

Student Views of the Pandemic

7/21

Kathy Holley

While everyone's life has been changed by the Covid-19 pandemic, how has it impacted local high school students? Applicants for this year's Racine PTA Council Scholarships were asked to write an essay telling how the pandemic has changed them and what lessons they learned from the experience.

Their responses were honest, insightful, and heartfelt. For many, the sudden impact of the pandemic made it feel like their world had come to an end. Joseph Skantz described a week full of swimming and music competitions, and then an abrupt halt on March 13. "Life as I knew it and everything that makes me who I am—swim, school, music, friends—was gone in the blink of an eye. My goals for the future were all tightly woven into my activities and now those activities were stripped away from me. I felt completely alone with no familiar routine or structure," he wrote.

Students suddenly had to adjust to a lot of stressful changes: being home all the time, sharing technology with family members, the loss of contact with friends, a lack of physical activity without sports practices, and having to adapt to online learning. "Time management was one skill that I learned to perfect. At school it was easy for me to pay attention but at home there were lots of distractions. I am able to work in any type of environment now," wrote Ella Janis. "I am also able to think things out for myself. At school it is easy to lean over and ask a friend for help, but at home I pushed myself to figure it out for myself."

Many students had to challenge themselves to be more productive and better organized, utilizing lists, calendars, planners, and learning new computer skills. But now they realize that this will be an asset by making them better prepared for college. They also found new ways to work fitness into their lives, without a coach or teammates to motivate them.

Others found that as the months dragged on, it got harder. Some admitted to struggling with depression and mental illness, and learned the importance of seeking help with those matters.

Laurel Sutherland struggled with remote learning, and eventually shared her concerns in a letter to the RUSD Board of Education. "Several of the school board members and school administrators reached out to me to thank me for my feedback and ask for suggestion. While the experience was uncomfortable and pushed me out of my comfort zone, it worked out for the best

and I am proud of the change I was able to help make. I now know the benefit of using my voice to make a positive difference.”

For many, loneliness set in. “Students felt disconnected from each other, our activities, and our schools. As more events were cancelled, our sense of belonging and school spirit suffered,” wrote Elizabeth Hanstedt. Her solution? Elizabeth worked with the student government at Horlick to create a district-wide canned food drive competition. “I learned the value of patience, respect, and perseverance. Unifying the students, staff, and community...we created a sense of belonging, contributed to making our city a better place, and donated approximately 11,700 pounds of canned food for the Racine community.”

While students missed their friends, others, like Mayle Aburto, found unexpected positives in their situation. “I didn’t realize that I was so focused on school, sports, and clubs that I had forgotten to take some time out of my busy schedule to just live in the moment with my family,” she wrote. “During quarantine, I learned how to cook some of my mom’s traditional dishes. I learned with my dad how to change my own car oil, change a tire, and other mechanical lessons. I learned how to sew with my younger sisters, and even talked more to my family back in Mexico.”

The same was true for Madeline Mars. “Once I got over the fact that high school wasn’t going to be the same, I started to find some positive. I started to appreciate my parents and time with them. We watched movies, played games, and made dinners together, something we hadn’t done since I was little. I was able to focus on my real friends and not all the other social pressures. I’m closer with my parents now and value family more than I did.”

After a long year, things finally started to change, as students returned to in-person learning, and happily began resuming activities.

As a talented musician, Rachel Christensen found that the pandemic took away her greatest joy—the ability to play with others in an orchestra. “When we were able to go back, just hearing the single soothing tuning note brought upon me this peace and calmness...the tuning note reminded me of all I have been deprived of...and reminded me exactly why performing in an orchestra is all I ever want to do.” The pandemic also gave Rachel the opportunity to think long and hard about a back-up plan, should she need to supplement her music career.

“Though this was a very stressful and emotional time, I feel so blessed and have developed a deeper appreciation for the security and safety my family has provided me,” wrote Elisabeth Greulich. “The Covid pandemic truly made me a more grateful person and helped me become a better listener and support to those around me.”

The lessons these students learned from this experience go far beyond any textbook or classroom lecture. “This pandemic has shaken our young understanding of reality—it has shown the value of time with others and morbidly outlined the fragility of life,” Kyle Waiss wrote. “The biggest takeaway, however, is the need to help others. No matter where I am, there will always be someone who is having a worse day, week, month, life. It is my duty to ensure they have a hand to bring them up, a torso to hug, or a shoulder to cry on. This is life post-Covid, and I intend to fulfill my duty.”

Marija Markovic learned about her friends and herself. “During quarantine, the people who wanted to reach out to me reached out, and vice versa, which revealed where my true friendships stood. The biggest takeaway I got from Covid-19 is self-discovery. I learned to enjoy my own company, which has guided me into becoming more independent,” she wrote. “I feel like this pandemic has allowed me to get to know myself on a deeper level and to not take things for granted.”

###