

WRITE TO EDUCATE

Scholarship Contest Winner

Mori Rothhorn

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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?

I couldn't believe how much I had missed this. Being face-to-face again with my friend after six months of isolation rekindled my hope that things could finally go back to normal. However, as we walked together downtown, that hope was slowly crushed. We were stared at, pointed at, and singled out simply because we were Asian. There were whispers of "China-virus" as we walked by; dirty glances that seemed to echo, "You're not welcome here."

When we were together it was clearer than ever that the pandemic had led to a deep-rooted anti-Asian sentiment. My friend is 100% Chinese, and as a white-passing mixed Japanese woman, I was privileged that my appearance didn't make me a direct target when I went out alone. I grappled with my privilege of being perceived as white, and identifying as Asian at a time when Asians were targeted and blamed for the onset of the Coronavirus.

While the vaccine has helped to minimize the spread of COVID-19, there is no cure for hatred. Anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339 % at the peak of the pandemic, according to a 2020 study published by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. In response to the rise of hate crimes in 2020, my sister and I organized a chapter of Tsuru for Solidarity, a non-violent Japanese-American-led organization fighting against racism, at our high school. Together we made over 560 origami paper cranes as an act of protest against the acts of racism occurring across the country. The organization intended to string the cranes, created by volunteers, around the white house as an act of protest, but due to complications from spikes in COVID-19 cases, the event was postponed. Nevertheless, supporting my Asian American community helped me heal some of the internalized guilt I've struggled with for passing white and to use my privilege for good.

As I wrestled with my identity and privilege, I also recognized the need to address mental health issues that were becoming exacerbated while we were in isolation. Mental health issues were often disregarded even though they disproportionately affected minorities at the school. When the pandemic started, students' mental health shifted from an issue to a full-fledged crisis. To make a change in my community, I began serving as the Student Liaison on my school districts Mental Health Advisory Committee. During my work with the committee, I established resources for students struggling with the pressures of COVID-19 like the Buddy System and worked to establish a tiered intervention program, TRAILS, at our middle school and high school. I also founded the Students for Body Image Support Club (SBIS) to help students struggling with self-love, and advocate for equity within the school. Working to establish SBIS in my community helped me overcome my struggles with body image and mental health, and taught me about the importance of vulnerability in leadership. Our work demonstrated the power and change that comes from the community and made me more passionate about working for equity within the mental health system; something I hope to pursue throughout the rest of my academic and professional career. With my background in mental health and advocacy work, I hope to pursue a career in Neuroscience and research innovative solutions to make all people feel welcome, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or orientation.

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