

## **Laurel Barrett - 9th Grade**

*Gateway Regional High School; Woodbury Heights, NJ*

Most people remember the COVID-19 pandemic as a time of sorrow. They shudder when they think back to its early, uncertain days. I choose to remember the pandemic as a time of joyful opportunities and rewarding educational experiences. Make no mistake, the pandemic left my family and me with indisputable anxiety and tough decisions. Still, when I think back to the years 2020 and 2021, I remember experiences of grit and growth with my baby brother when I watched him while my parents worked. I also learned to be more social through opportunities like an SAT prep course that led to academic outlets. I received tutoring in a new language, which will lead me to success in the future.

For as long as I can remember, I have always enjoyed my space in school and at home. I have always been an independent worker. Most students—including my elementary school brother—had a tough time being out of school and on Zoom. I saw it as a way to up my school project game and take advantage of the time to learn individually. After middle school, I decided to leave my school district and enroll in another high school. It offered Latin, and as an aspiring lawyer wanting to achieve a high score on my SATs, I was ecstatic. At my middle school, I studied French. To be on par with my peers in Latin II, I used the break time I had to learn Latin. The summer following my eighth-grade year, I also took an SAT course while still in lockdown mode—why not? At thirteen, I was leary of it. Still, I'm so glad that I took the course. It provided an outlet for socialization and other beneficial opportunities, such as a national leadership circle that will give me the skills I need to grow as a leader.

Even though I look back at the pandemic now gratefully, it didn't spare my family the stress many others faced. At the beginning of the pandemic, my parents had a safe and kind nanny that would watch my then one-year-old brother. My mother, a teacher, taught her high schoolers via Zoom, and my stepdad acclimated to his new position. All went well until that nanny unexpectedly quit, leaving us in the lurch. My mother is immunocompromised and was recovering from painful spine surgery. My other brother was only a baby, so it was hard to find someone trustworthy in the middle of a ravaging pandemic.

After another new nanny was let go for handling my baby brother too harshly, I decided I needed to step up. My parents were doing the best they could while still making an unprecedented experience tolerable for my brothers and me. I felt it was time that I helped. You may be wondering, *"What parents would leave their thirteen-year-old with a one-year-old for six hours a day?"* At the start, they were worried too. The situation of desperation helped them to agree to let me as long as I kept my grades up. I am happy to say that I successfully bonded with my baby brother and gave him the experiences he deserved during such a time of uncertainty while also learning on Zoom and maintaining my straight-A streak all year.

Additionally, I took it upon myself to oversee my ten-year-old brother's online education since he struggled academically and emotionally. I helped him organize his assignments and find productive things to do in his free time so that he didn't feel so socially isolated. I am happy that I had the opportunity to spend that time with my brothers, as both of their situations garnered patience and joy. My baby brother was a source of sunshine during such a time of depression for the world. I believe that the time we spent together led us to an unbreakable bond, and I will forever be grateful. I also believe I kept my 10-year-old brother from falling into a very dark place. As someone on the autism spectrum, I've been described as very consistent emotionally. While sometimes this leaves me or others confused, it was a benefit to my family when all of them needed me because I was the only one not freaking out.

Unlike many teenagers, I value my time at home with my family and know the bittersweet day I leave for college will approach before I know it. Fortunately, one of the bright spots of the pandemic was getting to spend time and make memories with my family. My mom is my best friend. Often compared to *The Gilmore Girls*, we have an open and hilarious relationship full of silly jokes and immeasurable love. As Rory Gilmore once said, "My mom and I are freakishly linked!" The main person I was worried about when the pandemic hit was my mom due to her variable health. When you love someone so fiercely, you want to do whatever you can to help them. That is why I stepped up with my little brothers. She was under extensive stress because she was a teacher during a pandemic while also recently emerging out of a high-risk pregnancy and major spinal surgery.

As a child stuck at home on Zoom, I felt helpless. While I know it wasn't my job to be a "parent," I didn't think of it that way. I picked up the slack because that's what family is about, and I knew I could handle it. I wouldn't trade the outcome of my subtle sacrifice for the world. Instead of dwelling on the past and thinking about the opportunities I missed, I chose to be grateful for my family and the hours we laughed and cried together. I wouldn't want to be trapped in a house with anyone else.