

LEARNING YOUR A, B, CS DURING A PANDEMIC

Crisia Shibu

Central High School, Class of 2021

Education has always been a focal point in my life, but, this year, COVID-19 caused an interruption in my schooling. As a rising senior, it has been difficult to completely throw out the old way of learning and adapt to a brand new one. Although the pandemic initially impeded my education, it also presented new opportunities for me and cultivated areas of learning outside of the classroom.

Rumors of a potential shutdown were circulating throughout classrooms in early March, but many never took it seriously. Students continued to move along with their homework, tests, and projects. On Thursday, May 12th, officials announced that school would close the following day for extensive cleaning, and they assured families that all would return to normal the following week. Unbeknownst to me, that would be the last day of in-person school for the rest of the academic year.

One day became two weeks, two weeks became a month, and soon it was clear that we would not return to normal. For the first month or so, the fate of the students was in limbo. We were left in the dark, and even our teachers, who usually had the answers, could not offer any. It was especially hard for the seniors to be unable to spend their final few months in the building that had watched them grow over the past four years. Fortunately, as a junior, I did not experience these same grievances, but my path to college became more unclear.

During the period where I was at home and online classes had not yet started, I was growing worried about falling behind since classes had paused indefinitely. Thankfully, online schooling soon commenced allowing teachers to continue with their instruction. It was a struggle at first for both students and teachers. The new technology was hard for some teachers to adapt to at first, but they did their best to provide quality instruction and we were able to get through the school year without much trouble.

In July, I was fortunate enough to participate in PennRSSA Academy, an online program, that gave rising seniors in the Philadelphia area an opportunity to learn about possible future careers and the college application process. Instructors worked with students to provide information and answer any questions about life in college and beyond. PennRSSA taught me what I need to do to prepare for college and it was able to fill in gaps in my education which the pandemic caused.

Throughout this experience, I was able to grow closer with my classmates and meet new people through PennRSSA. My schoolmates and I bonded over this experience in a way we could never before. We were able to get a glimpse of each other's lives by meeting each other's families and pets and going on virtual house tours. In PennRSSA, I met people the same age as me who were going through similar experiences. Furthermore, it was during this pandemic that I was able to learn that education does not always come from the classroom.

As a child, I had always watched my grandmother sew and stitch up pieces of clothing. It was something that I had always wanted to try, but never had the time to do. When COVID-19 hit, masks were essential for preventing the disease and I thought that it was a great time to learn how to sew. I had to teach myself all the basics as I could not visit my grandmother. It took countless hours on YouTube and the phone with my grandma, but I was finally able to do it. I taught myself how to sew!

Another valuable learning experience that I had during the pandemic was learning how to cook. Growing up, my diet consisted mainly of the Indian foods that my mother made. The dishes of my childhood were challenging to master and my mother's and my conflicting schedules never presented an opportunity for me to learn how. The pandemic offered us some more time together and my mother was able to teach me the right way to make sambar, chapati, and many other Indian dishes. Although I still have a lot to learn, I was able to gain rudimentary skills and set a foundation for my cooking career.

Reflecting on the pandemic and how it affected my academic endeavors, I realize that while it may have hindered my education in the classroom, it has opened new learning opportunities outside of it. I am so thankful to my family, teachers, and PennRSSA for guiding me through these troubling times. From this experience, I was able to learn invaluable lessons and given rare opportunities that help me continue to grow as an individual.

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