

Olivia Ruiz - 11th Grade

The Beacon School; New York, NY

When I left school on March 13th, 2020, I expected to return the following Monday. All of my teachers continually emphasized how inconsequential the virus was and believed it would not affect the world the way news outlets claimed. My teachers and I truly had no idea how much our lives and the world would soon change.

The first few months of the pandemic were full of immense change. The bustling streets of New York were suddenly empty, and I feared leaving my apartment without being exposed to the virus. I suddenly spent all hours of my day inside with my mother and grandmother— three generations now shoved into a single household.

I learned so much about the world throughout the pandemic. I learned that many individuals are unwilling to accept the inequities around them until they are forced to face them. In many ways, the pandemic was the great equalizer. No matter your social class, it affected everyone's lives; it forced us to go through a collective experience.

The effects of the pandemic uncovered the already existing inequalities within society, forcing others to reckon with them. The countless studies that highlighted how African Americans were dying from COVID-19 at higher rates than White individuals forced many to see the long history of healthcare inequity within the U.S.

The pandemic also fueled social justice advocacy, forcing the world to finally witness the realities of being a person of color within America. Following the murder of George Floyd, I saw many White individuals, ranging from celebrities to mutual friends, using their social media platforms as a tool of activism after seeing the effects of racism firsthand.

Despite a 400-year-long history of racism within America, spanning from police brutality to mass incarceration, many still believed racism was an issue of the past. However, after the attention George Floyd's murder raised, Americans were finally forced to recognize the inequities people of color have spent years protesting.

During the beginning of the pandemic, one of my teachers asked my classmates and me to create a digital journal to document our thoughts. I first disapproved of the task, believing it was a waste of time to write about how I spent my days inside my apartment. However, after the murder of George Floyd and the outpour of activism I saw online—spanning from people creating hashtags and posts to individuals gathering in the empty city streets to shout "*Black Lives Matter!*" and "*No justice, no peace,*" — I expressed the frustration I felt in seeing how so many were previously ignorant to the ill effects of racism.

I wondered why it took the horrific murder of an innocent Black man for individuals to acknowledge their privilege and the problems people of color have faced for decades. I then realized that I could turn my anger into advocacy, encouraging others to become more critically aware of their role in maintaining White Supremacy and how they can interrupt it.

The pandemic ultimately taught me the importance of advocacy. It also taught me how I could use my voice to combat the injustices within our society. As I continue to move through the pandemic, I intend to use my voice to combat the systemic inequities I witness—emerging as an agent of change and an individual dedicated to impacting the world, regardless of how big or small.