



→ What Was About to Happen

Oral Histories from the Puente Project
Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

1 INTRODUCTION
PAGE 02

2 ALISON M.
PAGE 03

3 ANDREW Z. M.
PAGE 06

4 EMMA M.
PAGE 08

5 GABRIELA A.
PAGE 10

6 INES M.
PAGE 13

7 IVAN M.
PAGE 15

8 JAZMINE G.
PAGE 17

9 EMMANUEL M.
PAGE 19

10 JOCELYN D.
PAGE 21

11 JOSUE A. M.
PAGE 23

12 JORDAN S.
PAGE 25

13 LOUISA C.
PAGE 28

14 MARIA H.
PAGE 30

15 MIGUEL B.
PAGE 32

TABLE OF
 **CONTENTS**

The story behind

WHAT WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN

As the COVID-19 pandemic led to closed schools for public safety, students at all levels were deeply affected. In particular, students transitioning from high school to community college or from community college to four-year universities suddenly found their worlds turned completely virtual on top of the usual changes.

The Puente Project is an organization that has supported students with these transitions since 1981. It strives to increase the number of educationally underrepresented students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities through interdisciplinary programs. Throughout the pandemic, students mentored by Puente were able to lean on each other during an increasingly isolating time.

Voice of Witness uses oral history to advance human rights by amplifying the voices of those most impacted by injustice and provides the tools for communities to tell their own stories. We were honored by the opportunity to help Puente amplify their own student voices, and we are grateful to all the students who interviewed each other and shared their moving experiences with us for this book.

As you read the fourteen narratives, we hope this serves as a time capsule for a uniquely challenging time that these students faced. They tell us about their moments of bravery, resilience, joy, heartbreak, depression, anxiety, fear, achievement, and more.

Special thank you to Alison, Andrew, Emma, Gabriela, Ines, Ivan, Jazmine, Emmanuel, Jocelyn, Josue, Jordan, Louisa, Maria, and Miguel. Our deepest gratitude to Grace Ebron and all the Puente Project staff for bringing our organizations together and providing critical support for this book.

In solidarity,
Erin Vong
Ela Banerjee
The Voice of Witness team

ALISON M.

I THINK THAT IF IT WASN'T FOR THIS PANDEMIC, I WOULD HAVE NEVER IDENTIFIED MY ANXIETY OR NEVER FOUND MY PASSION FOR PSYCHOLOGY/MENTAL HEALTH.

3 ALISON M.

Alison is a first-generation student at San Jose State University in San Jose, California. After transferring from Ohlone College, Alison is majoring in behavioral science and hopes to work as a clinical psychologist in her own clinic.

When COVID started to become more serious, I was still working. Besides being a full-time student, I was also a full-time worker at my local Michaels craft store. My days would start with morning classes and then move to my shift at work where I would get off around nine-thirty at night. Since I made my day-to-day schedule packed with courses and work, I never really had any time to focus on self-care and destress. Furthermore, I didn't have the opportunity to get more involved with my school beyond the Puente Project. However, once the pandemic hit, things changed very drastically.

News broke out of a case at the San Jose airport. Considering that I lived half an hour away from the area, hearing this instilled some fear in me. To make matters worse, Governor Gavin Newsom announced a shelter-in-place and created a chaotic response from those who lived in my area. As I got off of work, I headed straight to the grocery stores to stock up on food and basic necessities. My thoughts were, "Ok, well they're making it sound like we won't be allowed to go out at all for a few weeks and so we have become full-on Hunger Games to fight for our resources." I found many empty shelves and full carts of an endless supply of water or food. I spent roughly an hour at the store waiting in line to pay for the few items I managed to grab. From having to pur-

chase small off-brand jugs of water to purchasing multiple bags of dog food, I had my moment of realization that this virus was no longer something we could disregard.

At the time I was starting to hear rumors that a hospital nearby had received patients who tested positive from a cruise that landed in the Bay Area. This in itself definitely sparked some concerns within those in our area and I soon began to worry about the probabilities of contracting the virus since it was so close to us. I know a few close friends that tested positive. It was scary to just hear how someone I know contracted the virus and created a wake-up call within me to be more cautious of my actions.

During this period I was laid off from my job due to the location being shut down. Once I got laid off, I became even more devoted to my studies as I saw this as an opportunity to make up for the lost time. Although I gave my days some structure, I admit that this behavior of wanting to be busy at all times is not healthy because I hit burnout various times. Having an endless amount of time at home with nothing but classes as your only responsibility on top of being an anxious person is a recipe for burnout. Before I knew it, I fell deep into the cycle of procrastination and this in turn, negatively affected my mental health. I would put myself down for falling into this cycle and lower my self-esteem for not taking advantage of this opportunity to focus on school and make the most out of the situation.

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to the location being shut down. Once I got laid off, I became even more devoted to my studies as I saw this as an opportunity to make up for the lost time. Although I gave my days some structure, I admit that this behavior of wanting to be busy at all times is not healthy because I hit burnout various times. Having an endless amount of time at home with nothing but classes as your only responsibility on top of being an anxious person is a recipe for burnout. Before I knew it, I fell deep into the cycle of procrastination and this in turn, negatively affected my mental health. I would put myself down for falling into this cycle and lower my self-esteem for not taking advantage of this opportunity to focus on school and make the most out of the situation.

My first encounter with an anxiety attack occurred early on during remote learning. I had been enrolled in a difficult chemistry course and was already struggling to understand the material prior to the shelter-in-place order; however, with courses turning remote, it made the material ten times harder to digest. Being a first-generation scholar, I put a lot of pressure on myself to do the best that I can with my grades, be involved, and be an overall good scholar. With this kind of mindset, I faced a lot of challenges trying to adjust to remote learning, finding the motivation to continue studying, and enduring sleepless nights. Overall, it was really hard for me to not just study but also pay attention to lectures since it was a lot easier for me to get distracted being at home instead of in a classroom. The attack took place the day after I spent my night studying for an exam and ran on caffeine for the entire day. As I was working on my assignments I kept hearing my brother sneeze and cough. Instantly my anxiety kicked in with intrusive negative thoughts relating to the virus. One thing led to another, and I found myself experiencing every symptom in the book. This attack was so severe that my family had actually called 911 just to find out that it was a mental health-related issue.

I did fall into a depression soon after getting diagnosed with anxiety, which was hard as a Lati-

na. I faced a lot of stigma from my family and ended up putting myself in a bad place mentally. It wasn't the healthiest of environments for me. However, I'm very thankful that I was able to have one of my close friends named Roopa and my boyfriend Vince there for me as my support system. He reminded me that everything was going to be ok while encouraging me to practice help-seeking behavior such as finding a therapist. As terrifying as that experience was, once I overcame the depressive episode and started going to therapy, I became more involved with internships that revolved around mental health. I started doing work that I was really passionate about and started helping other people and educating others on what mental health is and how to break that stigma within my own community. I think that if it wasn't for this pandemic, I would have never identified my anxiety or never found my passion for psychology/mental health. All in all, I do think that this pandemic has been a blessing in disguise for me just because I was able to realize the importance of mental health and I'm beyond thankful for that.

Considering my experiences with in-person classes and remote learning, I want to emphasize that institutions need to prioritize their students at all costs. I have seen and I've interviewed other students at my college that also started seeing the school prioritizing their staff over their students. At our school, the staff had a whole period where they had training on how to use these platforms for classes while the students were out of the loop. Institutions have to realize that students are more important than the faculty because at the end of the day, the staff is there for the students. Furthermore, I firmly believe that these individuals must be mindful of what can go on behind closed doors. There are various traumatic events that students can encounter such as deaths in their families, financial struggles, or even homelessness. These unprecedented events can seriously impact their academic performance and may leave them in need of support. Institutions have to keep these possibilities in mind and provide safe spaces that

distribute the support that is needed.

As a Mental Health Equity Scholar at Ohlone College, I have learned a lot about mental health disparities and realized how rates have just spiked up during this pandemic. As for some advice, I would say try to keep yourself in a positive mindset. There are always going to be issues, but there are always going to be solutions for those issues. It's important to realize that and just keep yourself in the moment, live in the moment, because you're only going to be in that moment now. You're not going to be able to go back in time and experience the same thing. Most importantly, be mindful of your mental health and prioritize that first above anything. Give yourself some time to destress, process your day and just be mindful that you can't keep yourself running 24/7 like a robot.

Most people are not aware of the fact that there is a connection between the mind and our bodies. For instance, if you're having a stress-filled day the first thing that will feel this stress is your body. Tiredness, tenseness, and even digestive issues are results of stress on the body. With anxiety specifically, I would definitely suggest practicing proper help-seeking behavior. Whether you're indulging in self-care such as yoga or devoting your free time to a de-stressing hobby, know that you have support systems there ready to provide you with the strength and knowledge you need to get through this. Anxiety is fairly common so don't feed into the stigma of it. By educating yourself on what anxiety looks like you are able to recognize future anxiety attacks for yourself and others.

ANDREW Z.M.

WE AS STUDENTS OF COLOR OR WORKERS OF COLOR ARE TYPICALLY AFRAID TO REACH OUT FOR HELP.

6 ANDREW Z.M.

Andrew is a first-generation, Latinx, third-year transfer from Pasadena City College at the University of California, Berkeley. He is majoring in sociology, and plans to attend law school. He is a part of many communities on campus, such as NavCal, the Educational Opportunity Program, Disabled Students' Program, Underground Scholars, and Puente. Andrew envisions himself returning to his hometown of William Mead Projects to create free legal aid workshops with community partners.

I remember the pandemic starting; I was in my sociology course. For some odd reason, I was texting my friends, and I got a notification within a group chat saying something about the coronavirus that had been spreading. I was a bit worried, and I was looking through all types of news on apps and stuff, just trying to get more information from my friends. I was in class, but I also just started to think about, you know, how serious is this? And like, are things going to be all remote, or just, what's going to happen next, for college, elementary, middle school and K-12? Honestly, I was just in shock, like, is this really happening? The pandemic was coming throughout California and I was a bit worried about my family's health. My family specifically lives in Texas and Minnesota. My main priority has always been family. I prayed that they wouldn't catch COVID-19. I also felt like it was kind of rough, just because most jobs either went remote to work or completely shut down until things got better. And in order to make ends meet, especially as people of color, we need employment to survive.

At the time, I wasn't currently working, but I was volunteering through the Puente Project at Pasadena City College. Throughout that transition to online learning, it was difficult, I'm not going to lie. It was kind of rough for me because I'm more of an in-person student. I really like to interact with the class and participate, and go to professors' office hours and really make that connection. I was always looking forward to really connecting more with them on a personal level. I would just open up to professors about how I'm feeling about the class or times where I'm struggling.

At times I was thinking if I should even transfer, just because the stress of me doing online learning was really fatiguing, and I would get really tired and procrastinate. I was really thinking of not even transferring, just going to get my Associate of Science degree and stopping there. My procrastinating had been getting a bit worse because even though due dates were extended, I soon realized students see longer due dates and still do things last minute.

I had a good friend of mine—we would take some courses together but also help one another out. If one was feeling down, slacking, we would bring each other up. And we would do assignments ahead of time in order for us to relax and then re-energize for the next week. At times I felt like my grades would go up and down, but in the end, I would finish strong. With the support system I had around me, things felt more promising and made me hustle even more. So once the application opened for the University of Californi-

a system, I didn't hesitate at all to start it.

I'm excited but also nervous, because I'll be moving up north, and I won't be in SoCal anymore. But the way I'm looking at it is, I'm going to be up there to focus on my studies, make connections, and network. I'm going to come back down mentally stronger for my community, mi gente, and my family. But what I'm really looking forward to is going back in person for a few classes and really getting a chance to connect with professors. I want to make connections with other transfer students. I'm really looking forward to keeping the ball rolling, not stopping, but keep on going. The goal is to hopefully graduate from Cal and get my Bachelor's degree.

Unfortunately, my mom became unemployed during the pandemic, which was like a roller coaster for her. I can only imagine how it feels to not be working and just stay home. It's been a challenge for her, and she's really bummed out because she hasn't found a job yet. I just always tell her to never give up, just keep trying, there's still hope, you know, despite this pandemic. I try to help my mom out as much as I can. I knew there were things she needed or she needed help with, like paying some bills, the house rent, or groceries. I didn't hesitate to provide her money. I know it's stressful enough for her without a job, so I didn't really mind helping my mom out. We needed food on the table to survive at the house. Luckily I had my grandma cook, and we'd go over for dinner most of the days. My mom's not the kind of person to ask for help. And I have really started to see this in school settings, not just in my mother. We as students of color or workers of color are typically afraid to reach out for help. There's a stigma for men that we must do it on our own. But in reality our mental health is affected if we don't ask for help.

To all my scholars from K-12 to higher education, I want to say, just give it your all, no matter what. It's tiring, and at times you feel like you don't really want to do it, or you don't think it's worth it. But you don't know the possibilities. By the end, you'll feel everything falling into place.

Just don't ever give up on what you're trying to accomplish, but also know your purpose and why you're doing it. Surround yourself with individuals who want the same thing that you want, that have the same mindset and have the same goals and are really focused. Think of the outcomes you're chasing and who you're doing it for. Remote learning is indeed difficult, but I would really recommend visiting your professors' online office hours to build a connection. Build study groups in courses you feel you need that extra support. Don't be afraid to reach out to classmates. Surround yourself with resources such as clubs, organizations, tutoring. Find a support system that has your back just like the Puente Project did for me.

EMMA M.

I THINK I HAVE BECOME A DIFFERENT PERSON DURING THIS PANDEMIC. NOT A WHOLE LOT, BUT I HAVE BEEN MORE MINDFUL OF MY MISTAKES.

8 EMMA M.

Emma is an eighteen-year-old, first-generation, bisexual daughter of Mexican parents. As of summer 2021, she will be a sophomore at Cañada Community College.

At first, I heard about the pandemic through social media. It was portrayed as a joke because of its name's similarity to that of a beer brand. A lot of people joked about it. Weeks before remote learning, my parents had already warned me of the possibility of my high school senior year ending early. I remember the exact events on my last day of school. The day seemed exciting and normal because I was about to ask my girlfriend out to prom. However at 11:00 a.m., my principal announced what many thought was just a two-week dismissal. But I immediately doubted it would last two weeks. I expected about six months of quarantine, but that wasn't even a close estimate. It was actually a little over a year or so. I remember everyone jumping and celebrating that we didn't have school, but I was one of the few people in that class to have a realistic idea of what was about to happen. I was telling my group of friends during lunch that it wasn't going to turn out well. Not only were senior events getting canceled, but our state's restrictions were being introduced. Prom, retreat, and other senior events were thrown away. A lot of people's health was affected whether it be from the virus or from quarantining. Overall, it completely changed my class of 2020's expectations, goals, and health. There were many negative outcomes.

My parents took it more seriously than me in the

beginning. Their attitudes were focused on physical health. I desperately wanted to see friends before the COVID cases reached my county. My parents had to remind me that it was a newly discovered virus, and that by going out, I could be the first COVID case in my county all because of my impatience. We were still unfamiliar with how contagious it could be, the side effects, and more. My mother's lifestyle did change because she had a job. Unfortunately the company filed for bankruptcy because of COVID consequences around May of 2020. She was often seen crying soon after her unemployment.

As for my father, he started his own little separate company that is financially assisting my family. Overall, this pandemic gave us a lot of time to think about what we want, similar to what my dad has done. My mom found this to be a resting period from stress at work. I learned to evaluate my emotions on a day to day basis, and learned from my parents as well. I know this is going to rub off as cheesy, but it's hard to be self-conscious when we are so focused on the future over the present. We were so focused on the future that we never really got to appreciate what we had right before the pandemic.

But there were also cons that many other people have experienced. I had to stay in a house with my grandmother, father, mother, and little brother. We created unnecessary conflicts with each other because we saw each other too often under one roof. We had to learn to give each other space and were forced to understand each other. Sometimes it turned out well, sometimes

it didn't. We went as far as to learn about how each family member reacts to certain things.

There was a family issue about three years ago, something between my father and the whole family. Because of that incident and other issues, my mental health was low. My mother noticed this, so in hopes of things getting better, she sent me off to work with my father over 2020's winter break. Soon, it felt like I had established a new relationship with him. When I figured things out with him, I overcame a difficult period and learned what it is like to trust and love a father. I do think my family is closer to each other than before because we recovered from past events and learned about each other.

My parents know all too well that I like to challenge myself more than I can realistically achieve. I used to have difficulties knowing and accepting my limitations. My parents encouraged me to face my difficulties and accept that I am not the best because there is always someone better. Nonetheless, there is always room for improvement. By being narrow-minded about becoming the best, we lose our enjoyment of life. They helped me out through the first and second semester of college, especially in understanding my attention-deficit disorder (ADD).

I did have a difficult time accepting that I have ADD. For a long period of time before quarantine, I believed that people with ADD were inferior and destined for failure. My college professors, parents, and research gave me a lot of courage to overcome this common stigma in my Meso-American culture. As a first generation child, mental health and disabilities aren't often recognized. It was harder or just as hard for me to confront my parents about my disability compared to coming out about my sexuality.

I think I have become a different person during this pandemic. Not a whole lot, but I have been more mindful of my mistakes. I'm normally very stubborn, but I have to become self-accountable if I want to mature and approach adulthood. Accountability starts in school for me. I have to

understand my own strengths and weaknesses. I did learn to separate many things in my mind, such as insecurities and the present time. It's hard to put into words, but I started seeing myself as a third person. I began to see myself as an individual separate from emotion during the last two months of 2020 because my emotions usually got in the way of who I wanted to become. However, it became difficult to empathize and feel emotion towards other people's pain. Now in the summer of 2021, it's time I balance my emotions without my insecurities. I want to balance being successful and empathetic.

I'm looking forward to going out with friends and extracurricular activities, or in-person internships. Now, I have learned a little bit more about myself and gained a lot more confidence in how I dress and present myself. It's also fun to learn about people and how they may differ in opinions or how they are alike to ourselves. People are interesting. Every person is unique.

Most importantly, I learned to focus on the present and to love who and what you have at the moment. Things will always change in the long run. Don't fear change because by fearing it, it actually feels worse once it happens. Embrace it and learn from it, and it will either make you stronger or more vulnerable. Learning will help you dodge similar challenges in the future.

GABRIELA A.

I HOPE WE CAN MOVE ON FROM THIS PANDEMIC IN A POSITIVE WAY AND USE THE PAINFUL MOMENTS TO JUST EVOLVE AND BE STRONGER TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE.

10 GABRIELA A.

Gabriela is a second-year student at Chabot College in Hayward, California. She plans to transfer to Cal State East Bay in the spring of 2022 to major in psychology and pursue a career as a marriage and family therapist. She is a mother of three and happily married to her high school sweetheart of 14 years.

My shopping day for groceries is on Thursdays, and my store to go to is Costco because I have a big family. I have to shop basically for three hungry kids the whole time. It first became clear to me that COVID-19 was a serious problem when I showed up to Costco and it was packed. I had to wait for a cart. The line was out the door. By the next week when I did my normal grocery shopping, everything was empty that I would usually buy every Thursday, like milk and eggs. I was in line and people were antsy and fighting over water, fighting over toilet paper. I don't think my anxiety kicked in until I went to the store and I witnessed the mayhem that other people were going through emotionally.

At this point, my kids were told that they couldn't be in school, so I had to take them with me to the store and they were concerned. My kids were literally telling me, "Mom, there's no water bottles left, what are we going to do?" I was having that anxiety moment within myself, but I still had to make sure I was calm so my kids wouldn't be stressed. I don't know if it's like a mom instinct that kicks in when you sense danger, where you're like, I'm going to focus on what I need and I'm going to get out of here—which is exactly what I did. I told my kids, "We're going to do this toget-

her." To my older son who was 11 at the time, I said, "Go get in line because it's really long. Me and your sister are going to get the stuff and we're just going to get out of here." It was also allowing my kids to be part of the process of helping and concentrating on something other than just being anxious and experiencing that negativity in the store.

I had a pretty set schedule around what I had to do for myself and for the kids before the pandemic. My typical day, Monday through Friday, was: drop off the kids at school, come back home, feed my toddler breakfast, do laundry, clean the house until it was time for me to pick them up. Eating dinner, driving to ballet for my daughter or jujitsu on some days for my son. I had actually decided to take advantage of the opportunity of what they call "Parent University" here in Hayward, where they offer classes at no cost. It was one class, two nights a week in person, and I started at the beginning of January.

Unfortunately for my kids, they didn't get to go back to school after the pandemic started. They had to stay home all the time. For me, it meant getting back the time that I used to drive them around when I was home all the time. So I signed up for a full-time college schedule for summer and fall of 2020. It turned into me and my two older kids having a full-blown schedule of classes all morning, being at home 99 percent of the time.

The new challenge was managing my full-time schedule and keeping in mind what the kids' sch-

edule was like. Also, finding computers! My husband and I attempted to purchase another computer, but it was impossible to get Chromebooks during the first several months of the pandemic. I was thankful that the school was able to lend me one for one of my kids and we were able to work with two that we already had. So just taking turns, that was a challenge. And the Wi-Fi connection—it wasn't just purchasing a better connection. It was understanding that everyone around the city is on Zoom for school at that time. The challenge was knowing how to be patient and not go crazy with all the homework and adjusting my schedule to work with my kids. Because I have been a stay-at-home mom for the last 12 years, where everything was their world. For me, it was a blessing in disguise. The silver lining is that I actually will be graduating this fall, and I was able to accomplish so much in the last year.

I hope to expand in my career working towards my Bachelor's. I have been able to keep a 4.0 GPA this pandemic. I'm surprised with myself, but I'm very proud to brag about it because I didn't think I could ever do it. I went back to look at my transcripts from ten years ago and I was like a C student. And now I'm like, no. This is because it's for a higher purpose. I have a family that I need to take care of and I have kids that I could empower through this.

During the pandemic, I spent 99% of my time with my children. So it's not just about me parenting and me teaching and me helping. It's about teaching *me* everything and allowing me to see the world in a different view now that they've been here full-time for the last year. Watching them grow and evolve into pre-teens ... It's amazing. I'm very thankful for them. That brought me comfort, just knowing that they're safe and they have a safe space with me and they have a home. And we're just keeping in mind that not everybody has that.

I have been blessed and able to keep working during the pandemic. The first three to six months were a challenge for me because I have a

business where I make cakes from home. All the big demands for things like quinceñeras, weddings, and graduations were canceled. In the beginning, it was disheartening and it was very challenging not knowing actually what I would be able to provide for my kids and what bills I'd be able to pay for. That was very, very difficult. But then a lot of things started shifting. Other parents would feel like, OK, my kid is not going to be able to experience their milestone with their family, but I'm going to make it happen for them at home. Parents that were like, "Hey, let's make this special Can you put it all out on their cake and make it super fancy or elaborate and just to give them a smile and help them find joy in their birthday during the pandemic?"

I got to experience that for the last year, and I'm very happy to have been part of it. The thing that brought me back to the heart of why I started doing this for a living was so I could take care of my kids, so I could be at home with them. I was very appreciative and also understanding that parents were wanting to make their kids feel better and allow them to find joy through cake. It gave me a lot of joy back into my business and into the work that I do. It was very, very cool, and I was very blessed to keep working.

I would like for others to know that, in my experience, things happen when they need to happen. I was afraid and I was scared and I was not confident about myself and the pandemic, being a new college student and basically homeschooling my other two kids. And on top of that, having my toddler and having my husband at home when there was no work. It was disheartening and it was scary. But just have faith and know that things happen the way they need to happen.

I know it's easier said than done because a lot of people suffered a lot. I have lost several cousins due to COVID and we couldn't see them. They were young, they were young professionals, and they were healthy. And we couldn't hang out with them or see them one last time. And my sister-in-law got COVID and had to go to the hospital. We

couldn't help take care of their four kids because they were all infected with COVID and I couldn't be their support system. So I hope we can move on from this pandemic in a positive way and use the painful moments to just evolve and be stronger to help other people as well. Just know that everyone can channel their feelings of pain to also encourage others and bring comfort to them, knowing that it will get better. It will get better.

INES M.

I REALIZED THAT TAKING CARE OF MY MENTAL HEALTH WAS ALSO TAKING CARE OF MYSELF AND A FORM OF LOVE TOWARDS MYSELF.

13 INES M.

Ines is the daughter of two hard-working immigrant parents who immigrated from Oaxaca, Mexico to California in search of a brighter future. She is 19 years old, an undocumented woman of color pursuing the American dream, all while experiencing young adulthood as an immigrant through the pandemic and through the ruling of today's administration. Ines was raised in Santa Cruz, California with her younger sister.

Before the pandemic, I was towards the end of my senior year of high school, and I had a great schedule to leave early and go to school late since I had few classes. I'd get home, do my regular chores, so I would constantly move around a lot. I would also help out with my sister, looking after her and helping her with homework. I was also doing sports, I was in clubs, and preparing for college. Everything was very normal, and I had a routine that helped me stay on track. I also had plans to travel around with friends, looking forward to the graduation celebration, and saving up for my car. I felt that I was bettering myself in my personal life, mentally, and spiritually. I wanted to be as prepared as possible for adulthood and my future.

Then, there was the transition from high school to college, from teenager to adulthood. During the pandemic, the transition into college became more stressful due to distance learning, homework, and a stressful environment at home. I was accepted into the University of California, Davis, but I had to decline their offer since it was more expensive and it would be too much for me

to manage. I am a first-generation student in my family, so I have little guidance going into college. However, I value my education, and I want to succeed and encourage others in my community. In the end, I chose to attend a community college, which is more affordable and convenient. Overall, the pandemic influenced my decision of which school I would attend.

Honestly, I do not like this distance learning, I don't. I just feel so bored, and when I'm bored, I can't understand and absorb information. Learning became very difficult, and as a college student, all of the assignments just felt like busy work. I was just doing assignments, not learning. It felt disappointing, especially since it was my first year of college, but I never felt like an adult.

In high school, I was a good student, and I was an A and B student. I was in clubs and actively participating in community service opportunities. However, in college, I struggled, especially because harder math subjects and other new subjects were introduced. Additionally, there was a disconnect between students, teachers, and learning. Part of this was that many students, like myself, we're dealing with other problems raised from the pandemic. I also didn't feel motivated to do any school work, and I would always wait till the last minute. And because of that, I'd procrastinate a lot, and it would just be a very stressful cycle.

At the peak of the pandemic, I was stressed since not only was I managing school, financial instabil-

ity, and looking after my sister, I had to deal with my mental health. In my culture and my family, we don't talk about mental health; in fact, it is looked down upon. However, living through a nationwide pandemic, I realized that taking care of my mental health was also taking care of myself and a form of love towards myself. I took the opportunity to learn more about myself: what I like, what I don't like, and how to de-stress. If it weren't for these small steps that I took, I would have gone crazy! I was just juggling a lot of stuff in my environment and inside myself as well.

Not that long ago, my aunt, uncle, and a cousin of mine had COVID, and that was surprising because I would hear about COVID in the news, and it seemed scary. Hearing that a family member got COVID made me feel a little panicked and overwhelmed. They had all the COVID symptoms, and my uncles had harsher side effects for a while before getting better. In the end, they were fine, but it's different from knowing that COVID hit a close family member.

My family was also struggling financially, especially my extended family. My mother has always been a very creative, kind person, so she designed her first reusable mask through the pandemic. Along with my grandma, my aunt, and myself, we sewed masks. It was fun; we would experiment with material, and we created masks from shirts, cloth, and bandanas from colorful, personalized, and plain. It was a form of self-care for my mom since she enjoyed it and kept her busy. We made a decent amount of money from selling masks, and we split the profit between us since we were all helping each other out financially. Now that we're sort of coming out of the pandemic, we're seeing a lot fewer people demanding masks, so sales have gone down. On the other hand, my family has gone back to work, which relieves the financial stress.

Today, I still don't feel like it's back to normal because as I said, I'm a first-year community college student, but I still feel like I'm in high school since I've never even been on campus! All of my classes have been online, making it more

difficult to learn and grasp information. It's not until now that I'm being offered in-person classes, so I'm really excited and looking forward to that. My six-year-old sister started classes in late March, which lessened the load on my duties and allowed me to focus more on school. I was so grateful that schools were opening up again, at least for younger kids, because I felt like I was a mom! Once we saw that schools started opening, it was like a little ray of hope because it was an indicator that we were one step closer to normality.

IVAN M.

BUT EVEN THOUGH AT FIRST THIS VIRUS AFFECTED ME MENTALLY IT DIDN'T COMPLETELY BRING ME DOWN. INSTEAD, IT MADE ME A STRONGER INDIVIDUAL.

15 IVAN M.

Ivan is a third-year student at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California. He is preparing to transfer to San Jose State University in the fall of 2022. Ivan is majoring in criminal justice and hopes to work in law enforcement.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was a little bit skeptical about what is a pandemic and what were the procedures. I was not aware until I heard from a classmate talking about COVID-19. Once I heard many people talking about the virus, that was when I started investigating myself and came to the conclusion that it is a big deal overall. The shelter-in-place order was when I realized that something abnormal was happening to our society. As I heard more about COVID-19 I took it more seriously, but not as serious as others.

A typical day before the pandemic started by waking up at 7 a.m., making my bed, eating breakfast, and getting prepared to go to work or school. From Thursday to Sunday I worked at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk from noon to 8 p.m. This work schedule was a bit weird since I didn't like doing anything else besides my everyday routine. From Monday to Wednesday that's when I prepared to go to school. After I got furloughed from my job, I was thinking about what I can do. Since a lot of people were let go, there wasn't a demand for workers, therefore meaning no jobs available. For two days I didn't get out of bed because at that point I had lost hope. Thankfully the next day I looked at my vision board that explained all the things that I want to accomplish. With a positive mindset and ambition, I started r-

einvesting the money I had in the stock market when everything was at a discount. Thankfully I took this leap of faith that paid off. Now I have freedom. With the knowledge that I currently have and living frugally, I can take care of my family.

Online school was challenging since I'm a visual learner, and it was kind of tough, staying on topic with so many distractions at home. Zoom classes would've been nice to have, but for the most part, the classes that I was enrolled in were do-it-yourself. No Zoom, nothing. It was just like, here's the work, here's the package, and do your best, pretty much. And I prefer Zoom meetings where we can interact with others, it's better than just doing it yourself. Following the directions is okay but how I learn for the most part is listening to classmates' ideas, which helps to develop more in-depth knowledge.

I believe that my whole family got COVID-19. Well, I'm assuming that we all got COVID, but don't necessarily know, since none of us got tested. For the most part though, COVID-19 affected my family tremendously. My mom and I were unemployed for about two months meaning no income coming in. Luckily, we had an emergency fund that was designated for times like these. But even though at first this virus affected me mentally it didn't completely bring me down. Instead, it made me a stronger individual. The lockdown helped me pursue different hobbies and skills. I'll say thanks to COVID-19 I was able to further educate myself. I remember that from middle school to high school I despised reading,

but now I enjoy it because I'm able to learn more rapidly. Now that it is July of 2021, we see a different environment than in 2020. We see more freedom and fewer mandates, which I love to see. Thinking of the future I believe that the pandemic made me a stronger individual. Both mentally and physically. I truly believe that without the occurrence of the pandemic, I would not have fully understood my full potential and the things that I will accomplish.

JAZMINE G.

HONESTLY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS ARE FOR NEXT YEAR, I'M KIND OF SCARED ABOUT NEXT YEAR.

17 JAZMINE G.

Jazmine is a transfer student at the University of California, Los Angeles. As a recent graduate from East Los Angeles College, Jazmine hopes to become a teacher one day so that she can make a difference in the lives of students like many of her teachers and professors have done for her. She lives on her own, but still provides for her mother, as well as helping out her father with her two younger sisters.

To explain how I felt when COVID first hit, you have to know exactly where I was. It's kind of a funny story. I had just applied for this program called the Maya Program, created by Mayor Eric Garcetti as a way of connecting Los Angeles to different parts of the world. To my surprise, I got selected out of the thousands of students from LACCD and I went to Australia! But keep in mind, before COVID, Australia was on fire, so we were really worried and the students, including myself thought, "Oh my God, are we still going? Should we not go? Should we bring masks?" And we ended up going. It was very beautiful.

We went for two weeks and then, literally, the day after we landed we got this mass email and news updates saying that America closed our ports to international flights because of COVID. Even after hearing that I didn't really take it seriously and thought to myself, "Oh, it's no big deal." So I went to work the next day, and I used to work at ELAC in the Academic Affairs department and I was talking to the deans and the people there. We were just laughing about it. Like, "Yeah it's just the flu. People die of the flu all the time." A couple weeks later, I got sent home because it g-

ot way out of hand, and then we were all kind of just looking at each other, like, maybe we shouldn't have laughed.

Once I got COVID, I was so mad about it because I didn't think it was going to be me out of everyone in my immediate family. I had put time and effort into staying healthy and not going out, only to have contracted COVID. The only place I went to was grocery shopping, and sometimes I went to Starbucks. The one time I went to Starbucks, I got sick. And at first it was like, "Oh, it'll go away. Maybe it was just the ice of the drink." No, it wasn't, and at the time I lived in a two-bedroom little house with my grandma and my grandpa. I rented a room from her for me and my two little sisters. They literally had to sleep in the living room while I was quarantined in my room, and after a while, it just got really bad, my migraines. I've never had a migraine before. And then my cough got really bad. My symptoms lasted two weeks. Literally, it was like clockwork, two weeks. But honestly, for the most part, I just slept a lot. I took full advantage. And then I was just sad that I was alone because I'm so used to being around people, and my sisters were really sad that they couldn't be around me, too, because they're so used to being around me. My silver linings always come through my sisters, because it's a constant reminder of, like, why I do what I do and why I'm pushing myself and, you know, they're sweethearts. They know they're one of the big reasons why I go to school and I work two jobs. The people around me are literally the only reason why I'm still here. So it was for sure weird. I would not want to go through that again.

I was also still doing classes at this point in time. Since I was sleeping so much, I was falling behind on some of my assignments. So I emailed all my professors and I was telling them, "Hey, I just want to let you guys know I got COVID and I'm trying to do better and I'm really trying to do my work, so if you can, give me an extension." And they were really good about it. They were like, "You know what, take your time. I know you're a good student." Oh, my God, you know, my heart filled. And it's not even just when I had COVID. Ever since we moved classes on the online platform my professors have understood. I've been truly blessed with them. But there was one professor that had told me to drop her class. She was like, "Yeah, honestly, I don't think you're going to pass the class if you don't do this," and da da da da... And I was like, "OK." I passed the class with an A, but whatever, that was to show her.

I was so stressed throughout the school year that I even put myself in the hospital. It was so horrible. My shoulder was hurting before I fell asleep, but when I woke up it was like I was disoriented. It hurt so bad to the point where, if I was breathing heavily or if I was breathing in a certain way, it would hurt and I would wince. And it got to the point where I was like, "I can't take the pain anymore. I need to go to the hospital." And once I got to the hospital, they said that I need to take it slow because I had sprained a muscle. I had strained a muscle in my shoulder, my shoulder blade, due to stress. I was lucky that I didn't hurt myself even more mentally, because mentally I was OK, but physically I wasn't.

I ended up taking a week off and I just relaxed. I had to take a step back because I knew if I kept going, it wasn't going to end well, and I was going to be distraught and not in the right place and the right mindset. And I knew I wasn't going to perform to the best of my own abilities. So, that week that I took off, it was just really for mental health and getting my stuff together so I could regroup. And that goes to show you how bad it got for me this semester. But I got support from my professors and them telling me, "Hey, you can do this, like, I know you can do this. I've seen your

work before. All you need to do is just get started. That's going to be the hardest part." And going to office hours and actually talking to them about it. If I didn't do that, I wouldn't have graduated. That is a promise.

Honestly, I don't know what my hopes and expectations are for next year, I'm kind of scared about next year. I know I'm going to be at UCLA. I hope to keep the jobs that I have. If anything, I hope for better opportunities. I hope that I have my life together, and that I have a strict schedule that helps me maintain a social life while also maintaining an academic life. And I want to excel in every way I possibly can. And I want to travel more. I want to take more mental health days for myself, and I want to be more independent and I want to, you know, I want to find true meaning in what I'm doing within myself. Before anything else. In five years, I see myself in another country, teaching English as a foreign language and then paying for it. I'm shooting for Japan or China, but just because English isn't their first language. My first place that I like, really, really, really wanted to go to was Scotland, but I don't speak Gaelic, so I know that's a requirement. What attracts me is all the travel of it all. To get out of the US, you know. Escape these boundaries and all that.

EMMANUEL M.

THERE'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE A BIGGER PROBLEM, BUT THERE'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE A BIGGER SOLUTION TO THAT PROBLEM.

19 EMMANUEL M.

Emmanuel (pseudonym) is a first-year student at Chaffey College in Fontana, California. He is currently living with his parents in a small house in Fontana. He is majoring in administration of justice and hopes to work as a probation officer for juveniles.

I've almost completed my first year of college. I found out about the Puente Project when I was going to meetings with my counselor at Chaffey College. Lizzete was also a teacher and a mentor. She told me about the great opportunities to visit in college, but because of COVID it didn't really happen. But I think it was a good start because she was very positive. She was very motivating. She gave me a lot of examples and told me that what you're doing is going to help you regardless if it's a pandemic. You're putting your foot in the door to help you and your career. I think that was really very important to me to be a part of that, to meet many different students, and just motivate me to succeed.

I think professors need to understand that college is professional and they give out deadlines, but understanding that there's a lot that goes on beyond college, that other students may have to work two jobs now because of this pandemic that happened, that they need money to pay for college or that they're helping their families pay for the house, or any type of bill. I think we should be more understanding that maybe they might not turn in the work on time because they were working. And learning to be more empathetic and be more understanding that there's a lot going on because of COVID.

About the pandemic, I wasn't worried because I didn't think it was a legitimate thing to worry about. When it first started, I was in high school, I was a senior. So in my mind at the time I was not even worrying about political issues or world issues. I was just trying to have fun with my friends. The school told us that spring break was going to go from two weeks to four weeks, and then four weeks into it, the semester was going to be online. Then I figured out that this is a serious issue where I have to take care of myself and be responsible for my actions by following the guidelines given to us to keep our families safe.

I was very motivated, I wasn't going to let the pandemic be an excuse. My whole life, I was told that I wasn't going to be no one, so I wasn't going to use a pandemic as an excuse for not graduating high school on time, or not applying to college and continuing my education. I think it was a good time to find out new things about myself. It was hard to maintain friends because my mindset in high school was very different than right now, and I'm more focused on my education and I have to do a lot more work since it's an online course.

A silver lining was growing closer with my family because we were able to communicate more. We love each other, but I guess where I come from we're not very good at opening up to each other. We don't really communicate as much, especially my father and I, even though we live in the same house. It's very little, like, "How are you doing? Do you want to go here? You want to do this?" And

that is never a very good conversation. I guess with COVID, I was able to speak more with my family and actually spend more time getting to know them better. I think that's where I find the silver lining of this.

Mental health didn't affect me during the pandemic. But I know it's an issue in the Latinx community because we're not very open about it. We just think, "Oh, you could just brush it off," like it never happened. I had a very positive mindset throughout this pandemic, which helped me through college and be closer to my family. Even if we didn't mention mental health specifically, communicating really helped us to figure out the problem and just not privately stress about the pandemic. Like, is it going to make things worse for us? Or are we going to be able to pay our bills, or will we be able to eat? Are we going to be able to see our family again? I think just speaking in general about anything really helped us out. My tip for mental health is focusing and believing in yourself. I think believing in yourself would actually help you more than you think. Nine times out of ten, many people are going to criticize you and put you down, which could affect your mental health. I think just being able to believe in yourself and having at least one person you can trust or talk to ... support you. That's the best advice I could give.

One thing that helped motivate me was the criticism. I am Hispanic. And there's a very large criticism that Hispanics are connected with crime, they drop out, they only do labor jobs that are not very suitable to make a living better or have a good life. I think just hearing as a kid that I was going to end up in jail, I was going to end up in a gang, I wasn't going to graduate high school or even go to college ... having that criticism in the back of my head, it made me realize that I'm going to prove these people wrong. Not just by telling them, but I'd rather show them that I'm capable of success and — I got my high school diploma. I'm working on getting my college degree. I'm just going to continue on so I can motivate other people.

My family and I did get COVID, and I think it scared me a little bit because my mom has, not a severe health issue, but she has a health issue with her lungs. So I think that when I when I got the message, the email in the morning saying that my father, my mother, and I have COVID, I think it did scare me, but what helped me out was speaking to my mother and her telling herself, "I'm fine, everything's gonna be fine..." We're not too religious, but we pray and she told us like, as long as we pray, as long as we have that faith, that everything's going to be fine. It will be OK. And even if it doesn't, regardless, we're still gonna be OK, we're still a family, and there's still going to be hope for us.

I think just having a positive mindset, regardless of what you're going through, problems will come and go. As it's just called life, there's always going to be a bigger problem, but there's always going to be a bigger solution to that problem. And, you know, I think just keeping your head up, because at the end of the day, you're doing something regardless of what your journey is. Your goal is to fulfill what you want to accomplish. It could be becoming a better parent, becoming a better worker, a better manager, a better colleague, a better student. I think just having that positive mindset and just finding that one thing that keeps you motivated, keeps you going, will help you accomplish anything. That's what I found.

JOCELYN D.

SINCE WE WERE ALL BEHIND SCREENS, I HAD THAT CONFIDENCE TO RAISE MY HAND, ASK A QUESTION, MEET PEOPLE, TALK TO PEOPLE, AND NOT BE AFRAID.

Jocelyn is a second-year student at San Diego Mesa College in California. She is hoping to transfer to San Diego State University in the fall of 2022. She is a youth group coordinator and volunteer at her local parish. Jocelyn is majoring in psychology in hopes of becoming a marriage and family therapist in the future.

My name is Jocelyn. I am a Latina born in San Diego, and this is my first year at San Diego Mesa Community College. I'm currently 18 years old. My typical day before the pandemic was a very busy one. My schedule consisted of waking up at 5 a.m. to catch my school bus. I would get home around 11 p.m. My day was always pretty much filled with lots of things to do like homework, school, church meetings, and any other extra activities. I was never home most of the time. I was always really exhausted. I remember that I hardly ever got any sleep, and that I hardly had any time to even eat good meals or have meals at all. I always stayed up super late, and only got around four hours of sleep.

I remember finishing my senior year online and thinking, why now, why me? I missed out on the few things people look forward to in high school: prom, Grad Night, and the graduation ceremony. Not being able to walk the stage after all our efforts was one of the hardest things to accept. I was so upset and sad after realizing it was all taken away and no amount of hope would bring those things back. What we were told would be an early spring break turned into the last time we would see each other.

During this pandemic, my main challenge was my mental health. Since I was always very busy, I never focused on my mental health or self-care because I felt like I didn't have the time to even worry about it. But now that all of those things were put on pause, I was left alone to only have time with myself, which brought up a lot of feelings that I had buried inside of me that I didn't let myself feel. It pushed me to discover who I was and to take the time to take care of myself. I saw the importance of needing to eat properly and not skip meals. I also really dove into self-care during this time to make me feel better and lift my spirit when I would feel lonely or depressed. My family and I suffered losses that were very unexpected, and although they weren't COVID-related losses, they added to the hardship during this year. It made me sink into a hole of dark thoughts about death and purpose and things that not a lot of people like to focus on. It was hard having to cope with trying to see the positive view in things.

However, there were some positives during this time. My anxiety went down dramatically. Before, I was a very anxious person. I would suffer from having anxiety attacks, and it was something that I had to always hide. I remember the first couple of weeks I really enjoyed the lockdown and finally being able to be home and relax. Even just having my parents around helped a lot. My mom would always be very stressed out with work and exhausted most days, but during the pandemic when she was forced to work from home and do online learning, I saw my mom get this new sense of energy.

In a weird way, this pandemic was a blessing in disguise. I never really had any underlying academic problems. I always had good grades, I was always a good student, but I was never a proactive student. I always stayed quiet and reserved and dreaded any kind of participation I had to do in class. Now in distance learning, I feel more at liberty to express myself. Since we were all behind screens, I had that confidence to raise my hand, ask a question, meet people, talk to people, and not be afraid. I also felt that we were all experiencing the same thing and we all kind of felt out of place because nobody had ever done these things that we were all forced to adapt to. It was definitely something that kind of allowed us all to relate and allowed me to be comfortable to express myself. My experience improved because now I was able to find out about resources like Puente, and take advantage of all the tools that were given to me like attending workshops, attending club meetings, all these things that I had never taken into consideration before. It helped give me a confidence boost to know that I was capable of doing all these things.

The whole idea of going back on campus and returning to normalcy is something that definitely scares me. I have anxiety meeting new people, and I think it won't be as easy as it was, or as natural as it was. Now I'm just sitting here and thinking, do I want to go back to campus? Which is such a weird place to be since a year ago I was bummed about being online, and now I'm bummed that it's over.

Although this was a really hard year for everybody around the world, I feel like people should know that it's okay to feel the way you do. It's okay to not feel 100 percent all the time, and to take a while to adjust or to be angry. Your emotions are your own and your thoughts are your own. Know your feelings are validated and you're not alone. During this time a lot of people suffered with worsening mental health, and we must stand in solidarity together to lift each other up. Having support systems is super crucial, and I feel like for me, Puente, my counselors, my family, my

boyfriend, and my friends are what helped me most during this time.

JOSUE A.M.

I AM TRYING TO TALK TO NEW PEOPLE, AND LEARN HOW TO GIVE PEOPLE A CHANCE TO EARN MY TRUST. I NEED TO ACCEPT THE FACT THAT NOT EVERYONE'S THE SAME.

Josue is an eighteen-year-old first-generation Guatemalan student currently attending Cañada Community College in Redwood City, California.

I remember the last day of school. The last day I attended school was on March 12, 2020. It was a Thursday. I was actually really sick before Thursday. I had already missed two days of school because I was really sick at the time. I have no idea if I had COVID or not. It was probably just a really strong flu. But I will really never know because I never got tested for it. That Thursday, I was actually forced to return to school because I had really bad grades. I didn't want to go to school because everything hurt, especially my throat and chest. But it was mandatory because I would get in trouble by the school if I didn't return. I decided to ignore my health, so I drove to school even though my head was pounding. When I got to my classes, I do remember seeing a couple of students wearing masks and I assumed it was for their own protection, I didn't think they had COVID. I did my absolute best to fight the urge to cough. I also remember that Thursday was a short day, so I only had six classes. I was forced to make up a test since I missed it earlier that week. Throughout my day at school, my body started to really give up. When I got to my physics class to take the test, I started coughing uncontrollably. My physics teacher noticed how much I was coughing to the point that he was getting really concerned. Eventually, he told me to go home regardless of not finishing my test. That was probably the most memorable day.

Distance learning definitely affected me. Remote

learning was different and not something I was used to doing at all. I mean, no one was really prepared because it was all too sudden. I don't think any student was ever prepared to do remote learning. It was difficult to adjust to at first. I often fell behind in school. It just doesn't feel the same way at all. It felt weird to me, especially in this different environment compared to that of school's. I couldn't accept the fact that this epidemic was real. It was unbelievable that this pandemic could potentially be lethal to me and my parents. After a year of online learning, I prefer physically going to school than online learning.

Before quarantine, I was going to school and coming home. But during this pandemic, I have to stay home. Later on, it did create some arguments, and some fights between me and my parents. And sometimes it would just be a constant battle between me and my parents. In college, things are significantly more challenging and difficult than in high school. I have to wake up early, get ready for online classes, and do some other homework that does take a while to complete. It does bother my parents that I am constantly in my room and being on the computer due to long hours of studying or homework. They tend to think that I'm just stuck in my room doing nothing but just staring at a screen or playing video games. Sometimes they would just come to the conclusion that I'm lazy, even though that's not the case. But sooner or later, my parents will grow to understand. Overall, my parents have been starting to learn how to be supportive, even though this pandemic is close to being over.

Nonetheless, we still have a long way to go. Instead of just trying to make me feel bad or guilt trip me, they just learn to kind of accept that we are in this restricting situation; there's not really much that I can do. They are slowly learning to take slow steps and be a little bit more patient with me, which I'm grateful for.

Even though I would like to think that my mental health was the same all throughout before and after quarantine, I feel like it might have been just slightly better before quarantine. As of now, I have to stay home in spite of feeling trapped at times. Sometimes insecurities get into my head which is no different from how I usually felt at my time in high school. Making friends was already difficult for me, so being stuck at home didn't really help.

I feel like I got more antisocial throughout the beginning of this pandemic. I have always been skeptical of people and their true intentions. My encounters in high school were not the best. They typically ended badly because some people did not have the best of intentions. Those kinds of people are kind of the reason why I became a very antisocial person. The beginning of this pandemic resulted in worsening my ability to socialize. It wasn't until remote learning in college, that I tried to work on my social skills. I am trying to talk to new people, and learn how to give people a chance to earn my trust. I need to accept the fact that not everyone's the same. Everyone's different and maybe I could meet new good people. I'll never know until I take a chance. So that's what I did. As of right now, I'd like to think that my social skills are just significantly better. But I still have a long way to go. I'd like to think I am doing much better now than I was before and at the beginning of the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, I was a very boring person. I just stuck to the norms. I usually stick to what I am familiar with and like. With that came my skepticism about trying something new, such as creating new hobbies, trends and new foods. Nearing the end of this, I did learn to be more op-

en with the things I was often skeptical about. Overcoming most of my skepticism encouraged me to explore more about myself and my preferences.

During this pandemic, I kind of learned a little bit more about myself and what my abilities are as a student. I'm hoping to work out more because I really want to get back in shape. I feel like this was long overdue because as much as I love to play video games, I feel like I spend a little too much time on it. I also want to go and enjoy the sun, enjoy the outside world, go on walks, go on runs, enjoy the scenery, enjoy my neighborhood, enjoy what I have at the moment. And another goal is to go out more with my parents because before quarantine, I would sometimes reject them on the times they wanted to take me out for shopping or to the beach. I took these trips for granted. But with this pandemic slowly coming to an end, I learned that all the things that I have could be taken away in the blink of an eye. So I'm hoping to spend more time with my parents, and hopefully come to some sort of understanding with them. I hope to get to know them better and to learn their intentions. And another thing that I'm hoping is to get better at skating. As challenging as it is, it is very fun. And it's actually fun to sometimes fall and hurt yourself because you learn something from it in order to avoid falling again. It tests your resiliency. I think my final goal is just to be more social. I just hope everything goes well in the process of achieving my goals.

JORDAN S.

I REMEMBER IT BEING LIKE A GHOST TOWN. THERE WERE NO CARS ON THE FREEWAY, NO PEOPLE ON THE SIDEWALKS.

25 JORDAN S.

Jordan (pseudonym) is a first-generation Latinx student who recently transferred from East Los Angeles College to UC Berkeley. They grew up in East Los Angeles, Southern California. They are majoring in media studies and political science and hope to become a lawyer in the near future.

During the week that my school began to transition to remote learning, I had a history professor who told us that any professor who was transitioning their classes from in-person to online was just being lazy, because at that point it was optional. He said that COVID was not going to be that serious and the school district was overexaggerating. Later that week, I attended his class in-person for the final time and the first thing he said to us was that our class was going to be transitioning to online. It was kind of funny because of how ironic it was, but I think that was the first moment when I realized that it was going to be a serious thing. Looking back, I think it was really unnecessary for him to make those remarks because COVID was something that none of us had enough knowledge to form an actual opinion about and we did not know who or how it might have affected someone in the room.

I saw that a lot of my friends who were attending four-year universities had already transitioned to online learning. I never thought that my community college would do the same thing. From what I know, my school specifically was one of the last schools to change from in-person to remote learning. This was also during the time when the lockdown was first announced. I remember not really understanding what a lock-

down meant just because I had never experienced it and I couldn't really picture our government enforcing it. But sure enough, during the lockdown I would go outside with my mom to buy groceries and I remember it being like a ghost town. There were no cars on the freeway, no people on the sidewalks. This was abnormal because it was an environment that I wasn't used to.

When I graduated from high school in 2019 I enrolled at my community college knowing that I only wanted to spend two years there. My plan was to go in, get good grades and start saving up money for when the time came to transfer. I was raised by a single mother and I live with my mom and grandma, which means that she is financially responsible for both of us. Although I was in community college I knew that I never wanted to put financial stress on my mom because of my decision to transfer and study somewhere else. So as a result, I was hired at my first job, but it came with a price. Since I was so busy with school and work I would be so tired after my classes that I chose to go home rather than to find a club to join. This cycle of school, work and home really made me feel disconnected from my school. I didn't feel like I had a community there because I didn't have the opportunity to take the time to go to office hours or join a club. I definitely do wish that I started getting involved before the pandemic, but the circumstances that I was under made it a little bit hard.

Before the pandemic I didn't really spend a lot of time on my college campus despite being a full-

time student. I would go to school for class but I just wasn't really involved in extracurriculars. I would work five days of the week and I would go to school for four days of the week, and most of the time those days would overlap. I just remember being really sleep deprived and stressed all of the time. When I did have free time, I would do homework, catch up on sleep, or spend time with my family and friends. Right before the shutdown, I quit my job because I was taking 15 units and one of my classes was a science course, which is not my strong suit. But then everything transitioned online. So I was left with no in-person school or work. It really felt like I had all the time in the world.

Today, I do a lot less moving around throughout my day. I wake up, grab some breakfast, clean my room, sit at my desk and do schoolwork. During the afternoons, I am a student worker for my community college. I work as a supplemental instruction leader, which is similar to a teacher's assistant, for introductory college writing. During that time I create presentations, host Zoom meetings with students, and go over prompts or readings that are assigned by professors. After that, I usually like to go to the park and play tennis, come home, shower, watch some television and go to bed. Living through this pandemic taught me that being outside and getting fresh air and sunlight is extremely important for my mental health. So I like to take the time to go outside even if it's just for a few minutes. I think the biggest difference between now and then would be not having to leave my room or the comfort of my own home to go to school or work. I am very grateful for this because I know a lot of people don't have that luxury. Now I've been able to get involved remotely and I have joined amazing programs like Puente and UCLA's CCCP. The Puente club in particular has especially helped me navigate the college application process throughout the pandemic.

I contracted COVID in early December of 2020, which means that I had COVID when I was submi-

ting my college applications and getting through finals, but I didn't even know it at the time. Luckily because I'm young and healthy my symptoms were very weak. I was sneezing, coughing, struggled very mildly with breathing and lost my sense of taste and smell. At the time, I lived with my grandparents, cousin, and mother, so I had to quarantine in the room that I shared with my cousin, grandma and mother, but since we have a couch that turns into a bed in the living room they were able to sleep there. Shortly after I recovered, one of my extended family members got COVID, and since most of my family members live in the same apartment complex and see each other often it started to spread very quickly throughout my family. The first person whom I lived with that contracted COVID was my grandfather and then my mother. Unfortunately because of his age and medical history, my grandfather's body was not strong enough to fight off the virus so he passed away in early February. Luckily my mother did not experience harsh symptoms so she was able to recover quickly.

As soon as we found out that my grandfather tested positive for COVID, I temporarily moved in with my cousin who did not live in the same apartment complex. This happened mostly because my immune system was already pretty weak and we did not want to risk me getting COVID for a second time within the span of two months. I couldn't help them by cooking or cleaning because I was not supposed to be near them, but I did my best to support them in any way that I could. I would bring them groceries and medicine and leave it at the doorstep. We would also communicate via FaceTime and text because I remember how lonely I felt during quarantine. I would say this was probably one of the most difficult times I have ever experienced.

I have lived in Southern California my entire life so I'm really excited about moving to the Bay Area in the fall. I'm really looking forward to exploring a new environment and meeting new people, especially since we just completed a year of isol-

ation. I know that the pandemic isn't over, but it's nice to know that life is somewhat going back to normal. Something else that I'm really excited for is studying at one of the country's best educational institutions as a first generation Latinx student. Only 14% of the student population at UC Berkeley are Latinx so I feel so honored and grateful that I get to go and represent my people and community. At Berkeley I hope to learn about different ways that I can use my career to improve my community and enrich the experiences of other first generation college students.

LOUISA C.

I GUESS IT MADE ME GET OUT OF MY OWN HEAD AND REALLY SEE EVERYONE ELSE THAT WAS AROUND ME AND IN MY LIFE.

28 LOUISA C.

Louisa is a 25-year-old first-generation student at Riverside City College. Her family comes from Mexico, while she was born and raised in Riverside. She's preparing to transfer to Los Angeles and pursue a career in filmmaking to continue sharing stories with the world.

A friend and I were at a park in March, hanging out and talking about what was going on in China. A few weeks later, they announced that everything was going on lockdown, everyone had to stay home and stay away from people. I live in a traffic-heavy area, so every day we always hear either the train or we hear cars zooming back and forth, but there was nothing. There was no activity outside and it seemed really strange to me.

Even before the pandemic, I was in a really, really bad place. Since I was 13, I had been struggling with clinical depression and anxiety. I think 2019 was the final straw for me; it was when I decided I needed help. I needed to get better somehow. I didn't want to be stuck in that void I was in. I would meet with a therapist once a week before everything shut down and we weren't allowed to see each other in person at her office anymore. I had to do therapy through Zoom. I was comfortable being at home avoiding people, avoiding my friends, not going to school, not having a job, because that's how I had been for so many years. Then it hit me. Now everyone is going through that, I'm not the only one that has these problems. I guess it made me get out of my own head and really see everyone else that was around me and in my life. As my therapy progres-

sed I realized that, no, I don't dislike people, I don't dislike socializing. It was the situation and the state of mind that I was in beforehand that I hated. I was able to see beyond what my brain was making me think, because mental illness messes you up and it makes you think things that aren't true a lot of the time. Halfway through 2020, I started school. I wished that I could meet people in person and go out and do things because I missed out on so much due to my mental health for so many years. Until now, I finally feel better.

At school I have Puente, our meetings and English class were through Zoom, so we could actually talk and interact with our classmates and our professors. But in my other classes, they didn't have Zoom meetings. We had to do everything on our own time and that could work for some people, but with my math class, because I am not good at math at all, I had to teach everything to myself and that was really, really tough. The distance did kind of help me gain a little bit of independence, but at the same time, I really wish that I could have interacted with other students, especially my Puente cohort. I connected with them, even for a very short amount of time.

Compared to high school ... in high school I didn't do anything. I was struggling with my mental health and my situation at home so I was never really involved, even though I always secretly wanted to participate and be active in clubs or organizations. For my first year of college and being in Puente, I was mostly looking forward to

field trips, visiting universities and colleges. That definitely would have been fun, but we couldn't do any of it.

I did really well for my first year in college, even though it was online. Next year, I will start applying to transfer, so I'm really looking forward to that. And my family has been planning to visit like our relatives in Mexico. I'm excited especially about doing the things that I missed out on, not just during the pandemic, but from years before, things that I couldn't do with my friends or traveling places and doing activities that I was always not confident enough to do.

I think what helped me reach this point was partially the results of therapy, because one thing that I struggled with a lot concerning my anxiety is bad thoughts and always worrying about things that haven't even happened yet. My therapist taught me that those kinds of thoughts are unnecessary. It's fine to be prepared for the worst, but to be constantly thinking about those things and letting them dictate your life, it's not healthy. It helped me ask myself, is this really helping my situation right now? It's regrounding myself in reality.

It does make me feel a little bit guilty because I know, everything was super terrible for the majority of people during the pandemic, but for me it was what finally pushed me to get my life back on track and really put things into perspective. I haven't "gotten over" my mental illness, because that's not very easy, but I've been able to push it aside and say, no, I'm not going to let this ruin my life any longer.

No one is alone, because that's how I felt for so long. There are always people who care about you and want the best for you, not everyone is out to get you, not everyone hates you or whatever it is that you make yourself think. We have to be together, community is important, togetherness is important, because people are all we have in the end.

MARIA H.

THIS WHOLE THING ABOUT TAKING ONLINE CLASSES WAS VERY HARD FOR ME BECAUSE IT WAS SOMETHING NEW THAT I HAD TO ADJUST TO, A NEW SYSTEM.

30 MARIA H.

Maria is a 20-year-old student attending Skyline Community College in San Bruno, California.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was confused about what was going on in the world. I remember that I first heard about COVID-19 from my brother. He mentioned to me and our family about how COVID-19 is a strange virus that came from Asia, like months before it got announced here in the U.S. When my brother mentioned this, I didn't really pay that much attention to it, since it's on the other side of the world. Later, after a few months passed by I began hearing the news talking about how this virus attacks the immune system of the human body, such as breathing difficulties. I was like, "Oh damn, this is definitely a serious virus." I remember that on my last day of school, I was in my economics class and my teacher was discussing how this virus is spreading more. And how this might bring schools to close down within the first couple of weeks or up to some few months. But I never imagined that that quarantine would last longer than what I expected. So far it has been lasting for more than a year, which is shocking.

My family members and I didn't know much about the whole pandemic that was occurring around the world at first, we thought that it was just fake news in order to scare the public. But then later we came to the conclusion that it wasn't a hoax, it was real. How this virus can really take the lives of people. We began believing it because we knew some family friends' relatives dying due to this virus. The pandemic affected everyone around the world in their jobs, lifestyles, academ-

ic learning by switching from learning in-person to online learning.

Before the pandemic started, my typical day was waking up at 6 a.m., getting ready to go to school at 7:30 a.m., getting home, doing chores, supper time, then doing homework from 7 p.m. all the way through 11 p.m. It was the same routine again from Mondays through Fridays. So it was basically from home to school to home, and then during the weekends I would go out with my family. But it was usually from home to school and repeat the next day. Now my typical day is getting up at 6 a.m., preparing to go to work at 6:30 a.m., getting out of work at 11:30 a.m., lunch, classes, supper, then homework until 10 p.m. This is the same routine throughout the weekdays. During the weekends I usually just spend time with my family at home or going out with them.

Distance learning did affect my academic studies in a negative way. This whole thing about taking online classes was very hard for me at first because it was something new that I had to adjust to, a new system. I remember having hard times in my science classes understanding the course material. It was definitely really hard taking science classes online because based on my experience I felt that they were tougher online compared to in-person. I honestly prefer my science classes to be done in person rather than online. Yes, some of my science classes did have recorded Zoom meetings, or required one to attend those Zoom meetings. But besides that it was indeed difficult for me to keep on track wi-

th all of the classes. It made me procrastinate on their assignments.

A big concern that I remember having when the pandemic started was being worried about my grandparents. I was very worried about my grandparents' safety and health since they are seniors. I was worried about them getting the virus because since they are old, they are an easy target. So as their granddaughter, I was very worried about them being okay. And since they live in another country outside of the US, I was worried even more because I am unable to visually see them and check whether they are healthy or not. I remember constantly telling them to be cautious whenever they went out, and even reminding them to wear their face masks whenever they were out in public or when visitors came by to see them.

My family and close friends were the people who brought me the most comfort during the pandemic. You know, it's not easy taking online classes nor working at the same time, but they're always there for me whenever I need them. Even though they also struggled as I did with their jobs or any other thing, we're here as a family to help each other out.

MIGUEL B.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I WAS UNSURE WHETHER OR NOT I WAS GOING TO MAKE IT THROUGH ANOTHER DAY, BECAUSE THE VIRUS WAS LITERALLY IN OUR BACKYARD.

Miguel is a first-generation Chicano transfer student who recently graduated from Pasadena City College. He is the first in his family to transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where he will continue his academic journey in fall of 2021. He is currently working as a peer advisor for The Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCCP). Miguel is majoring in sociology and plans on becoming a counselor to work with individuals who have been impacted by the carceral system as well as communities that have been negatively affected by social and systemic barriers.

I recall listening to the news as they were talking about the virus spreading over to Italy. It was shocking to hear, and I wondered, "How did the virus manage to travel from China all the way to Italy?" and then it began making its voyage around the whole country. The internet was flooded with headlines about nurses and doctors who were flying in to help alleviate the situation. Some flew all the way from Peru, others from Honduras, and some also from Mexico. The whole world was supporting Italy during the pandemic. This brought a certain level of tranquility to me. It wasn't until the virus made its way to San Diego and San Bernardino ... that is when I knew we were in this for the long run. I live in L.A. County and at this point I was just hoping for the best.

To be honest, I was scared, worried, and confused, and for the first time in my life, I was unsure whether or not I was going to make it through another day, because the virus was literally in our backyard. As time went on, the ne-

ws media announced that Los Angeles had now become the epicenter of this whole pandemic. A lot of questions were up in the air. I kept asking myself, how did this problem get out of hand? One thing is for sure, COVID is the real deal. The virus managed to travel all over the world and was able to cause a lot of pain while destroying lives.

Distance learning has affected my academic experience by taking me out of the classroom. I'm the type of scholar that enjoys learning inside a classroom, socializing and indulging myself in the whole academic experience. Online learning has made me realize that I'm just completing the assignments just to finish it on time. At the end of the semester, I started reflecting as well as questioning, such as, "What did I get out of this online class?" I have also experienced a lot of Zoom fatigue; online learning comes with a lot of pressure behind the scenes. Everything isn't really as accessible as before. With the added responsibilities in regards to learning how to balance social life and educational life with Zoom meetings, getting things done before the deadlines, managing multiple classes, dealing with technological issues at various times as well as home and family issues, this is just a glimpse on how distance learning has impacted my experience.

Music alleviated a lot of the pain that came with this new way of living. For instance, having to make the adjustment of staying in lockdown, doing online classes, and maintaining that social distance was frustrating enough. I spend most of my days putting on my headphones and sitting in

the front of my stoop with my mask on. Music uplifted my spirit by taking me to a different dimension where the virus didn't exist, even if it was just for that moment in time. I also occupied my time by writing letters to my incarcerated family and friends. This was therapeutic for me because it brought a lot of peace to my heart knowing they were still alive. This pandemic really made me appreciate having a roof over my head, being able to laugh and cry with one another, and being able to break bread with each other at our dinner table was more than I can ask for during this pandemic. At the end, I realized that most of my comfort came from the individuals who were living at home, my familia.



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