](#), and seeing his “grams” helps me feel connected to my family despite being on different continents.

Christmas 2020 was my first in 8 years apart from my husband and furball, but I gained a new perspective: It was the year we didn't get everything we wanted but it was the year we appreciated everything we had.

And hope was on the horizon. That month the U.S. Food and Drug Administration finally approved a COVID-19 vaccine.



Shot of hope

I felt like my shot at regaining my life was to get a shot.

So when my sister-in-law told me Memorial Hermann needed volunteers to help at [vaccination events](#)—and that I could get a vaccine in return—I jumped on the opportunity. This was my moment.

After only being around a small group of people for more than a year, the drive-through vaccination clinic felt like a thrill. I was able to speak to people outside of my “quaran-team”—and in three languages, no less.

Now that I’m fully vaccinated, I’m hopeful I’m one step closer to being reunited with Eric.

When I finally see him, it’s going to be so emotional and amazing.

I keep building it up in my head like it’s one of those movie scenes where I run through the airport and jump into his arms.

More than likely, I’ll have to quarantine when I arrive so it may be a little less romantic, but it definitely will be a long-awaited reunion.

A new beginning

As I reflect on the past year, I realize I’m capable of much more than I thought. Eric and I know that not everyone could’ve gone through what we did and stay together. Our relationship still is strong, if not stronger.

And, after spending five straight months with my friends, we’ll definitely be friends for life.

We’re still holding out hope that he can extend his contract and we can have our long-awaited adventures—traveling and enjoying a different part of the world.

That has always been our dream. It still is. Someday, somehow, we’ll make it happen.

We will have a happy ending—or new beginning.

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