

[Home](#) > All for One and 4 for \$4

ALL FOR ONE AND 4 FOR \$4

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A spicy chicken sandwich meal. A risky joke about someone's sister. A passionate discussion by a self-appointed panel on the best way to slide into Instagram DMs. These are just a few of the things I imagine when I reminisce about what would have happened if my friends and I had known that Thursday in March would be our last day of junior year -- if we had made one last trek to the Wendy's that had become our haven, free from stress about school, family, and even the news about the virus moving rapidly closer to our home. But we never got that last trip; instead we gave each other handshakes that day and unknowingly went home to months of stress...doing school... at home around our families... during the pandemic we never thought would hit us so hard. Although we don't have a place to go and get away anymore, we still talk like we're and support each other like we're still together, and the unity with each other and our families is the only thing that has gotten us through this in place of a "4 for \$4."

Of course coronavirus, in its twisted sense of humor, sent me somewhere where the lone Wendy's stood like a beacon in the middle of nowhere. As it turns out, getting your bathroom fixed takes a lot longer during a pandemic, and so we moved to my mother's house in South Jersey for the "probably two weeks" that lasted for four months. It's actually a beautiful, quiet place; the chirping of crickets no longer drowned out by a Meek Mill song blasting from a stereo, and the spacious farmland yards that met my eyes instead of densely packed row home porches was exactly what caused my discomfort. Luckily, before I got too deep in my daydreaming, there was always a very tiny hand there to slap me back to reality. My baby brother embodies the spirit of Philly: never sleeps, unusually aggressive, fun and exciting, but way too wild if you aren't prepared, and most importantly impossible to control. It was impossible to dwell on how awry everything had gone while he was trying to run us over with his walker, or climb into the oven, or act on his apparent vendetta with the blinds by trying to take them down for the millionth time. He gave me a whole new perspective on the phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child," because even with my mom and my aunt there to help, we still had our hands full. We took shifts in the most exhausting 24/7 job we had taken on in recent memory: trying to get work done while we tried to contain a hyperactive ball of energy. In the end, our growing disdain for Sesame Street and the drained feeling we all had at the end of the day helped us to understand each other better, and share ideas in hopes of getting him to sit still. Seeing him grow has been worth all the energy we spent, but none of us could have done it alone. Knowing what my mom has to deal with when my brother is home, all that chaos on top of the medication and therapy for his Down Syndrome, has made me appreciate my mom and brother especially by being even more involved in it all.

During that time, I coined my own equally appropriate saying: it takes a village to finish chemistry. By April, I had lost all desire to ever calculate the specific heat of copper again in my life, but when my friends and I combined our studying habits and our last ounce of drive we had just enough steam to get us through June. Between waking up at a time that my brain was functioning (instead of the cloud of fog it was at 6:00 a.m. when I'd woken for school before it was online) and being able to talk to my friends without fear of a possible detention, I somehow pulled off nearly straight A's despite not knowing what was going on most of the time. Having people around me who I trusted also worked in my favor during the summer because only people who were familiar with my impulsive, usually irrational decisions would have hopped on board so quickly with my plan to start the poetry club I had been envisioning since February virtually. We threw together an event with a famous poet and school alumnus in two weeks and even though I suspect that I harassed the speaker until he finally caved, everyone had a good time, especially the students who I had kept in mind when I created the idea in the first place. There's no way I could have accomplished that without my friends following my questionable judgment, and the way we support each other in anything is one of the things I've always valued about them that stayed constant when circumstances changed overnight.

All in all, not being present with the people I'm closest to is hard, but having them present in my life is what's most important. As long as I keep in contact with them, I know I'm not alone in any situation I face right now because my friends and family have my back (virtually). Staying busy trying to follow my passions and fulfilling my obligations while keeping in touch with people who want to see me succeed helps keep me grounded in the things that are important to me. And because I've done that, I have no doubt that the next time it's safe for us to stroll into Wendy's and take up our favorite section, we'll have more material for our obnoxiously loud conversations than ever.

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