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While the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed many lives over the past year, my life changed in surprisingly few ways. I had been preparing for this “new” way of attending classes since 7th grade, though I hadn’t known it at the time.

Growing up in the small town of Cooper Landing, Alaska, with 250 year-round residents, fourteen students, and one teacher in the Kindergarten-12th grade school, my childhood and grade school life was much different from others my age. I am the only high-school senior and will be the first student to graduate from Cooper Landing School.

When I entered seventh grade in 2015, I had my first experience with video telecommunications (VTC). My teacher worked with other teachers from large middle schools on the Kenai Peninsula, to arrange for me to connect to their classrooms through video calls. After seven years with the same teacher, this gave me the opportunity to experience classes with different teachers and other students my age. I have now attended twenty-five synchronous classes via VTC, from eight different schools throughout our district, over a six-year span. These experiences taught me how to be independent, responsible, and, above all, resourceful.

During the past two years, I have been an intern for the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, working alongside district administration to provide additional classes, specifically to small schools, through the use of VTC, as well as spreading awareness of educational programs offered worldwide. In addition, I created professional development courses and spoke to teachers across the nation wanting to bring VTC into their classroom. I believe the transition to remote learning was easier for those teachers who had received this type of training prior to the pandemic, when school abruptly moved to an online format.

When the whole world switched to online learning in March 2020, the biggest change for me was calling into my classes from home, instead of doing so from the school building. While this was a fairly small change to my day-to-day life, the past year has had its share of disappointments and was not how I had always imagined it would be. In prior years, once or twice a month I would go to the city 50 miles away to attend classes in person, giving me a chance to meet other students my age. This was no longer possible. Prom was canceled at the large high schools, which I have been looking forward to since 6th grade, as well as other high school social events I’d been invited to in the past. In addition, many educational field trips that my own school in Cooper Landing had planned were canceled.

While it has been difficult seeing very few people outside of my own household, my family and friends have encouraged me to find the silver linings in challenging situations. I have managed to keep a positive attitude and connect with friends and family from afar. Over the summer, my youth group met utilizing Zoom each week. We found online ways to continue everything we were used to doing before the pandemic. These included online board games, reading books together, and working on projects. Every Thanksgiving, all of my family that lives in Alaska usually gets together for the holiday; this year we met over Zoom. It wasn’t quite the same, but in some ways, it was better, because family members from other states were able to join the video call.

In the end, I found more benefits during this time, than drawbacks. With everything online, materials became more accessible to me than they had been in the past. I even had the opportunity to take a chemistry class, which I previously had never had access to. Lastly, with school being online and at home, I found I had additional time on my hands, allowing me to do things that I didn’t have as much time for before, such as making hand-made cards, crafting, sewing, playing the piano, and reading books.

Overall, though there have been many difficulties caused by the pandemic, there have also been a number of positive changes. There are now more online opportunities available to small communities that were not as accessible previously. I believe these changes are here to stay, and if anything, online access will continue to expand. For the past few years, I have worked to increase opportunities for students in small communities. Pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Communication will help me gain skills to increase human connections worldwide.