



## Scholarship Contest Winner

**Aanchal Jain**

**Okemos High School**

**Essay Topic: Examine your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**How has the pandemic altered your high school experience and how have you adapted? How has the pandemic affected your decisions for your future endeavors after high school?**

The year was 2020. The year when everyone's life changed. What started as an extended spring break turned into a year-long journey of navigating the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic had forever changed the world, and surely enough, disrupted the course of millions of high school students across the nation.

Being a sophomore in high school when the pandemic began, life was great the first few months. The SAT had been canceled. There were no final exams. What else could be better for a 15-year-old, right? But, the pandemic continued. And after learning that my junior year was entirely online, I felt as if my high school years were dissolving into nothingness. Although virtual school was a little unusual the first few weeks, it eventually became a routine: wake up, join Zoom classes for four hours, finish homework, spend time with family, and repeat the cycle the next day. I quickly got bored of this pattern, though. The loss of motivation in classes and the aimless afternoons were getting to me. Yes, I was starting to feel the effects of the pandemic. I yearned for interactions and extracurricular involvement to boost my lost motivation.

With the extra time I had in the afternoons due to the reduced schedules in online learning, I decided to browse for virtual opportunities. The desire to find new experiences led to me figuring out what I wanted to major in in college and potential career choices I could undertake. I was able to expand my passion for card-making to elementary students by hosting virtual card-making classes. I had the opportunity to conduct a research project and submit it to multiple virtual research fairs. I got to volunteer at a research lab, learn many computational biology methods, and work on a computational project. The pandemic nearly changed my viewpoint on the biological sciences because of the time I had on my hands to explore research, volunteerism, and medicine. My future directions, before the pandemic started, were not clear, but the extra time I had helped me solidify my career choice in healthcare. Even though I may have missed out on homecoming festivities, holiday spirit week, and one-and-a-half years of high school, I would say I still had an equally meaningful high school experience. I was able to use the time to find different opportunities that I may have never come across if it were not for the pandemic.

Although the pandemic has changed our way of life, it has provided everyone with a moment of reflection on the importance of valuing in-person connections, especially in school and at the workplace, and spending time discovering one's passions. For me, the one year we all had at home changed the path for the rest of my life. As the virus diminishes, I am grateful for the opportunity to be back in-person at my high school, progressing through a relatively normal senior year. The pandemic has made me realize not to take anything for granted. Rather, when faced with a sudden, peculiar situation in life, one should take full advantage of it.

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