Our Growing Divides

Lydia Pita - 11th Grade
Strath Haven High School; Wallingford, PA

I didn't start this pandemic here. I started in the Philly suburbs, which is where I spent most of it. I was a freshman in a small town across the country. The day school closed and everything changed. It was a rural town. Back then, people were less resistant to mandates. Things felt less polarized and political, even if it feels odd now to imagine the Republicans dutifully putting on their masks in my hometown. My new friends in my shiny, bourgeoise Philly suburb tell me how my current school soldiered through with remote learning. I remember that my old school did none of that. When the pandemic shut down the school, it meant that I finished my freshman year in February in equal parts due to unwilling students and a disorganized administration.

I spent those early days of the pandemic in relative freedom. Case numbers in my town were zero from March until July, so I felt comfortable going for socially distanced bike rides with my friends. These rides were through my now-abandoned hometown, and we looked at the skeletal streets where I'd grown up. The pandemic, in the beginning, was not isolating for me because I finally had the freedom I'd desired for so long.

Things changed when my family moved. After four days of driving across the country, in August 2020, I found myself staring at the white suburban house I now tentatively call home. Gone were the days of easy freedom and carelessness that marked the first days of the pandemic. COVID restrictions were rightly tighter in my suburb because of our proximity to the city, restricting the comfort I had grown accustomed to. Before we moved to Philly, the pandemic had almost felt like a far-off fantasy, separate from the life in my small town.

Moving to an entirely new place during the pandemic was incredibly difficult. My sophomore year was practically lost to hours of Zoom classes with students I'd never met, and cross country meets with a team I barely knew. Because of virtual school, it didn't sink in that I went to my high school until I stopped by to pick up something in a classroom during April of my sophomore year. I made friends, sure, but not ones that lasted. Unlike in a normal year, my friends were ones who, because of circumstance alone, were able to make the transition from class Zoom calls to text messages. Being at a new school, in a place I'd never really been to, in the middle of a pandemic was profoundly isolating. Pandemic isolation is a term that gets thrown around a lot, and I certainly experienced a strong dose of it. Not only was I completely separated from the world, but I had to navigate an entirely new place at the same time everybody else was trying to navigate the "new normal."

When I think about pandemic isolation and life during the pandemic, my reflection consistently drifts to the sharp dichotomy between the types of pandemic life I've experienced. Not only the contrast between the pandemic in March 2020 in another state and October 2020 in the Philly suburbs but also the shades of pandemic experience that have colored seemingly every week and month.

My school started going optional in person in April 2021. It altered the social dynamics of the friendships I'd made, and even to me, a relative outsider, I could tell it divided the school. When everybody came back in person this school year, we all wore masks and attempted to socially distance ourselves. Even then, some students didn't want to mask or didn't wear them properly. Surely, there were teachers who didn't enforce the mandate. It was jarring to see the divide grow, especially as restrictions shifted and the COVID situation kept changing peoples' perspectives. New variants increased people's paranoia, and some students became draconian about masks in ways I hadn't seen since 2020. Yet, in the same month, my school went mask-optional, and it seemed like everybody judged everybody for their choices.

Divide has largely characterized pandemic life for me in so many ways. Although I never knew them before the pandemic, I've seen my classmates become increasingly divided and judgemental over pandemic issues, from going in person to wearing their masks. It's a strange thing to watch. Today's broader political climate has made it even stranger—knowing that these same dynamics play out on the national stage.

My life experiences of the pandemic have varied significantly because of my changing circumstances. While I didn't see all of rural American COVID politics play out, I did see the seeds of it. While I didn't experience the initial lockdowns here in Philly, I did see how policies evolved and drastically affected the daily lives of everybody. I've seen these divides grow in the classroom and everywhere. I wish I could say I was hopeful about this divide that I've seen emerging. There's a juxtaposition between my small-town life and my suburban one, as well as the broader social ones. It's hard to be sure when it seems like these divides keep growing, no matter what policies get passed or actions get taken. I can't say what will happen, but I can only hope that something happens to soften the ever-sharpening lines throughout America.