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June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

It was March 2020. The weekend of Friday the 13th was arguably the worst of many of our lives. It acted as a catalyst that brought division, uncertainty, unrest, and— worst of all— online learning. I was not a stranger to online classes; I had had them to catch up on credits and take required classes while fitting the extracurriculars I wanted into my schedule. If anything, online classes and I were best friends, but this time was different.

March was going to kick off the last leg of my junior year. I had it all lined up: regional and state competitions for basketball, a civics and conservation summit in Juneau, a concert for band and choir, a Close-Up trip to D.C. and New York, the Region V Music Festival in Sitka, a capstone event in Juneau for a research program I was participating in, and a six-week summer program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Life would never be boring. My academic resume was about to be as colorful as my calendar. At least it would have been.

None of it really sank in until the first week of quarantine when I suddenly felt suffocated by a heavy weight on my chest. All at once, I was reduced to nothing. I, a person who felt validation from my extracurriculars and being an overworked busy bee, was nothing in an instant. For the first time in my life, I slowed down, and I dug myself into a hole I could not get out of. I had no purpose. Being in my room and in front of a screen all day brought no motivation; it just brought me to my bed to sleep all day instead. It's a song well-known by the Zoom students of the quarantined generation.

When I heard that the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, the six-week summer program in Fairbanks, was occurring virtually, I decided to give it a try. My hopes were low: how was I supposed to learn or make friends the way I would in person at UAF? Maybe I signed up for six weeks of a failed virtual program that I would never get back. Nonetheless, I was eager to busy myself, to have a spring in my step again, even if that meant spending all day in my room in front of my computer.

My day started at nine in the morning and ended at nine at night. RAHI online was meant to be “as close to the real thing as possible,” which meant spending as much time together as we would have in person. In retrospect, I'm thankful for it; it forced me to get past the barrier of our computer screens and get to know my peers. I quickly made friends who would joke around, rant about classes, and play video games with me. Nearly a year later, I still talk to them and consider them close, trustworthy friends. I learned much from the virtual experience as well. I was forced to view my bedroom as a workspace and manage my time productively in the same room I had used to escape from work. I forced myself to prioritize. I learned how to study better. I became comfortable in asking for help, not only from my peers but also my professors and their teaching assistants. I realized that this kind of productivity during a pandemic required a certain level of maturity, and it enabled me to grow as a better student. Many of the techniques that worked for me— keeping my desk clean, making lists, staying connected with friends— are ones I plan to continue using to maintain a more productive but healthy lifestyle.

The most important thing that came to light during the pandemic is how much people need each other. Virtual learning has brought great challenges to both my physical and mental health, but I realized I should worry about the things I could actually control. I realized how important it is to check in on the people around me, like scheduling a group Zoom with my friends, playing a couple rounds of a video game, or even sending a simple text. Ultimately, I learned that I could not let anything, even virtual learning, get in the way of my education and well-being. It is a task easier said than done, but the lessons I have taken from the pandemic will forever shape me into a better person and a better student.