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The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown have played an impactful role in my education. Amidst social distancing and school closures I have been blessed with many opportunities for self-improvement. I can confidently say that without the interruptions caused by the pandemic, I wouldn't have grown in my academics, extracurricular activities, and personal wellbeing in such unique, significant ways.

Our school community has absorbed measurable impacts by the pandemic. Student learning among classmates and teachers has been reduced to near isolation. My motivation and mental health took deep hits initially and I struggled with procrastination. In time, however, I began to adapt my goals, reprioritize what was important, and change my approach to learning. My guidance counselor helped me consolidate my senior year courses into first and third quarters, so I could capitalize on free time second quarter to complete an online pre-calculus refresher course. I am now earning an "A" in UAA Calculus to replace the "D" grade I received in this course junior year. The support of my guidance counselor has been instrumental in preparing me to begin college as a Pre-Physical Therapy student next year.

Our human need for connectedness has become clearer to all of us and this was reflected in my AP German peer group this year. Our teacher Frau Senden remarked that none of our classmates actually needed the credits for graduation, but we showed up ready for 8am Zoom classes regardless. She described us as the most dedicated German class in her career. Our willpower, motivation to succeed, and dedication to peer relationships kept us connected. As studies began to sprout suggesting a significant percentage of ASD students were failing classes, I used this as motivation to stay engaged and become the best student I could be.

Outside the classroom, extracurricular activities have always been important to me. The pandemic delayed our football season twice, severing my connection to our football coaches and teammates. I initially responded by registering for UAA online summer courses to fill the newly created free time, but I learned this was a mistake. Additional time in front of a computer screen didn't fulfill my need for peer connection. I withdrew from two of these classes and applied for a job at Cold Stone Creamery as a restaurant worker. By following CDC safe practices for retail food stores, we kept this mostly teen-run restaurant open during the pandemic. The job was a lifeline, connecting us to each other, improving our mental health, and helping me earn money for college.

Because of COVID-19 lockdowns we only had six football games last season. This impacted our team development, time available to train, and size of our roster. Our linemen coach asked me to take on a mentoring role with our younger players and I grew so much as a leader. I taught safety and form in the weight room, explained how to run plays correctly, and modeled how to handle game losses. Despite our difficult 0-6 win/loss record, our team learned resiliency, grace in the struggle, and the power of human connection. We learned lessons far beyond the football field.

To say I am a better person amidst the pandemic is an understatement. I now take ownership in my education and personal wellbeing. At the start of this global disaster, my executive functioning skills were not sharp. I learned to adapt to new circumstances, be better organized, and avoid schedule conflicts via a shared Google Calendar with my mom. I capitalized on free time during lockdown, began exercising regularly and helped my family prepare healthier meals. I lost 80 pounds over 8 months, and feel like a more energized, balanced person. While navigating online classes, my struggle to stay focused had become clearer. I was referred through an ASD Special Education teacher to a Pediatric Psychologist. He evaluated me and recommended I begin treatment for ADHD. I followed his recommendations, and have noticed marked improvements in my executive functioning, focus and organizational abilities. These gains have been so impactful and I am truly grateful for what the pandemic has done for my growth.

Looking back, the past twelve months have blessed me with many transformative opportunities. I am proud of my positive attitude and focus on minimizing the pandemic's effect on my junior and senior years of high school. I will graduate in May 2021 and start a 7-year journey toward a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree as a wiser, resilient, and grateful young man ready to pursue new connections and opportunities.