

## RELIEF FUND

# HCC student turns bad luck into good fortune

By **Wei-Huan Chen**  
STAFF WRITER

Jamyra McAfee was walking back from a dinner celebrating her upcoming last semester of school when she saw the shattered glass in the parking lot. Someone had broken into her friend's car and stolen McAfee's laptop.

"I had a complete breakdown," she said. "I knew I didn't have enough money to replace it."

That incident in December meant that, when COVID-19 hit the U.S., McAfee would become one of the many Houston Community College impacted by the quarantine. As a student who relies on using the school's computers and attending classes in person, online-only class wasn't possible.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this," she thought to herself after HCC went completely online in March.

McAfee graduated in 2008 from Sterling High School in Houston's south side. She planned to go to college and work in criminal justice but had to leave school in 2009 when she had her first daughter. But working in the prison system had been a dream of hers.

"I have family members that have gone through the prison system – an uncle was wrongfully incarcerated," she said. "I had friends, too, a lot of people who have potential; they're smart, but they feel like nobody cares."

McAfee wanted to be that person who cared, and so decided she wanted to work in juvenile probation. She wanted to be that parole officer who cared about the people she worked with, who knew the



Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

**Houston Community College student Jamyra McAfee's laptop was stolen, leaving her unable to continue her coursework when her campus went online during the coronavirus pandemic. Thanks to the HCC Foundation relief fund, she replaced her laptop.**

kind of impact someone like her could make on a teenager with a record.

"Having seen so many who come through the prison system, I know they're gifted people, if only they put their energy into something else," she said.

Going back to school to fulfill that dream seemed daunting. To pay for school and to help raise her two daughters, McAfee worked nights stocking items at a warehouse.

"I'd be in school 9 a.m. to

12:50 p.m. I'd go home, pick up my kids from school, take a nap, go to work at night," she said. "I worked from 10:45 to 4:45 a.m."

She switched to working at H-E-B, managing to pay her school bills while raising a family and taking courses. Then her laptop was stolen – then the virus hit.

After HCC went online, McAfee found a way to finish school. That's when she found out about a new relief fund for students just like her – those in

## Make a difference

To support HCC's emergency relief fund for students, visit [hccsfoundation.org/emergency-relief](https://hccsfoundation.org/emergency-relief). All donations are matched by the HCC Foundation.

need of the technology required to continue with schoolwork during the quarantine. Supported by the HCC Foundation, the fund allowed McAfee to have enough money to buy a new

laptop.

"I was shocked they said I had been awarded," McAfee said. As a probation officer, she said, she looks forward to giving people the second chance many never got.

"People make mistakes they could have avoided if they had somebody who took the time who cared. I know there are officers who care," she said.

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## PANDEMIC

# Libraries not reopening yet, but virtual programming still going strong

By **Emma Balter**  
STAFF WRITER

The Houston Public Library system, which operates 38 locations across the city, opted not to reopen May 1, despite Gov. Greg Abbott's declaration that libraries (as well as restaurants, theaters and malls) may open their doors again. Instead, it will remain closed through May 31.

All requested books are still on hold and cannot be picked up. However, the library is still offering a wealth of remote activities and resources, from story times and podcasts to craft sessions and virtual tours of historical buildings.

When coronavirus cases started to rise in early March, HPL took precautions such as spacing out chairs and turning off every other computer. As in-person services were ramping down, the staff brainstormed how to increase and add virtual programming. Then on March 16, eight days before the Harris County stay-at-home order, HPL locations closed their doors.

HPL's resources and activities are accessible for free with a My Link library card. For those who don't have one, HPL is offering temporary online cards, which are valid until Aug. 1. Books, audio books, magazines, TV shows, movies and music are available online as always, and the library is adding content every week. Brainfuse, an online tutoring service, may be especially useful for parents homeschooling their children right now.

Other activities previously held at the library have been adapted to



Melissa Phillip / Staff photographer

**Houston's public libraries, including the Freed-Montrose Neighborhood Library, will remain closed through May, but their staffs are regularly adding virtual programming to engage readers.**

social distancing.

"We're used to people coming to us, so we're having to figure out how to get to them," said Laurie Covington, HPL's interim assistant director of customer experience. "It's definitely been a learning curve."

The story times on Facebook Live are the most popular new addition. Staff members read books aloud to viewers at 11 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Covington said publishers have been extra generous with permissions because of the current circumstances. Story times at a library location typically attract 30 to 50 people, but on Facebook Live, libraries are seeing 600, 800, sometimes 1,000

people tune in. Engagement on various online platforms is up across the board.

"The way that we're connecting with people now through social media is stronger than it was before, and I think we'll continue to build on that," Covington said.

The library has added podcasts as well as the video story times in which staff read the first chapter of teen and tween books to whet readers' appetite. They are working on getting craft and STEM videos up; the latter will involve simple scientific experiments that kids can recreate with household items. Anyone can take virtual tours of the Julia Ideson Building, includ-

ing a scavenger hunt and a "then and now" theme that shows when it was built in the 1920s. The African American Library at the Gregory School will also have its own virtual tour soon.

A telephone reference line is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays to help library users navigate all of the library's resources. Virtual events are posted on the website's calendar.

The new programming is resonating. During story times, some children have even been requesting their own librarians, eager to see a familiar face.

"I think it's important to realize that we're part of the community that we live in and that we're there for you," Covington said. "We're just like anybody else, trying to feel our way through."

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