The property of California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) was not always the site of the CSU’s twenty-third campus. From 1936-1997 the Spanish-colonial style buildings housed 7,000 of California’s mentally handicapped population at Camarillo State Hospital. The site sat vacant for 5 years from 1997 until CSUCI took over the old hospital buildings in 2002. The COVID-19 pandemic brought back an unnerving quietness, reminiscent of when the property was unoccupied.

My mom and I took advantage of how serene the campus was and made a point to walk our dogs there several times per week. We did it not just to get out of the house, but due to how enjoyable it was to take in the beauty of the campus. Recalling these memories strongly evokes all five senses and immediately brought me back to the lockdown times of the early pandemic.

The absence of college students rushing to their next class made the campus strangely quiet, but there was an enjoyable quality to it. You would occasionally hear ocean breezes whizzing around the vacant corridors and then immediately get greeted with the smell of salty beach air. It would be common for the air to be mixed with the smell of cilantro and strawberries being harvested at farms surrounding the campus. However, not all smells are made equal. When the winds would change, the on-site wastewater facility would waft heinous odors into the direction of the campus, momentarily ruining the blissful experience.

The open corridors of the former hospital buildings contain steady slopes, occasionally requiring one to hold the handrails that have stood for nearly one hundred years. It always made me dive back in history and think about the thousands of patients at the hospital that probably held onto that same rail. At times we would hear screeching from the sky near the old Receiving and Treatment hospital where the current university library stands. We both would look up and see large turkey vultures or hawks elegantly gliding over the thousand-acre property, creating a picturesque scene above us.

Now that we are in a post-pandemic world trying to return to normal, these experiences are not quite the same as they were in the height of the pandemic when the school was completely emptied. Students have returned to the dorms, and university-related events are once again a common occurrence throughout the campus.