

WE, I, AND THEY

Owen Setiawan, Central High School, Class of 2023

This piece was written as a way to highlight the voices of students and youth that are many times silenced. However, in recent months, students and many in the younger generation have been rising up to let their voices be heard in the American public and in the media. As a generation that has faced an infamous and enormous amount of challenges in just our teen years, students right now have made it known that we are more than just children and teenagers.

This piece is separated into different perspectives of “We,” “I,” and “They.” The “We” section is meant to bring out the collective front of students, so I place myself into the perspectives of students. The “I” section is where I input my own opinions and experiences about this time in our society and lives. The “They” section is where I place myself into the perspectives of the survivors who will pass on the stories of the many events that are occurring right now in our world.

WE

We used to have one goal: to learn. A student was just a student. However, now in 2020, we’ve become more than just prospective learners. We, students, are part of a broad spectrum in a social system, and this system creates no boundaries when it comes to creating social change. In this moment, we have created a multi-layered spectrum where we have become more than just learners. We are workers, survivors, activists, fighters, victims, allies, and yet we still are learners.

In the movie-like world of 2020, we have watched through our lenses how students have managed to adapt to so many new challenges. 2020 has no doubt proven the strong-willed front of students. In a world where much of society relies on human interaction to stay connected, students have without a doubt faced a huge challenge. However, the strong-willed heart of Gen Z has continued to show the power of what happens when we are faced with even formidable challenges. In just 5 months, students have had to get accustomed to online education, survive amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, support our families in times of need, witness and fight social injustice, and still find a way to continue our education. If someone tells me that teenagers today “don’t work hard enough” or “are lazy,” I would react with utter confusion.

I

In my small yet growing little world, as a rising Sophomore at Central High School, I’ve experienced more than I had expected during my first year of high school. Most kids going into high school would expect to face problems with relationships, friendships, and grades. It was beyond my imagination that I would be hit with the worries of bringing a dangerous virus home rather than the worries of what I’d get on my next history test. Rather than worrying about the young midlife crises of high school, I was worrying about what would happen to my parents as essential workers during a pandemic.

As an Asian American and a person of color, I am privileged to say that I have faced little discrimination in a city like Philadelphia with a diverse population. Needless to say, little does not equate to never. Nor does this apply to many other Asian Americans that I know. Witnessing the government’s response to COVID-19, I was horrified. The leadership response did not align with the disastrous reality that the pandemic was going to harm people, nor did the leadership response exhibit the guiding hope that I had searched for from our leaders. Instead in the coming weeks, after the outbreak started in America, I was terrified both about the very real health effects of the virus and then also about the violence from those who targeted and harmed people who look like me and my family for a virus we had nothing to do with.

THEY

After a disaster hits, the people who are still there are the survivors. The survivors are the people who will tell the stories of those who had been lost in the disaster. They are the people who will continue the narrative. The survivors of the past couple of months are the people who have the ability to continue their lives. They have the privilege to say that they can continue to attend school after the pandemic and see their friends again. They can say that they will return to work to see their coworkers and friends. The survivors are the people who will one day be able to tell their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren about the stories of their youth. The stories of when and where they faced barriers and challenges. The stories of what they had to do during the COVID-19 pandemic to survive. The stories of the unjust actions taken against African American people in the United States. The stories of the protests that followed for months after. The story of the youth that is left untold.

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