

PLUS ME PROJECT & GEAR UP
PRESENT

PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES

**Sharing Real Stories
From Our Students.**



+ME



**GEAR UP & PLUS ME PROJECT
PRESENT**

PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES

SHARING REAL STORIES FROM OUR STUDENTS



Copyright © 2021 by PLUS ME Project

All rights reserved.
Published in the United States by PLUS ME Project

Printed in the United States of America

Formatted by Aby Cortes

Edited by Flo S. Jenkins
Words That Flo!...Editorial Consultancy Services
www.wordsthatflo.com
Torrance, CA

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author/publishers, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

“LET’S PUT IT IN A BOOK!”

This was the enthusiasm that sparked the idea to create the book you are now holding in your hands.

Everyone has a story that matters, including you! However, too often, there are stories that get left out. These stories tend to be those of our youth, whose perspectives, experiences, and feelings can be easily disregarded as immature and unthoughtful.

We disagree.

“Who are we?”, you might be asking.

We are the PLUS ME Project.

PLUS ME Project is a Los Angeles-based non-profit that activates the art of personal storytelling to increase confidence in youth as they pursue college, career and life goals. We envision a world where all communities are filled with courageous voices whose stories are heard, valued, and celebrated.

During a global lock-down due to COVID-19, there was an opportunity to provide a safe space where our children’s voices could be heard and appreciated.

Therefore, in a collaborative effort between PLUS ME Project and GEAR UP, we captured the stories of the GEAR UP community (i.e. students & coordinators) and archived an important and unprecedented time in our history by sharing real stories from young people who lived through a pandemic.

Your decision to read this book ensures that their voices are heard and affirms the fact that their stories matter.

For more information about PLUS ME Project, visit:
www.theplumeproject.org

For information about GEAR UP, visit:
www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Thank you!” to all the students who made this book possible.

BRAYAN VERDUGO

COLLEGE • GEAR UP SAN BERNARDINO

GEAR UP has always been a part of my life since the 8th grade, and they have improved my entire future. They would always have programs for the kids that helped them prepare for their future goals in life.

During the pandemic, GEAR UP had so much planned for us; however, they couldn't do exactly what they were hoping for, but they still managed. They had a workshop that I was interested in, which was about designing clothes. I was a bit nervous, because I wasn't sure how it was going to be and who was going to be there. The first day I showed up a little late, but they still accepted me and caught me up with everything. This made me feel good because this was the start of my future career.

After the first session, I became comfortable with people I had never met before. What I learned from this was that you can meet and become friends with a bunch of people just by liking the same things or having interest in the same topic. I also learned how to start up my own brand and how to do it from my very comfy chair at home.

During the pandemic, we have all gone through issues, and one thing you should know is that you are not alone. People from all over may be feeling the same way, and if somehow you connect with someone because of that, you can build a great friendship. The moral of the story is to talk to someone and engage with them. Sometimes a stranger can be just as much help as your friend you've known for years, but you will never know unless you start talking to them.

GEAR UP has given me, and many other people, hope for our future in college. It has also provided many resources to help us become outstanding individuals. They have impacted me and others by giving us many resources for college and beyond. GEAR UP has shown us that they truly care.

No matter what background you come from, GEAR UP supports you in whatever you want to aspire to, and they don't force anything onto you. I truly can't thank them enough for everything they have done for us all.

ELISA ROMERO

COLLEGE • GEAR UP SAN BERNARDINO

Months into the quarantine, I received a letter about the cancellation of the senior class activities. I was heartbroken in my bedroom, crying while watching prom video blogs as I daydreamed of how I would finish my senior year.

My uncle came to check up on my family, because we went into a global pandemic grieving for a loved one who was taken away by cancer. My uncle comforted my cries; he reminded me of my senior photos of me modeling in my prom dress. My uncle left our home, and my grandmother texted me weeks later that she had scheduled a tailor to adjust my dress to a good length that I would be able to move in. Even if my dress was to be altered, I felt my satisfaction fade away over time. My dress was finished, and my grandmother paid for my dress, because she wanted me to feel my best during my last year of high school.

After I picked up my dress, I eagerly prepared the whole outfit because my uncle had planned a photo shoot after days of rain in downtown Redlands. I still felt gloomy when my sister and I got picked up from my house for the photo shoot. When I finished getting ready, my sister kept making me laugh as she was doing my makeup.

My uncle drove me, my sister, and my grandmother to Downtown Redlands to take photos. My sister and grandmother helped me pose for the camera, because I was quite shy about going in a public space to take photos. I was relieved that there were only a few people out going on walks. I stretched and relaxed myself so I wouldn't be so stiff while taking my photos. I posed in a way to extend my body in the photos and to feel more confident in my dress.

Once the photo shoot ended, so did the sunset, and it was time for the moon to rise. My family and I went home to edit the raw camera files. Later, I revealed my senior prom photos to my family and received many compliments.

During quarantine, I wore a mask and stayed away from people as much as possible. In the end, I still felt bummed out that my graduation ceremony was to be postponed. I learned to be more grateful and appreciative of what I have now.

GEAR UP impacted my life to always use the support I need to make it through difficult times and not to be afraid of receiving extra help.

NIRVANA MADRIGAL

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was hot and I couldn't bear the heat. Suddenly, my mom got a call. Of course, I was curious about who it was, and when she got off the phone, I anxiously asked her who she was speaking to. She said it was a staff member of the After School All-Stars. I asked what the teacher had said, and she told me to take a shower and we were going to the school to pick up a gift card.

I took a quick shower and got dressed quickly. I was too lazy to walk to school, but I thought, "At least I'm fresh now." When we got to the front of the school, I saw my teachers whom I've grown so fond of. It was amazing to see them again and we chatted for a short while. Then, we got signed up for the gift card. I was so excited and felt appreciative of the All-Stars. Then, my mom showed me that the gift card was for a grocery store called Food-4-Less.

Receiving the card made me feel so honored. I couldn't believe that I received a gift card and felt so happy and grateful. This act of kindness showed me that even during the pandemic, anyone can make a difference and make someone very happy.

GEARUP4LA has impacted my life by ensuring me of a successful future.

MADISON WILLIAMS

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

COVID-19 has changed my life because lots of people are losing friends and family. We had to stop going to school, and we have to wear dumb masks all around. When someone is sick, everyone just thinks that person has COVID, and it gets really annoying.

I just want it to be like it used to be: the times when we could go to places and have fun without people looking at us fearfully if we cough or anything like that. I want to go back to when we used to have school in person and not online. I want to go back to when people didn't lose their jobs.

This sickness is scary but also dumb. Now some people have become more depressed because they're stuck at home with nothing to do. Sometimes there is no one to talk to because not everyone has a phone. It's changed so much in everyone's life. It's becoming better, but it's still a big change to everyone. My life has changed a lot with COVID. I can't go anywhere because my mom is scared that one of us is going to get it, and things like that make it frustrating.

GEAR UP is always there for me whenever I need them.

NORMA MARTINEZ

12TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

The pandemic has been a very difficult time for each of us, but our experiences are what makes it different from everyone else's.

It was a few months into the pandemic when George Floyd was killed. My heart was shattered for him and his family. One night, I was sitting with my mom watching the news when I saw the news about people protesting and looting neighborhoods around the city.

As I saw more and more Black people being hurt and not receiving justice, I was so heartbroken that our city and nation does a horrible job at bringing justice for Black people. Even through these peaceful protests, Black people are the ones looked down on and the police receive the praise. As I witnessed this, I wanted to join and contribute by protesting with everyone. However, with COVID-19, I wasn't allowed to attend by my mom. I felt hopeless and helpless. I wanted to show and give my support in any way I could, but I didn't know how.

After talking with my mom and some friends, we came up with a way to still help. Looting had become a bigger problem that week, so we decided to help our local stores that were looted. My friends and I helped a local shop. We swept and dug through the stuff that was destroyed to find things that weren't damaged or that could be saved. Working together, we were able to find many items that the shop owners got to keep and to sell.

We were unable to stay the whole time to help, but we helped as much as we could. At the end, the owners of the shops were so thankful. They thanked us and were so happy when we offered them supplies to continue cleaning.

Although I didn't feel I had helped as much I could have, seeing how thankful they were to us made my day. Because of this event, I have learned that even the smallest gestures can make someone's day, week, or even their year.

GEAR UP motivates me to never give up on my dreams and inspires me to help others.

EVA BRICENO

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was the beginning of August 2020. I was sitting outside talking on my phone. I was in a happy mood that afternoon. Once I had put my phone down, I received a text message from my cousin, saying, “Hey Eva, hope you’re doing well. You know what happened with Abuelita, right?” At that moment, I was worried. I didn’t know if it was going to be good or bad news, because my grandmother had a stroke about 2 or 3 months prior. So, I said, “No, what happened?” He replied, “She passed away last night.”

I felt so much pain that I couldn’t believe it! With watery eyes, I asked him, “Are you serious?” He responded, “No, why would I joke about that?” I started to cry. I was in a lot of pain and my heart felt like it was in a million pieces.

My cousin told me to, “Let everything out. Don’t bottle it up.” I still felt sad, but I also felt a little comfort because once I read that, it made me feel like I knew my family and I could get through this. I think one of the things that hurt me the most was that I wasn’t able to see or talk to her one last time.

Everyone should cherish precious memories or moments you have with someone, because you don’t know when something could happen to them, and there is a lot of pain when something does. You should also never think that your family isn’t there for you—because they are.

GEAR UP has inspired me to achieve my goals, to never give up when I am starting to fall, and to help and be kind to others.

JILL MANNING

COORDINATOR • GEAR UP 4 LA

I am standing in line at the market, and I see people looking at me, at the mask I'm wearing. I'm embarrassed. "This mask must be really bad," I think to myself. A woman with a bandana tied around her face walks up to me and says, "Excuse me, where did you get that mask?" I hesitate, but decide to confess, "I made it." Her face lights up. "Do you sell them? Would you be willing to make one for me? For my family?" she asked. I am shocked. She likes it! She really likes it! "I, uh, guess I could make you some," I said. "Do you want to give me your number?"

Let's back up. It was early April 2020. No one was 100% sure how COVID-19 was being spread, so the suggestions about how to avoid catching it ranged from "Don't ever leave your house again" to "Wash your hands," to "Wear a mask." PPE was in short supply and limited to medical personnel, first responders, and frontline workers.

I was afraid of getting COVID. Scratch that, I was terrified. I'm 53 years old, have a history of asthma and I'm overweight. People with statistics like mine were actually dying, so I wanted to do my best to flatten my own personal curve. Not leaving my house was unrealistic – I had to get groceries. So, I figured I could wash my hands when I got home and wear a mask when I went out.

I looked at the CDC website for suggestions on what made the best mask. Cotton fabric, at least two layers, tightly fit on your face. Sounded easy enough.

Let's be clear. I am no seamstress. I can sew on a lost button and hem a pair of pants, but that is pretty much the extent of my repertoire. I had never used a pattern. I didn't know what it meant to 'back stitch', and 'bias tape' might as well be a foreign word. But I am not one to back down from a challenge, so I dug in the back of my closet and pulled out a sewing machine.

I scrounged up a derelict piece of fabric, watched a YouTube video on how to make a mask and I went for it. "You can do this!" became my mantra, and I managed to make a reasonable facsimile of a mask—the mask I was wearing at the market.

Heidy's (that was her name) interest in my mask changed me. I never really thought I could do much to stop the transmission of COVID-19, but that day I realized that I could do something. I could sew masks. I could help save someone's life. And so, I sewed.

To date, I have made and donated more than 850 masks. The masks have gone to families across Los Angeles, to Project Angel Food, to nurses at Kaiser Sunset hospital, and even to such far-flung locations as North Carolina and Utah.

The pandemic can make you feel small and helpless. But making masks has empowered me. My masks help protect my community and my community is worth protecting. We are stronger than COVID-19, and by working together and caring for each other, we can beat it.

Working with GEAR UP reminds me that everyone can achieve their post-secondary education goals.

JARED GONZALEZ

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was late at night when my mom got home from her job at her restaurant. She was tired after a long night of serving people, all the while figuring out how she was going to work in a global pandemic. After all, she was out of work for four months, and had to figure out how to pay rent, eat, support her family, and deal with two kids without the help of anyone—a single mother. We were happy that she had her job again, but it changed our lifestyle. I now take care of my brother five days a week at night. It was all something new.

My mom barely gets any sleep. Since she started working again, she gets up, makes food, cleans the house, does some exercise, and goes back to sleep for another hour. I started to feel bad that all these years she's done this, and I haven't been too much of a help. Even with her job, she was still constantly searching for help. I asked how I could help and saw everything she did. As people I've known started to get the virus, I realized this was getting closer than I thought.

I began to help around the house. I began washing the dishes, helping with the car, and cooking. I realized that these little things I did were making a difference for me. I felt more helpful. It helped me to see how little things we do can make a difference. Smiling at other people, helping them with groceries and more just makes life more like it was before the pandemic. It took a pandemic for me to realize that. I wonder how many others realized that. I learned to help more around the house and in the world, because Earth is just humanity's house. We have to take care of it, because we don't have another one. We need to understand that.

GEAR UP has inspired me to find out more about post-secondary education, and where I can find people to help me at school with anything I need.

ALEXIS FAGER

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

COVID-19 hasn't really made an impact on me; well, at least not in a negative way. I enjoy being quarantined because I'm not a very social person, and I love just staying inside and not having to go out.

I've been doing fairly well in school. I have not failed my classes at the end of the nine weeks, and my final grades have been A's and B's. I do wish that I had teachers helping me with assignments. I'm too nervous to talk through the mic during my virtual classes, so normally I don't ask the questions that I may have wanted to ask.

I did have COVID a month or so ago. I was one of the luckier ones and didn't really have any symptoms of it other than some coughing, no sense of smell, and some migraines. I do miss being able to go to the movie theaters and being able to go do things with my friends or go to school.

I can't wait until I don't have to worry about giving others the disease. But all in all, the quarantine hasn't really been much of a struggle for me, but I know that it has been for others.

GEAR UP has helped me emotionally.

NUBIA OSORIO

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

I was helping my mother and aunt with some errands. I was just waiting for my aunt to park the car -- and I felt so uneasy. It was starting to scare me. I kept stopping once-in-awhile to see what was bothering me, but there wasn't anything; there wasn't anything wrong with the environment. I was sitting down on a bench with my aunt when I smelled something in the air. I was confused and scared, so I turned around and saw smoke everywhere. My mother, my aunt and I went straight to safety, and we drove home. Of course, I was freaking out, but I didn't want my mom or aunt to worry about me. I tried my best to stay calm, but my asthma started to kick in, and I had to use my inhaler since all I could breathe was smoke.

We got home and a few minutes later I saw the news about the gas station near us. I was mortified; but then, again, our world is full of fear. This was an experience that made me realize how this year has us all conflicted about violence and isolation, and that there is so much going on that is causing tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, and more. I've learned that the world can be pretty scary and dangerous, but as long as we are safe and calm, we can live a beautiful life.

GEAR UP inspired me to go to college and achieve my academic goal.

DAMARY GONZALEZ LOPEZ

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It all happened so fast, so suddenly. One day I was dragging my legs, reluctantly heading to school, and the next I was prohibited to even go to school. Who would have thought 2020 would turn out like this? In fact, it was one of those lazy Saturday mornings; the ones where it is so hot that you don't want to lay anywhere else other than the floor.

My mother and I were watching TV, when unexpectedly, while we were viewing Mayor Garcetti, he informed L.A. County it was now on lockdown. We both turned our heads to look at each other. My mother's face mirrored my own; we were both taken by surprise. My mother then proceeded to say, "Let's pray to God that we will all get through this together, because only He knows what will happen next."

Lockdown was pretty much uneventful, to the point where I was actually missing attending school. However, I knew that going back to campus meant wearing a mask ALL the time. Restraining and tiresome. That's how I'd describe what it felt like when wearing a mask. Forget running around freely and at full speed, because the mask made it difficult to breathe. Not only is a mask required for school, but a mask is required everywhere—for our own safety and for the safety of other people. It has me thinking, "When will this end? Will we ever return to 'normal'?"

GEAR UP has given me so many opportunities that are very beneficial to me now and in the future.

JENNIFER LOPEZ-RAMOS

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was my birthday and the middle of COVID-19. I felt disappointed because it would be the first time not celebrating my birthday; however, I was just going to accept the fact that I wouldn't be celebrating my birthday. My mom told me it was going to be fine, and that made me feel better. At that time, she was cooking a lot of food. I saw that the last few days she had been cooking a lot, but for the family. But this felt different, because she cooked more than she normally did; so, it made me wonder why she was cooking so much food.

When it was around 2 p.m., I left and went to visit my dad at the place where he sells things. I stayed there for a bit and then went home at 4:30 p.m. When I got there, I saw my aunts cooking with my mom. The two aunts living with us are part of my dad's side of the family. I became suspicious about all of them cooking together, because that often happens when it is someone's birthday. So, I went up to my mom and asked: "What are you doing?" She told me she was cooking for the whole family, and for a moment, I thought she was telling the truth. I said, "Ok," but I felt that my mom was not telling me the truth.

It was now 6 p.m. My aunts and uncles arrived at the house, but only the ones who are closest to our family, and those we knew were safe to be around during COVID-19. I knew that they were going to celebrate, so when they told me, I was not surprised; however, I acted surprised so that I wouldn't spoil anything. It was a little party and not a big one. I was happy and I saw that my family was happy for me, which made me even happier.

I also got some presents, but not a lot. I always get happy about what I get. I am not a spoiled kid like some other kids my age. I'm not saying that all kids my age are spoiled, but some are. I'm happy for the family I have, and they are always there when I need them the most. When the party ended, I opened the other presents, and I liked them. It was 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. when the celebration ended, and I was happy that we were able to celebrate my birthday during this time.

GEAR UP has inspired me to follow my dreams and reach for my goals.

NATALLY BARAJAS MANZO

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

I remember I was deciding on what to do with all my free time, since we had to stay home because of the CORONA-19 virus that was spreading around. So, I just decided to watch one of my favorite Anime cartoons called "Fruits Basket." While watching it, there was this one scene that really caught my attention. In this scene, one of the characters said, "Hey, let's play cops and robbers!" The reason this scene caught my attention was because before CORONA-19, my 11-year old sister, Hailey, my neighbors Joshua and Alan—who are the same age as me, 14—and Yordi, age 10, and I would go outside and play cops and robbers, which was our favorite game to play.

How we play cops and robbers is that we first put our feet in, and the last 2 are cops, and the rest are robbers. The cops must tag all robbers in order to win, and if a robber is captured, the other robbers can free them by tagging them out of the prison spot. Watching that cartoon scene made me feel a bit sad, because I missed going outside playing cops and robbers with them.

Around June, my neighbors began playing outside again. They came by my window and asked me and my sister Hailey if we could come outside and play. I responded, "I'll ask my mom and see if we can go outside." But, sadly, my mom said, "No," which was understandable since she just wanted to keep us safe from the CORONA-19 virus.

A few days later, my friends came by again, and I asked my mom if we could go outside, and she finally said "Yes!" We, of course, had to put on our masks and put on hand sanitizer every time we came back in the house. Finally, going outside, I was really excited! Meeting up, we all started to catch up on stuff, and we also began to compare each other's height to see who had grown throughout the quarantine. I was really shocked that Alan is almost the same height as I am! I am 5'4", and I now only beat him by an inch; he used to be around 5'2". At first, we started off with a game of tag, and then we played cops and robbers. It started feeling like the old times before going into the quarantine.

What I learned from this experience was not to worry too much. This whole quarantine thing is not going to last forever. I also learned to treasure the little things, because one day you'll look back and see those were the big things. Just like I learned with a simple game of cops and robbers with my neighbors.

GEAR UP has made me more of a leader and more mature.

ANTONIO GUERECA

EDUCATOR • GEAR UP 4 LA

Virtual learning had just been announced by LAUSD as I was wrapping up my Friday at Pio Pico Middle School. Students were told that classes would no longer happen in person and that they were to report to their teachers via Zoom after Spring Break. Coincidentally, that same Friday was also when I was supposed to start moving into my new apartment in the Palms area. I felt excited that I was moving in with one of my closest friends -- let's call him "Derek" -- and I was looking forward to all the adventures we'd have together. But, I had a small worry looming in the back of my head wondering if this new COVID-19 quarantine would affect what I had envisioned for my apartment.

The first couple of months weren't that bad at all; I felt I had absolutely nothing to worry about. Derek and I found ways to make quarantine fun -- like playing multiplayer video games or looking up cool recipes to make for dinner. However, I noticed that the games we chose or the food we made were different from what I was used to. It's important to note that Derek is Asian, and I was the only Mexican in the apartment. At first, I didn't mind making Asian-inspired foods, but as time went on, I started feeling a little left out.

Before moving into this new apartment, I lived with my parents. I was used to the cumbias on full volume on Saturday mornings, or the smell of the chorizo grilling on the skillet before I went to work. I began missing parts of my culture that shaped my home. As time progressed, it wasn't just the food that became an issue. I felt like Derek didn't understand my life experiences on what it's like navigating society as a low-income, Mexican male.

We ate chorizo, because it was inexpensive meat to get at the store when our family was short of money. Dialogues turned to heated discussions, and our bonding activities got shorter until they were non-existent. Confused, I kept asking myself, "Am I the problem? I'm trying to explain why I feel singled out; should I keep trying? Should I ignore it?" I started to feel sad, hopeless, and tired. The excitement of this new apartment journey turned to regret.

The buildup soon became too much, and Derek and I got into a full-blown argument. He thought he was taking my suggestions and applying them to how we interact in the apartment, but I still felt he wasn't listening to me. I was angry because I knew it wasn't up to me to invest emotional labor invalidating my narrative. I left my apartment and went back to my parents' place. I needed to remove myself from the situation because it was all so emotionally exhausting to take in.

The following Monday, I returned to my apartment, and sure enough Derek and I talked. We both voiced our opinions and decided on a course of action we can take to start mending our relationship. With a sorry look in his eyes, he apologized, and of course, I did as well. I felt bad because it was also unfair of me to have all these expectations for concepts he's never seen or lived.

This experience during quarantine taught me a valuable lesson: you'll have differences with the people you love. However, it becomes a choice whether or not you decide to invest emotional energy or walk away for the sake of your self-preservation.

Working with GEAR UP serves as a reminder of the importance of empowering and servicing the communities you come from.

CAROLINE VARGAS

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

How do I start?

Imagine a year where there is racism, homophobia, having to fight for women's rights, a pandemic happening, and living in a country with a terrible president that is extremely ignorant all at the same time. Yeah, you guessed it, 2020. Let's go into brief detail on these events.

You may have heard about the death of an innocent Black man named George Floyd, right? Some police officers k*llled this man out of suspicion and racism, no evidence has been shown as to what he did wrong. After this incident, many other innocent Black and brown people have been k*llled due to the corrupted and racist police system. This is how the Black Lives Matter movement started.

If you still don't really get it, let's compare our lives to houses. If someone's house is NOT burning down and you compare it to the one that IS, then the one that's burning would matter more simply because it's in danger. It's the same with lives. Black lives are being k*llled by police just because of skin color. We also use ACAB, which means "all cops are bad" (because even though not all cops are bad, they are a part of the same police system that is corrupted and that still allows those people to remain as cops). If you want to learn more, there are articles on the internet and social media on these topics.

Another thing that I wanted to talk about was the LGBTQ+ rights, along with women's rights. LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and more genders/sexualities. The reason we want rights for them is because they are treated like aliens, but they are human like everyone else. It's not a choice to make, you can't choose what feels right to you. It's not their fault they want to be what they believe they were meant to be. So, they should be allowed to walk in peace, talk in peace, and just, overall, live in peace.

Now, for women's rights. Women are always overlooked by everyone because "they are women". Women get paid less than men and are always told how to behave. We're also told not to do specific things; like go outside at night, and wear whatever we want. Women are also told that we need to rely on men, and we are just here for men, when women are stronger and more powerful on their own. We shouldn't have these silly rules. These rules are just implying that women can't be free on their own. That's why we are fighting for women equality and rights. All of this is happening and is being shut off due to the bigger problem in the world, which is the pandemic.

But just because there is a deadly virus going around doesn't mean it's going to stop the people who are protesting for equality and rights. Many people are fighting for equality because these issues are serious and need to be stopped.

GEAR UP has impacted me with this wonderful opportunity to work with the Plus Me project. I am very lucky to have had this chance to share my story and educate people on how the pandemic and other events have impacted us.

STEPHANIE MARTINEZ

12TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

People say life is a roller coaster; but honestly, it is. Sometimes the roller coasters get stuck somewhere and it doesn't move anymore. And you get stuck--until someone fixes it or until I fix it.

The last day of school before we were going into our quarantined break, life wasn't going great. I wasn't at my best. I was all over the place. I had people in my life who were very toxic, and I always forgave them. I was hurting myself again and again with these people.

"I need you in my life. I want to have a friendship with you," my ex-friend said. For a week, I was receiving messages like this. I didn't want to reply anymore. I was hurt for a long time by them. They made me feel insecure and they made me feel weak.

After a month, I received another text: "Hey, how you been?" I didn't want to ignore them anymore, so I replied to them saying, "I've been good -- just keeping myself on the low." And they replied, "That's good to hear." We had a very rough conversation after we were just discussing things, and I said, "You made me feel like nothing. I can't even be myself. I couldn't find myself while being under your shadow. You put me in a dark place." This person replied, "That is your fault, not mine." That's how the last conversation ended, and I couldn't even reply because I was blocked from everywhere. I couldn't even finish telling them my feelings.

With just those words I was hurt. I wasn't myself. I gave up. I was numb and I was lost. Everything around me was just a blur. I felt alone. I thought everything was my fault. Being in quarantine made me feel extra lonely, because I hate being home and I just wanted to go out and feel free. There were so many things going on at my house and this added much more to me. I was keeping a fake smile. I tried acting "normal", but what is "normal"? I went through a hard time.

Through the night, I would go to the restroom and cry and hear music. The artists I would hear made me relate to them: NF and Ivan B were my saviors. The restroom felt like a safe place. It was behind a closed door and that was my safe place where I could find myself. I would sit on the floor and write. I was writing everything, and I turned it into a story.

This person made me feel worthless. I learned so much through this friendship. I became open about it after a month that it had happened. My real friends were there for me, and they said: "You are never alone. We are here to stay for you." That melted my heart, because within the month of not being open, I was broken and in the dark, and I needed to find myself again.

I needed to pick up all the pieces and put them together. I found what I needed, but I haven't fully recovered yet. You are never alone, and I know that now, because I went a full month with self-pain and self-doubt. People change and hurt others, and there are others who will make you happy. I learned that the hard way. My feelings were all over the place, but I know what I felt. My friends who I opened up to know they were there to listen, but they can't relate to my pain.

GEAR UP has always been there to push me when I couldn't.

SUGEI CORTES

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was my first time going to a Zoom meeting. I was having trouble locating the link, but I got to it with my teacher's help. Before entering, I was pretty excited yet nervous, because I thought I would get into the wrong meeting by accident and stuff like that; and also, because it's been a while since I had gotten to see or greet my classmates.

Once I pressed 'Join Meeting', "Wait until the host lets you in the meeting" was the next thing I saw on my screen. That's when my mind started to fill up with questions. "What if the camera or mic would turn on once I'm in the meeting? Should I cover the lens just in case?"

As I was reaching towards the lens of the computer, I realized that it was taking a while to get into the meeting. But all of a sudden, poof! I see the screen pop up with multiple boxes with my classmate's names on them as I hear my teacher welcome me into the meeting. "Wow, this is cool! It's been a long time since I've seen them all!" I thought to myself as my face filled with joy. I noticed I had both the camera and mic off. I assumed it turned off automatically. "What a relief!" I said as I took my finger off the lens.

I continued analyzing the new site of Zoom and testing out the other tools in the meeting. We spent the entire class talking about how we were going to turn in our work, and how to use some other apps to communicate with together, as a class. We also discussed apps we could use to interact with as groups, and the apps that could help us type and input our work. I felt glad to know that my teachers were making things more understandable, because I was really nervous about how we were going to work things out.

Time went by, and as we were about to leave the meeting, I made sure to let my teacher know that I was glad to be able to see everyone and that I really appreciated their concern about our education, and that they were making everything easier to handle. I felt better knowing that we will be doing Zoom meetings often and that I will have help from my teachers if I am having trouble.

GEAR UP has helped me when I have trouble understanding stuff I debate about. It helped me better understand how we all are important and that our education matters. :D

JORGE MARTINEZ

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

This story is about me in the pandemic. I was in Middle School when COVID-19 hit. I was so scared and nervous. I didn't want to watch the news because all they would talk about was how many people were dying. We all went on vacations and had to quarantine. I graduated from my Middle School and passed on to High School.

My dad ended up getting tested for COVID and the test came out positive. He had to isolate himself for 14 days. Everyone in my house had to wear masks all day long. It was so hard. After 14 days passed, my dad finally tested negative.

GEAR UP made me more confident.

SARA MELENDY

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

I've been associated with GEAR UP since I was in 7th grade at Haysville Middle School. It was spring break! I was so excited to have a break from school. It felt like school had lasted forever and we would never get a break. I don't pay much attention to the news, but, a few days later, I overheard news from my parents. They were talking about what President Trump was talking about. It was scary at times.

A few more days had passed, and I heard we were going on "Quarantine" for another week. I didn't think much of it.

Time flew so fast. It was already Friday. I was scrolling through social media and saw peers posting about schools shutting down in our city. I freaked out. I was ready to be back in school after two weeks.

My parents didn't know anything until I told them. As soon as we found out that it was the truth, my brother was running around so happy that we didn't have school for months. I, in fact, was disappointed. I wanted to finish out the year of middle school, go to promotion, and do my last choir concert.

As time passes, the more real it gets. It feels like this is a fantasy movie. You kind of get used to it.

GEAR UP never fails to put a smile on my face. They push me to do my best and they always remind me that they are here for me. They give me hope for the future!! :)

KEVIN SALGADO

12TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Quarantine for COVID-19 had just begun, and everyone was still extremely shaken up about the virus and the fear of contracting it. I was especially fearful of contracting COVID-19. My situation is very different from others. I am a cancer survivor and am currently in remission treatment, so the chemotherapy and medication I receive makes me extremely immuno-compromised.

Being much more susceptible to catching a virus is very nerve wracking. Just thinking about it adds to my anxiety, which leads to panic attacks. I'm very cautious of where I go and who I'm with. I pay attention to every minor detail, making sure I'm not near anyone with symptoms of COVID-19.

About five or six months into quarantine go by and everyone seems to be settled into this sudden change of everyday life. I am still cautious, and I am still a little anxious when I go out to do chores. One day I had decided to go get Ramen and Boba with two friends in Little Tokyo, and we all had quarantined for two weeks to ensure we were not putting each other in danger. It had been a while since I had gone out anywhere. I had resorted to staying in my house, so I was pretty excited to get out for the first time in a good minute.

As my friends and I got to the Ramen bar in Little Tokyo, we noticed the lack of mask wearers. This terrified me greatly because I didn't want to catch anything, especially COVID-19. We continued with our day as we planned. We walked around Little Tokyo, got some ice cream, bought things from the local gift shop, and admired our surroundings.

Although my friends and I still had a great time, I was frightened on the inside. I was super cautious and made sure I was sanitizing my hands and wearing my mask while staying away from people not wearing one. Reflecting back on my day out with my friends, I realized how fearful I was the entire day, even though I did have a great day.

The idea of catching the dreaded virus was in the back of my mind. A thought had been brought back up in my mind and I thought to myself, "This is how a lot of people must've felt during the beginning of the quarantine." Everyone was perturbed when the pandemic began, and quarantine was just being put into effect. People left and right were grabbing everything off the shelves in stores in surplus amounts, especially toilet paper. It was like they were preparing for an apocalypse.

I came to the realization that we fear what we do not know or understand, and not being able to understand something so bizarre results in chaotic behavior.

Overall, I just hope this pandemic gets solved and its burden gets lifted off our shoulders.

GEAR UP has impacted me by showing me how much they care about me and my future. They wish nothing but the best for me by giving me various opportunities to exceed academically. PLUS ME is one of these various opportunities that GEAR UP has given me, and for which I am beyond grateful for, and I'm glad I got to be a part of it.

FERNANDA RAMIREZ

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

While we were quarantined, I went to the store with my mom. As we were walking to the store, people were looking at us very judgmentally and as though they were mad. Once we got to the store, we realized we had forgotten our masks and that is why people were looking at us. So, my mom went in, and they gave her a mask and not me, because I was waiting outside the store. Very nervous and embarrassed, we rushed back home.

We saw our neighbor and we were going to say "Hi", but, all of a sudden, he saw me with no mask and started to cough. I was very disappointed, and when we got home, my mom told me to take a bath, because he was coughing in my direction. That is when I realized how our world of kindness has turned into a world where no one can be secure.

GEAR UP has impacted me by helping me to explore, to try to help others, to not be shy and to ask questions. It has made it easier to meet new people.

JENNIFER CARDENAS VIDAL

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was a Thursday afternoon. I was finishing up my homework and making sure everything made sense so that I could submit it. I was concerned that I was going to fail if I didn't turn it in. I was overwhelmed with all the other work I had and still needed to turn in. When I finally turned in the homework, I went to see what else I had to turn in. That was when I realized that my notifications for my Spanish class were off. I also found out that I had 2 missing assignments that had to be turned in that same day. I felt stressed and anxious hoping that I would finish on time.

I was doing my Spanish assignments when I felt like I was going to faint. I got scared, and I started crying because I didn't know what to do. I felt worried because that had never happened to me in the past. After that happened, I did what any 13-year-old would do: I Googled to learn what had happened to me.

I found out that I had had an anxiety attack. At first, I was shocked that I had one, but soon afterwards, I went to tell my sister and my grandma. When I told my sister and my grandma what had happened, I felt nervous because I did not know what they were going to think. To my surprise, they were actually comforting me and telling me that everything was going to be okay. The lesson I learned in this experience is that you don't have to go through anything alone.

GEAR UP has impacted me by making me more aware of what I want to do in the future.

JOSH QUEEN

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

In March 2020, my parents were not able to go to work because of COVID-19. While staying home, we became bored, so we started thinking of ideas to pass the time. We started doing arts and crafts but eventually ran out of things to do, so we started a garden!

First, we had to get chicken wire and wood for our garden box. While we were at the store, we also picked up some seeds. When we got home, we put the seeds in little cups and waited for them to grow while we built our garden box. A few weeks later, all the seeds had sprouted and were getting so big that we tilled up the dirt in our garden box to make holes for our growing plants.

We planted tomatoes, carrots, squash, cucumbers, cantaloupe, and corn. At first, the plants really were not doing anything, but a month later, we had our first plant showing its first flower. Pretty soon, all of them had flowers and they turned into vegetables.

The first vegetable we got to try was a cucumber, and it was so good. Next, we tried the tomatoes followed by squash and cantaloupe, but the squirrels kept eating them. The corn got out of hand and started taking over the garden, so we uprooted them to save the other vegetables. We made salsa with the tomatoes, and although I ate it, it really wasn't very good.

If it hadn't been for COVID, we would have never spent the time together as a family planting and harvesting our own vegetables. This event is probably the only thing good that came out of the Covid virus, and I am very thankful for that.

GEAR UP: They have helped me become a better student by helping me improve my grades and homework.

BRYTNEA BARKLEY

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

How COVID-19 impacted me: I see my friends less. Another thing is that school is much different, and our lives have been changed. So many deaths have happened and so many jobs lost. My dad has lost his job due to COVID-19, and now he is a semi driver.

As a result of the COVID virus, we have to wear a mask wherever we go. Restaurants shut down permanently, and it is so sad to see our world falling apart. Riots are happening and people are hating police for things that they did not do. Churches are shutting down, and I love church. I've been going to church all my life, and I am involved in my church. Church camp also got canceled. That's how COVID impacted me.

GEAR UP has helped me with homework after school.

DR. MONIQUE OHASHI

COORDINATOR • GEAR UP 4 LA

When I first heard about California's stay-at-home order to slow down the spread of COVID-19 back in March, I was relieved to know that I would be safe at home with my family while also working from home. I ecstatically jumped for joy knowing that I would not have to worry about dropping off and picking up my four children at four different locations; nor did I have to feel stressed about trying to follow the ever-changing GPS directions to avoid as much traffic as possible to get to work by 7:10 a.m. every morning.

The thought of just avoiding any form of commute gave me a glimpse of hope that I would be able to make better use of my time and finally could have the opportunity to improve my quality of life. Unfortunately, my feelings of exhilaration were short-lived...BIG TIME.

"Is there anything to eat right now?"

"The baby ripped my book and now she's writing on the walls!"

"How do I solve this hard math problem?"

"Why is my laptop not working again?"

"Can we go to Disneyland, Universal Studios, and Hawaii soon?"

"I forgot my mask again!"

Those were just some of the things that I would hear from my children throughout the day while my husband and I were trying to work from home. I felt like a hot mess as I attempted to wear many hats at home, feeling emotionally exhausted and frustrated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The euphoric emotion that I developed back in March quickly dwindled within a matter of days. That is when reality finally sunk in.

The pandemic was not going to end any time soon, so I knew I had to do something different....STAT! Our family of six needed to remain safe at home, however, staying cooped up indoors seemed to have detrimental effects on all of us.

We were constantly arguing or upset at one another, as this pandemic reminded us of all the things that we now are not able to do. My husband longed to watch movies at the local AMC theatre; my eldest daughter missed seeing her friends and playing high school basketball; my second child longed to hang out and play with his middle school friends; my 7-year-old son craved going on family trips; and my curious baby simply wanted to continue to explore our world.

My husband and I finally made time to have a long and serious conversation, and we finally compromised on making some changes for the better.

Although we wanted to save more money due to the uncertainties of pandemic life, we decided to make some purchases that would improve our quality of life during these challenging times.

Since our “talk”, we purchased a large projector screen so that we could watch Netflix movies in the comfort of our own backyard. In addition, my daughter now participates in virtual Zoom basketball sessions with her basketball teammates. My middle school son learned how to stay connected with his friends through online gaming (only during the weekends) and FaceTime, while my 7-year-old son now owns a Power Wheels jeep and drives it around the neighborhood to simulate the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland. Last, but not least, we currently have regular outdoor play sessions and eat dinner outside so that my toddler can continue to explore the beautiful world in which we live.

Nowadays, I can honestly say that we feel more connected to one another as a family unit, and we truly look forward to doing the little things in life together, such as having a relaxing evening under the stars after a long day of work and distance learning.

We learned that staying positive, focusing on what we CAN do, and making some creative adjustments to our lifestyle allowed us to appreciate one another and persevere during these challenging, unprecedented times.

Despite these challenging times, GEAR UP has constantly provided unconditional support to not only our GEAR UP students and families, but also the entire GEAR UP staff/team. For that, I feel truly blessed to work with such AMAZING people.

BELEN BENITEZ

EDUCATOR • GEAR UP 4 LA

When the news broke about COVID-19, I was told to clean up my desk area and work from home. I had mixed emotions because I was feeling excited to work from the comfort of my home, but shortly realized that the outbreak of the virus was not a myth. It was real and it was deadly.

After a few months of panic, things slowly began to feel comfortable again. I woke up and started my daily routine. While brushing my teeth, I grabbed a bottle of Listerine mouthwash, poured some into a small cup and rinsed. As I put the liquid into my mouth, I cringed, expecting a burning sensation. To my surprise, I did not feel the burn from the alcohol. I was confused because I did not feel a thing, so I decided to pour a second cup of mouthwash and rinsed again. I was shocked and verified the expiration date on the bottle, but it didn't expire until 2021.

I instantly panicked and ran to my room. I felt horrible; my hands were shaking. I thought to myself, "Did I lose my sense of taste?" Could it be possible that I was infected by the deadly virus? I scheduled a test that very same day, and I Googled COVID-19 and a list of symptoms appeared. Loss of taste buds was third on the list and my heart dropped. I did not sleep the whole night.

The next day, I received the results and I had tested positive. I instantly started crying, feeling anxiety and guilt, and hoping I didn't infect my family. The next day I felt fever, chills, headaches, muscle aches, chest pains, sore throat, loss of smell and taste and vomited. I felt hopeless and suffered depression; I was not able to leave my room and was forced to refuse employment since I was feeling an array of symptoms. I quarantined for a total of three weeks and finally tested negative.

As soon as I beat the virus, I cleaned, showered, and ran to my parents. I hugged them as tight as I could and prayed with them. Tears ran down my cheeks knowing I survived the deadly virus. I promised myself I would not take anything for granted. I learned to be patient, resilient, and never lose faith.

GEAR UP staff supported me from start to finish and always kept me in high spirits.

CHEYENNE BURNS

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

My year started out perfectly fine. I have always had headaches, but this year they got especially bad. So, my family decided to take me to see a neurologist. I tried 5 different meds and did not find one that worked. The next thing I know, I'm being pulled out of school to be taken to the hospital.

At this point, I was very nervous and, honestly, scared, because I had never been to the hospital—besides when I was born. I ended up spending 5 days there, and they did find a medicine that worked; but, in the process, I got an MRI and they found a brain tumor. Once they found this out, all I wanted was my family. But since COVID was still going on during this medical process, the only people that I could see were my mom and dad. Yes, I love them, but it was still really scary. When you think of a brain tumor, you think of cancer, but luckily, I don't have any type of cancer. But it was still very scary.

After they gave me the medicine, I went home the next day and then 2 days later all I can remember is I was in Westley's Children's Hospital -- the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit -- because I had an allergic reaction to the medicine I was put on. It was actually weird, because I didn't remember any of it, except a few things, like my nurse, that I had that good night; and I remember being in the ambulance from the emergency room. That's all I really remember from the first 2 nights.

They would do neurology checks every 4 hours, because I was saying funny things and not speaking correctly. I just was not being myself. It really scared my whole family because we didn't really know what was happening. I ended up being there for 4 days right after I had just been in Westley Children's Hospital for 5 days. So, my mom and I were very tired of hospitals, and I kind of think that they were tired of us, too.

Not too long afterwards, my mom and sister and I all got COVID-19. It didn't affect us as badly as everyone says on the news, but it did have long-lasting effects on me. I now have to see a cardiologist; and to this day, I have chest pains and really bad shortness of breath.

So, that was my 2020. I promise it wasn't all that bad, but it really did have its ups and downs. Overall, it was an interesting year.

GEAR UP didn't only help me with school; I always felt like I could go to them with anything.

BLAKE PERRIN

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

How COVID Impacted me:

COVID has impacted my life in good and bad ways. A good way is that we got the opportunity to make a garden, because we were worried about not being able to afford things, so having food from our own garden was just cheaper.

Another good thing is that it brought my family closer together and showed us what we could do as a family. We were shown that even in bad times there is still something good.

A bad thing about Covid is that so many people have lost their lives from this terrible virus. This has also impacted me by making me afraid to go out and do things I enjoy, including hanging out with friends. It worries me that I could come back and make someone else sick if I did get exposed, and the risk of giving it to them makes me afraid.

The epidemic has made me very cautious and shows that we can get through terrible things; we just have to stay strong and work together.

GEAR UP has provided me support when I need it.

YULIANA VALDEZ

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

It was March 13, 2020. It was Friday morning, and I was aware of what COVID-19 was and I knew that it was starting to spread to California. I didn't really think that it would affect me too much. I had gotten ready for school and went to my mom's room where I saw the news that there was a board meeting being held to determine whether or not LAUSD schools would be closed. When my mom, brother, and I got into the car, my mom promised to text me to keep me updated.

I got to school and met up with my friends at our usual spot. We started to talk about what was happening and what we thought was going happen. The bell rang and we went to our first class of the day, which was Robotics.

In the classroom, everyone was quietly copying down the agenda from the board into our notebooks when the silence was broken by the principal's voice on the P.A. system. She explained what was going on and said that she would keep us all updated.

Once we were done copying the agenda, we all went to the computer lab to work on coding. Our teacher informed us that whatever decision the district made, everything would be fine. Everyone was silent practicing coding on the computers with their partners when the principal came back on the P.A. system. She said that they were just informed that the district decided to officially shut down schools and what we were going to do to prepare for it. Half of the class started to panic, and the other half was excited. I started to panic. I started spiraling. I didn't really know what to do.

All of these questions went through my head: How is this going to work? What was going to happen? How long were we going to be out of school? When will I see my friends again? Will things ever go back to normal? All of these things were going through my head, and it was really overwhelming.

I was pulled out of my thoughts when I got a text from my mom telling me the news. I talked to my mom for a little bit about what we were going to do until the teacher explained to us what we needed to know for his class while online learning. The bell rang and we were dismissed to our break before our next class.

During the break, my friends and I were talking about what was going on. We were all pretty scared, but we tried to cherish our last day together for a while. In every class I went to, we were preparing to start learning from home and discussing how to stay safe and sanitary. This is when I realized that this was really happening.

GEAR UP has helped me prepare for and realize what I want to do in the future.

SHYANN COOK

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

During COVID-19, my siblings and I got closer. I created a bigger bond with my sister, and we dyed our hair one too many times. My brother and I worked out a lot and went on walks together. We ended up losing our grandfather during COVID, and due to us all creating bonds and getting closer, we were able to be there for each other more than we would have before.

My sister and brother are close, and I have a close bond with both. My sister and I have always been close, but we got closer. When my grandpa passed, I started to get close to my cousin and, after everything, came to find out that she and I have a lot in common.

Since COVID hit the town and we all went remote, I haven't been to Emporia to see my family; that has been weird, because I haven't seen my favorite cousin in a long time. There are also a few good things that happened. I made new friends and I got to see one of my other cousins, who I rarely saw. I was also able to talk to my best friend who I hadn't talked to in a few months. I played tennis for the school, so my friend came to our practice and that was the first time he and I got to hang out. He gave me food, so that made me happy.

The GEAR UP advisors are great and always want me to succeed.

KELLEY WILLIAMS

EDUCATOR • GEAR UP 4 LA

"I can't wait to get to Palm Springs!" I thought to myself. It was a warm Sunday in June. Summer was finally here. I had been working from home and practicing social distancing since March 13th when school, and pretty much the world, shut down. I needed a break from all of it! The negative news, the long lines at Costco and Trader Joe's, the hunt for toilet paper and Clorox wipes. Moreover, the never-ending Zoom meetings, be it for work, friends, or gym classes. I was DESPERATE to find some normalcy, so I told my husband, "Let's go to Palm Springs for the day. We can grab some lunch, drive around and come back home."

The two-hour drive was nothing out of the ordinary. I was driving and I remember appreciating the fairly-empty freeways. We arrived at Cabazon. "Ooh the outlets are open!" I exclaimed. I exited the freeway and started the hunt for a parking spot. We went to the parking garage, found a spot quickly and walked into the center of the outlets.

While some stores were open, several were closed. Signs on the doors stated, "We look forward to seeing you on June 19th." We walked past this long, snaking line and I thought, "This looks like Disneyland. What's going on over here?" I asked a woman, "What's the line for?" She stated, "This one's for Nike, that one is for Coach." The lines were so long, they intersected. "I guess we're not going in there," I said mostly to myself. So, I told my husband I'd had enough and that I was ready to continue on to Palm Springs. I never walked into a single store.

We took the Highway 111 exit past the windmills. Palm Springs is my happy place because I love the weather, the restaurants, and the laid-back vibe. As we drove down Palm Canyon Drive, which takes you straight through downtown, there were restaurants open and an occasional pedestrian strolling down the street. We found a parking spot and started walking to nowhere in particular.

The weather was perfect! Sunny, shorts and sandals weather. We strolled into a shop where the mannequin's outfits caught my attention. The friendly shop owner was happy to have a customer. She asked, "Where are you from?" "Long Beach," I said. "I came out here because I needed to find some normalcy." She replied, "I think the only place you will find that right now is on the moon." We made small talk about the pandemic and other current events, I bought a baseball cap, and we headed out the door.

We decided to continue down the street to a restaurant that we had passed by in the car on the way in. As we walked down the street, some restaurants were bustling with patio and sidewalk diners while others were empty or closed. We found the restaurant.

It felt wonderful to sit down and be served. Three months of cooking at home had gotten old. I ordered a salad, which was delicious. As we ate, I made my husband take selfies with me. Going to a restaurant to eat in June 2020 was definitely worthy of an Instagram post!

Once we finished, we strolled back towards the car; but first, we had to make a couple of stops. First, we stopped at our favorite sandwich shop, which we visit every time we go to the area. We ordered our sandwiches to go and headed to the car. But one more stop! We parked right in front of an ice cream shop with a Dole Whip sign in the window. I'm not a fan of ice cream, but I can't resist a pineapple Dole Whip. It was the icing on the cake for this trip.

As I rode back home, I thought about how good it felt to get out and do something that, before COVID, I took for granted. A little shopping and lunch in Palm Springs felt like a trip to Jamaica. It made me realize that it doesn't take much to be happy, and it helped me to appreciate every day, because you never know what tomorrow holds.

Each day I get to help students learn about opportunities that can positively impact them for their entire lives.

JOSH BEEHLER

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

COVID has impacted me in quite an annoying way. In my family, I am the youngest of three boys and my two brothers have moved out. The first time I heard about COVID-19, it was a joke on the internet and around school that we laughed about. We regretted it shortly after. I was in the 8th grade when it first hit and school ended. What joy! So, I started to chill at home and at the pool.

Before high school started, I was already on the football team, and we had our first game. My mom was, surprisingly, the first to get the virus, despite the fact that I got exposed previously in culinary class. My dad happened to be next in January 2021, and when he got out of quarantine, I had just started feeling ill; lucky me. I tested positive and was only feeling a bit stuffy in the nose; however, my parents had it way worse. My parents lost their taste and smell, and I lost the option to go to my brother's wedding.

GEAR UP has really helped me with homework completion.

NEALA VOWINCKEL

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

Have you ever felt like you were punched in the gut, not physically, but emotionally? Well, I just had that moment. I felt like COVID-19 had just punched me in the gut. Right at that moment, it felt like my breath was taken away from me. As the news went in one ear and out the other, I paused. I felt betrayed and angry, but even more so, sad. I just got some terrible news that nobody wants to hear. Before I get to that, let's start at the beginning.

It was Friday, which meant I could go visit my dad. My parents split when I was just a baby, six months to be exact. My mother got sole custody, but at least I get to visit my dad every other weekend. As I was packing my bag for what I thought was going to be the best weekend ever, my mother ever so slightly tapped on my door and asked to speak with me for a moment. I walked over and invited her in, but I could tell by the look on her face that the talk wasn't going to be good. She slowly patted her way to my bed and sat down; she tapped on the bed for me to sit, so I sat down at the end of the bed and patiently waited as she began talking.

As the news hit me, I felt upset. My mother had just informed me that due to COVID-19 and my father's job that I would not get to visit him probably for the next two weeks. I was heartbroken, because I barely got to visit him already and now I would see him even less. I knew my mother knew I was upset, but I put a cover on because I have a huge responsibility, and that is helping my mom when she needs it, especially with COVID-19.

I have learned that we should spend as much time as we can with the people we love, because those moments are precious, and we shouldn't take them for granted. When we do get to visit people after all the mess has passed, we will know not to waste the time we have together. This is my COVID-19 story and how it affected me.

GEAR UP has been there for me when I was going through a tough time in my life and with my family. They helped me get through the rough times and now I am thriving. This is how GEAR UP impacted me.

FARRYN GONZALEZ

8TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

COVID-19 has really impacted my life. I used to love going to sporting events at school, but now I can't because of COVID. Also, school in general is so different due to social distancing guidelines. For example, the seating is so spaced out, and if you want to go somewhere, you have to wear a mask. I understand why it's necessary, but it's kind of annoying, because if you forget your mask, you can't go.

Also, when shopping for clothes, you can't try on stuff at most places, so you either buy it and hope it fits or not buy it at all. Additionally, just seeing family has changed so much. When I go see my grandparents, I have to be careful, because I don't want them to get sick. That is how COVID-19 impacted my life.

GEAR UP has helped me during COVID.

GEMA PENA ZARAGOZA

COLLEGE • GEAR UP SAN BERNARDINO

It was 11 pm on May 5th, and I was in bed with my older sister and younger brother watching a movie when my mom came hastening towards the room. She told us that my uncle had been in an accident. It was clear that she was in shock, due to having been caught by surprise with the news, and she was trying her best to hold in tears that seconds later only came rushing down her cheeks.

I immediately got up from the bed and asked her what happened. I was terrified and forced to think the absolute worst. I thought that something severe happened to my uncle or that he would now have to remain in a hospital and may very well potentially catch Covid-19 and possibly die.

After a few minutes of my mom struggling to tell us what happened, she finally lifted her head and, with pain in her eyes, said, "He shot himself ... in the head." I couldn't believe it! It was as if I had heard the news, but my brain just could not comprehend what I had only heard seconds before.

My older sister abruptly got up and said, "We have to go right now." Quickly, we all put on our shoes and rushed outside the house and into my sister's car. As my sister drove as fast as she could, I began to feel a particular pain as if I could not breathe. It reminded me of the exact feeling I felt the moment I was told my dad passed away from a heart attack. Moments later, as I transitioned into thinking of my uncle's four children, I started to feel all of my tears pour down my face. All I could ask myself was, "How? How could this have happened?"

When we arrived at my uncle's home, the police surrounded the entire house. I ran out of the car and past all of my family members who had already arrived, and towards the entrance of the house. When I walked into the living room, I immediately saw my aunt frantically crying while holding my baby niece. My aunt was covered from head to toe with my uncle's blood. I was instantly terrified. I had never in my life seen so much blood.

As I got closer to her, she saw me and turned around to open her arm to hug me, and I could not help but rapidly begin to cry once again. When she let me go, I looked at her in the eyes, and desperately in need of an answer asked her, "What happened?" She didn't reply to me and instead kneeled to the floor and continued to cry.

A few moments later, a police officer and the forensics team entered the house and told her that they were now going to take away the body.

Before doing so, they wanted to know if she wanted anyone to say goodbye to him. She quickly got up, and passionately said, "Yes, I want everyone to see him one last time and say their goodbyes."

As we all exited the house to see them take the body of my uncle, I realized how vital and essential it is that mental health is no longer overlooked in men, especially in the Latinx community. For so long, mental health in the Latinx community has been devalued as a joke, a weakness, and even as being nonexistent. It has become such a problem that cannot be accepted nor allowed anymore. The real dilemma, however, is a lack of information and misunderstanding of mental health.

Helping the Latinx community overcome the stigmas that surround mental health has been challenging, but it is not impossible. The more that we begin to raise awareness of mental health disorders, especially in older folks, the more likely it is that we can start to see real change.

GEAR UP has taught me that no matter where someone comes from, our background, or our current circumstances, our dreams and goals have always been and will continue to be within our reach.

LOGAN PARKER

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

How did COVID-19 change my life? It hasn't really changed at all. I've been doing the same things I do in a normal year. The only major thing that changed was that we are now doing online school, which has hurt my grades. I was doing pretty well in person, then we went online, and my grades have never looked worse. Other than that, I have had a pretty normal year.

We went to Dallas to watch the Cowboys play football. We have been to some Wichita Thunder games like we always do. We do everything we would in a normal year, so really, COVID just made me wear a mask when I'm doing stuff. It hasn't changed what I do and where I do it.

GEAR UP: They are always bugging me to do my homework.

LACI GUTHERY

EDUCATOR • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

I honestly can't believe how much I have let COVID-19 affect me personally, especially considering that I have not lost anyone to the virus or been sick with it myself. Before COVID, I worked 5 days a week in a high school. This meant getting up at 6 a.m., waking my triplets, and getting everyone off to school before I headed to work. I would wear makeup every day and look somewhat professional for the role of College Access Advisor.

Fast-forward a year, and I am in my living room in my pajamas working from home, no make-up, and a messy bun. I don't mind working from home, but I never knew the toll it would take on me mentally and physically. I often find myself wearing the same outfit two days in a row because my days just run together.

My job as a College Access Advisor has turned into a quota race for Face Time minutes each week with my students, instead of in-person counseling or college shopping. What used to be the greatest job in the world has left me feeling hopeless and useless as I watch my students' grades decline due to being remote and not in the classroom. It breaks my heart that there are students out there who do not live in a safe environment and have no choice but to endure it because their safe place has been closed.

Trying to provide services for my students virtually and adequately has been an uphill battle, but, little by little, I am doing it.

COVID has taught me to be more patient and let the little victories count, because they do! I have a better relationship with my students now because I contact them more often since we are remote. I provide them with bad jokes, and they tell me about their day and, hopefully, I made a difference in just one student's life.

GEAR UP has provided me with a job that makes a difference in students' lives every day!

ERICK AMEZCUA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

My name is Erick Amezcua and I am 14-years old. I was planning to help my family with cleaning and doing my homework. After COVID-19 happened, it affected me and my family. It affected us in both good and bad ways, because one of my family members died due to COVID-19. Not only did it separate us from our friends and teachers, but it also brought us closer to our family.

Due to my family member's death, we wanted to go visit my uncle and his fiancée in San Francisco to see if they were okay and if they needed help with something. I was so excited to go because I hadn't seen him in a long time.

On our way to San Francisco, we stopped at stores, but most of them were closed. When we stopped at a gas station, we used the bathroom and got us some snacks. Afterwards, we just kept driving in the car. I mainly just slept the whole way there. When I woke up, I was tired and bored, so I began drawing to kill time. I love to draw because it's very fun.

When we finally arrived in San Francisco, it was nighttime, and it was nice to look up at the stars. When we got to my uncle's house, we were happy to see him. He let us in, and we played a few board games while we were waiting for the food. Something that I realized is that going to visit my uncle brought us closer as a family. Another thing that I realized is you should never take family for granted, because they are the most important thing in life. You should always spend as much time with them as you can.

When 3 days passed, it was my birthday. We celebrated it and it was fun, but we could not go anywhere due to COVID-19, so we stayed in and had a cake and it felt nice. I was so happy and could not wait to play more board games, because the board games my uncle has are so much fun and anyone would enjoy them.

At night, we were all sitting down on the chair, couch, and mattress watching a movie. When it got really dark, I would look at my phone, turn on the flashlight and look at the fish tank, because they had a small shark, and it was hiding. I thought it would come out at night and it did, but it comes out mainly for food.

When we were leaving San Francisco, we took things back to remember our trip. We also took seeds so we could plant a few things, like fruit, in the backyard of our house. It was a long way back, but it was worth it in the end, because nothing is more important than family.

That's probably what my uncle thinks, too, because he comes and visits us with his fiancée, and we all are happy about that. So, always help a family member and be nice to them as well, because someday they won't be there, and you will regret it.

I learned many things from my own story and the story of others, and in each one, there will always be a family. Always know family should come first, and it's the most important thing in somebody's life.

It was very inspiring and helpful to meet more people through the GEAR UP Program.

CARMEN DOMINGUEZ

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It's been a month since I last spoke with my mom. I was at home in the living room watching TV. With COVID-19 going on, I miss my mom and family more than anything. The last time I saw my mom was during Thanksgiving break 2019. We were watching movies, the news, and the nightly Telenovelas. My mom called me that evening between 6 and 8 p.m. We talked for about 45 minutes to an hour. I asked her about my grandparents, my 3 siblings, and her. She said that they were alright.

My mom told me how much she missed me and how she wanted to hug me. I told her how I wanted to be there with them as if to protect them. I talked to my little sister, and she told me that she missed me and how much she loved me. She asked me when I was going to come over to visit them. I wanted to tell her that it wasn't possible at the moment, but she wouldn't have been able to understand. So instead, I told her that soon I would be there, and I would hug them as much as they wanted.

That moment my emotions took over and I wanted to cry, but I couldn't because it would make them sad. My little sister passed the phone to my grandparents. They asked me "¿Como vas en escuela?" How's school? I told them I was doing good. I had straight A's. My mom told me that my little baby brother started speaking. I felt sad that I couldn't be there to hear or see him say his first words or first sentence.

After we finished talking, I hung up and started crying. I felt sad that I couldn't be there with them, see them, and hug them. I felt sad that I couldn't be there during this hard time of COVID-19. My aunt told me to breathe and that "everything will be okay," and I would see them soon, and she hugged me.

I went to the restroom and washed up and got ready for dinner and set up the table. She told me, "When the COVID-19 case numbers go down, then we can go see them."

That day, I learned that no matter what happens, I have to be strong for me and my family, because even though we're far away from each other, we still have one another.

GEAR UP has inspired me to do my best in school and with my personal life. They also taught me to keep on trying to achieve my goals and dreams.

MANUEL ALVARADO

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It had been a year since I started eighth grade, and now I was about to graduate and move into high school. I arrived at the gym of my school around 8 a.m., and I was dressed up according to the school code. They took my temperature, and I went into my assigned line. I was very nervous, and my hands were shaking.

The time came, and the teachers said that we were going to where the ceremony was to take place. We walked through the hallways to the soccer field, which is where the ceremony was to be held. I was happy because when I was about to sit in my chair, I saw my mom and my sister. Also, my face was full of joy because all the hard work had paid off.

When it was time to get my diploma, I was nervous because I was the first one to be called, and I knew that everyone would stare at me. I went on the stage and got my diploma and went back to my seat, and I smiled to my mom and sister. When the ceremony ended, I went to my mom and my sister and gave both of them a hug, because they were there with me.

I realized that all the work that I had done since 6th grade was now paying off, because I had graduated. Finally, I took some pictures with my teachers, and afterwards my mom, my sister and I went back home.

GEAR UP has helped me to make sure I reach my goals.

TISHANA MARTINEZ

8TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

My parents were planning on going fishing on Friday. The night before the trip, I couldn't sleep because I was so excited. When Friday morning came, my parents and I got ready and drove to pick up my grandma.

Along the way to the fishing location, my parents decided to go to a waterfall instead, but we came across some issues because of how far it was on foot, and my grandma can't walk very far. It made me somewhat disappointed, because it would have been my first time seeing a waterfall, but I was also a bit relieved since I wanted to swim.

We then got back on track, and we headed for the waterfall. When we made it there, I noticed how beautiful the river was and that there were some really big fish that looked like goldfish. It was a bit vacant, because of the pandemic, but I didn't let it disturb me. I was just happy because I was able to swim after being indoors for so long.

GEAR UP has made school more fun for me.

JACQUELINE PELICO

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

On June 13, 2020, I got my 2 birds. The birds were 2 cockatiels; one is yellow, and one is white with some pretty patterns. I was watching some cartoons/shows on my phone when my parents and my little sister came home from the pet store.

They came home and told me and my 2 brothers (I have an older brother and a little brother) to go outside to the living room, and so we did. We saw the cage and we were shocked to see the birds. They looked friendly and they were so afraid of us, but they looked very cute and very beautiful.

After we looked at the birds, we tried to take them out of the cage, but they were very afraid, and they went crazy inside the cage! My father tried to take out the white bird, but she bit him hard and peeled his skin off. We took the yellow bird out, but with a small towel, and he didn't really make a fuss.

When we took them out, we gave them a shower. After that, we tried to tame them. They got tamed with us in about a week or so. Then a tragedy happened. We lost the yellow one in the park on November 29, 2020. We got another bird, but this time it was a baby bird. Thank God we (mostly my mother) fed him his baby food and now he is a grown bird.

GEAR UP has impacted me by helping me to try harder in school and encouraged me to go to college.

ANDREA CONTRERAS

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

One day my uncle and aunt invited me to go to Mexico to see my grandma, because we heard she was sick. I said yes and was so excited to see her and spend time with her after years. I also wanted to see where my mom and uncles grew up. We got on the plane and took off. After 2 hours, we finally arrived to Mazatlan, Sinaloa. It was so beautiful. We went around the city, and I really liked it. It was so much fun, but after we finished going around the city, we had to go see my grandma before it got dark.

We arrived at my grandma's house and all my family went to the room where she was. I was shocked to see my grandma in bed, unable to get up. It was very hurtful, especially because she didn't recognize who I was. My grandma then had a seizure right in front of me and my family members. I couldn't handle seeing her like that, so I got up and left the room.

The next day, we had to get ready to leave for the airport, so we went to say our goodbyes. Everyone in the room was crying because we all knew my grandma didn't have much time left here. When it was my turn to say goodbye, she finally recognized who I was. She grabbed my face and smiled. I held her hand and began crying. I felt bad and didn't want to leave her here, but we headed to the airport and took off.

The next day, we arrived back in California, and I was really overthinking things, so I went to my cousin's house thinking maybe she'd be able to distract me from everything. My cousins got tired after having some fun. We took a quick nap in their room for about 2 hours.

When we woke up, I went to the living room and had this feeling in my heart that something was wrong. I looked toward my aunt's room because she came out holding her phone in shock. I ask her, "What's going on?" and she said, "Andrea, your grandma passed away." I looked at her in shock and thought she was lying. She showed me her phone and I immediately began crying. I didn't really want this time to come like this and I felt horrible.

GEAR UP has helped me in many ways. They have helped me to open up more. If anyone needs help, they show that they are there for you when you need someone to talk to about any family problems or anything in general that is making you feel hurt. They helped me understand that I'm not alone, that there are many people here to help you, and there are more people who can relate to your problems. Once you have someone to talk to about your problems, you feel more at ease knowing you've let out what you've been hiding inside. They make me take big steps and I'm thankful for that.

ITZEL SILVA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Something I have experienced is eating disorders. I haven't been diagnosed with it, but I can relate to the things that are associated with the disorder. I also haven't talked to my parents about this because I don't want to.

I've never previously had eating problems, but the problem started when the COVID-19 quarantine began. TikTok is a popular app, and during the quarantine, people were trying new diets, workouts, etc. I wanted to lose weight so that I can look better. But trying all these different diets made me self-conscious about how I look.

My parents get worried when I don't eat for a few days, but I lie and tell them I'm fasting and that it's good for you. Technically there are benefits, but in my way, I'm just starving myself. I can sometimes eat normally, but later, the guilt I feel after eating it isn't worth it.

I hate how I look; everything about me grosses me out. Whenever somebody tries complimenting me, saying I look perfect or whatever, it makes me frustrated. I don't like when they say that; it just makes me feel like they're pitying me, which I hate, because I'm not looking for anyone to feel bad for me.

I always plan out how many calories I'll be eating, and if I go over my calorie intake limit, then I won't eat for another 2 days or more, but I like myself when I don't eat. The side effects are what scare me a little. I would feel dizzy when standing up due to my low blood pressure, and I would experience heart palpitations.

It has really affected me a lot in different ways. Going shopping for clothes usually just ends up with me crying in the changing room. I've developed a need to look at the calories on food menus before eating out with family and friends and more. During school, before COVID, I weighed 133 lbs. Now, I'm 112 lbs., but I don't see any difference with my body, and my body image just keeps getting worse.

The only reason I never told anyone about this is because I like the way I feel after starving myself; it feels like I've accomplished something. Even now, I still have all these thoughts, but I don't plan on trying to get over this.

GEAR UP 5 has impacted me because it made me realize that I can relate to others and I'm not alone.

LUNA ALVAREZ

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Towards the end of 7th grade, I began feeling bad about many things, and that didn't help with my mental health. I began leaving some of my work unfinished and I cried a lot at home. After a few months, I left school and felt worse because I felt bad about myself. My mom noticed and took me to see a therapist for the 4th or 5th time.

The therapist did help me, but he also told me to see a psychiatrist. I have had childhood depression and have had a therapist since elementary school, so I was alright with the therapist. They took me through some tests and told me how I can try to help myself. They told me I had depression, schizophrenia, and anxiety. I have now started to do more things that help me with these issues, such as drawing, acting, dancing, and singing.

I learned that I must learn to take care of myself more, and I am doing fine right now, thanks to some people who have helped me along the way. This is a hard thing for me to talk about, so I don't know what else to say.

GEAR UP has impacted me by giving me more information about college so that I will be prepared. It has also helped me develop more self-confidence.

AMANDA GARCIA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Most of the time when I wasn't in Zoom classes or texting my friends, I would just lay down, listen to music, close my eyes and enjoy past memories from when I was younger.

At some points, I would feel happy because I would recall happy memories; sometimes I would feel sad because of sad memories; and sometimes I would feel confused because it didn't make sense. But most of the time, I felt excited because I would usually recall good memories.

One day after I finished my class, I said bye to Emily after we had been texting for a while. I had nothing to do, so I went back to my room to lay down. I started having memories of my time in preschool and kindergarten. I felt happy because most of my memories were of joyful, exciting times.

But who knew that what I would remember next would affect me so much? All of a sudden, I remembered when I was in preschool one of my classmates would touch me where I didn't want him to, and he would do things to me that I didn't like. I also remembered that when I was in kindergarten there was this girl who would also touch me where she shouldn't have, and she also did things to me that I didn't like.

After these memories hit me, I sat up and I felt confused because I wondered why this came up so quickly, and why I didn't remember these things before. I also felt scared, because I hoped it was just a very bad dream and not something that actually happened to me.

I would always dream about these memories after that day, and I would wake up very anxious and scared. I didn't want to accept the reality that I was sexually assaulted at such a young age by kids my own age. After recalling these things, I didn't want to do anything; I would feel down and anxious.

I still didn't tell anyone because I didn't want to accept it. I felt sad, anxious, disgusted, mad, and depressed because I still could not believe it. I felt disgusted in myself for the things that happened to me. I felt mad because – "Why couldn't I have done something to stop that from happening to me?!" I felt sad because – "How could someone do that to someone else at such a young age?!"

After days of denial, I had to finally accept what happened to me, although it affected my mental health a lot. I faced my fear and accepted it.

Although I had accepted it, I didn't want to tell my parents because I didn't feel comfortable telling them. But today, while I was at school, I made a huge step and told my best friend, Emily, because I was more comfortable with her knowing this.

I felt sad and happy. I felt sad because I can't believe that I had gone through this when I was younger. I also felt happy because I had finally accepted it. And I didn't have that feeling of hiding it anymore after I told my best friend, Emily, who is now supporting me. In the end, I realized that sometimes it's better to accept reality than not doing so, because the latter will hurt much more. It's better to tell someone you trust rather than to keep it shut deep down inside of you.

GEAR UP has taught me that I have many helpful resources I can reach out to.

LUCAS FUENTES

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, I did not do much except skate. I ended up tearing my ligament and I could no longer skate; therefore, I stressed out and focused on my other priorities, such as family and school. I had a buddy who supported me during the time, and although he was my competition for skating, he was quite honest and straightforward. He was the type of person to tell you if you are messing up or not.

Midway the pandemic, I realized that I hated it. Even though I had my friends around me, I did not enjoy it. I lost some of my social skills, so being around huge crowds stresses me out now. I learned that you must stay tight with your people and understand what you are going through and what others are going through as well. You never know what other people are actually going through.

SNGG

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Quarantine was announced on March 13, 2020. My friends and I were so excited, since we were at the point of the school year where we were already exhausted. We were told that this would probably only last for 2 to 3 weeks. We truly believed this, so we practically celebrated by walking all of our friends home and saying “farewell” dramatically as a joke. Little did we know that Friday the 13th was living up to its hype. This was the beginning of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Months passed by, and eventually the school year was done. I was sad since I hadn’t seen my friends in a long time. Not only that, but I missed going to after school activities with my friends and team. I began to worry, and surprisingly I started to miss socializing with people, but I tried to stay hopeful. For the following school year, we were introduced to online classes since the pandemic was still ongoing.

I was actually doing well with my online classes, at least for the first month. But then I began to lose hope, motivation, and my sleeping schedule was messed up. I even lost all of my stamina and gained weight. It became so stressful to the point that I wasn’t able to keep up with my work.

My streak of straight A’s was ruined, I genuinely felt like it was all over by May, because I had promised myself that I was going to get straight A’s for all of middle school and high school. That goal was now ruined because on my last report card, I didn’t get all A’s. I was truly disappointed in myself, but I was still grateful for the grades that I got because I was aware that it wasn’t the end of the world.

By late May, I got a call from school. To be completely honest I thought it was a call for my grades, and that they were concerned. It ended up being the opposite. They called me to ask if I wanted to be valedictorian for my academy. I didn’t believe I deserved it, since I really slacked off. I kept on asking myself, “Why me?” I was close to denying the request since either way, I have stage fright, and I tremble really bad when I’m in front of a lot of people. But I ended up taking the offer because I wanted to make my parents proud.

I began to regret my choice, but my mom kept on saying it would be a good opportunity. She said it would be a good way to get rid of my shyness and that it wouldn’t be so bad. So, I took the chance and spoke in front of many people as the M.C.

I remember being so nervous on the day of the ceremony. I had so much doubt, and I began crying because, again, I had a hard time talking in front of a crowd.

Luckily, I calmed down before I arrived. Once I saw it wasn't so bad, I felt better. I spoke in front of a lot of people without having a breakdown. This might not be an accomplishment for a lot of people, but it meant a lot to me.

Once it was all over, I told myself that I'd never let it get as bad as it got this year ever again. I learned that doubting yourself will bring nothing good, nor will procrastinating. Staying focused on what you have in front of you is what should matter the most.

GEAR UP has allowed me to remember that I should focus on what is in front of me.

ALEXANDER FLORENTINO

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was the week before the 4th of July of 2020 when I was talking to my grandpa for the first time in three years, since he was getting medical treatment for a medical condition in a pueblo in Mexico. It had been hard to get in contact with him because Mexico was two hours ahead, and he was always busy with the medical treatment. I was very excited to talk to him because I had not spoken with him in a long time.

The day that was planned for me to talk with him was coming soon and I was becoming stressed. I didn't know what to say to him or what to talk about with him or if he even recognized me. The day came when I was going to talk with him, so I went to my room and video-called him. It took about 15-25 minutes for him to answer because he was doing something in his house. After he answered, we chatted about how he was doing in the pueblo.

After an hour of talking with him, I began noticing he was coughing repeatedly and I asked him if he was infected with COVID, and he responded "No" and said it was just a cough and it would go away soon. He told me to get my mom so he could talk with her for an hour.

Later that day around 9:10 p.m., I heard my mom crying in her room, so I asked what happened and she told me that my grandpa was rushed to the hospital and was infected with COVID. She was told it was too severe and too advanced, and he would have no chance of surviving. My mom went into a mental breakdown when the hospital called to tell us he had died. A few weeks after his death, my mom was beginning to come out of the mental breakdown.

I realized that people should keep something that is very severe; so as to not worry family members.

GEAR UP has impacted me by having me write about a memory from the pandemic and reflect on that memory.

ABIGAIL DE LOS ANGELES

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was a very beautiful morning and my mom had felt sick, so we went to the hospital and found out she needed surgery immediately. All I thought at first was that she was going to be okay, but I felt kind of nervous at the same time. So, my mom went into surgery, and they put her to sleep to begin the procedure. I was scared and thought to myself, "I know she's in God's hands, so she's gonna be fine."

An hour passed by, and we didn't hear anything or know what was going on in the surgery room until one doctor came out and told us that my mom was losing A LOT of blood, because the surgeon had messed up.

My mom was white and looked like a vampire, because she was losing blood. I first thought maybe that day was the day I was going to lose my mom, and I was feeling worried and panicked.

Everybody in the waiting room was panicking, too. My mom was losing half of her blood already, so I prayed to God for Him to, "Please help my mom and to put Your hands over her." I just felt like fainting, and I didn't know what to do, so I just cried.

Another 30 minutes later, here comes the doctor again to give us some news, and the news that came out of her mouth was, "Your mom is fine. She is resting in her room and out of surgery."

I just knew that it was God Who helped my mom. He listened to my prayer and helped her be okay so she can be with her family and kids.

The lesson helped me learn that your failures can actually help you become better at things. Knowing this, I am now much more confident and not as fearful of failing. I also learned that my emotions can actually mean something, and that people can actually care and hear about stuff we've been through in the past or in the present.

FAUSTINO DAVILA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

During the pandemic, I was home chilling in December near Christmas. I got my Nintendo Switch, which was pretty awesome; then two days later, my dad took a COVID test, and it came out positive. I caught COVID, too, and it was pretty bad.

Still, COVID has not impacted me at the current moment.

REEN RAMOS

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It has been many years since my stepmom has seen her sister. I would sometimes see when they would make phone calls or video chats and I was always curious to find out what type of person her sister was. During this pandemic, my stepmom's sister decided to come from El Salvador and spend some time with us. Her husband and her two kids came along with her.

During their whole stay, I was nervous since I was with people who were basically strangers to me, but there were a lot of fun times and good memories that I got to make with them. The only thing that made me feel quite uncomfortable was the fact that they were sleeping in my room, and I had to sleep in my parents' room. But soon, the day came when they were leaving, and I would get my room back. I was excited and happy that I wouldn't have to sleep in my parents' room and on an air bed.

The day my stepmom's sister was leaving, I heard that she wasn't going back to El Salvador, but to New York instead. "How lucky," I thought to myself. It was morning and I was still a bit tired, but I obviously couldn't stay asleep any longer, because my siblings would jump on me. It annoyed me every time and made me a bit irritated, but I endured it. It was mostly the adults talking and my stepmom received a call that her dad was coming over to say goodbye to her sister. Later, when her father arrived, he entered the living room with two people I didn't know. It was this that made me realize that the living room was crowded with people, and this made me anxious and nervous, because I hate being in crowded places.

Finally, it was time to say our goodbyes and my dad volunteered to take them to the airport. With the final hug that my stepmom gave to her sister, they cried. This made me quite emotional, and I almost cried with them.

While I was feeling quite down that my stepmom wasn't going to see her sister in a long time, I was filled with joy that I got my room back. Even though I had my room back, the house wasn't as noisy as before, which made me realize I was also missing the family members that left. I realized that we have to value the time we spend with our loved ones, because you never know when you will get to see them again.

GEAR UP has inspired me to learn about different colleges and to try to be a good student.

GISELLE PENA VELASCO

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

Throughout the summer of 2020, amid the COVID-19 crisis, my older brother asked me if I wanted to go volunteering with him. He wasn't specific when he said "volunteering," but I thought, "Hey, I have nothing better to do, so why not." Our mom then drove us to the YMCA where the staff greeted us with gloves, hand sanitizer, and an extra mask if needed.

Slowly, as my brother's friends started arriving, we began to create the food bags. I got so excited when I saw that we were creating food bags, and I even saw a coffee cake packet that each person would receive. My group created an assembly line where each station had a different meal. My station would usually be breakfast or a snack, and then I would pass it on to the next volunteer. Each time I would pass it to whoever was at the next station, they would say something funny. I would burst into laughter, and out of nowhere, the time would fly by, and we had finished with all the bags.

It was now that awkward portion of time that you just wished would go away. I would sit at a bench and think to myself, "Where are all the people?" But then I would look up and see cars lined up against the road and get so joyful knowing that I created something that they will enjoy. I heard one of the supervisors yell, "Let's go," meaning that it's time to do the work, and I jumped up and got ready to do anything they needed me to do.

Cars started to flood in, and we began passing food bags. I didn't do it as much as the others since they were more experienced, and I was also the youngest one there. The times I was able to open the trunk of their cars and see them look back at me with relief that they now have food for them and their kids was amazing and rewarding. I have never felt so proud of myself.

It was getting slower, and the food bags began to run out. My mom came to pick us up. As we left, I looked at them and told them that I was thankful for them allowing me to join in and experience "other people's happiness making me happy."

I also told them I was able to see how much more fortunate I am: "I have all the basic necessities and don't have to be afraid that my family and I won't have enough to eat." Leaving that day just made me want to do it all over again, and luckily for me, I was able to do the volunteer work throughout the whole summer.

GEAR UP has allowed me to express my feelings about events that I have suppressed and allowed me to learn from them.

ANONYMOUS

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It has been a year since I last saw my best friend. During the pandemic, I struggled a little bit, but what kept me going was believing in myself and thinking that I have my best friend with me. We would text each other, but most of the time we were busy with school work.

Over time, I realized that my last year in middle school was coming to an end. I thought I was going to graduate in front of a camera, but all teachers wanted their students to graduate in person, because they know how hard everyone has worked.

On the day of graduation, I just wanted to see my friend. I saw her and gave her a hug, and it was a special moment for me because the last hug we had was in 7th grade. I am grateful for my teachers and the experiences I had in middle school. It was fun.

After graduating eighth grade, my friend invited me to her graduation party, and of course I went, because I knew that I was going to be bored for the rest of the day and I had no other plans. I went and it was just a fun experience to see her again, and it's certainly not going to be the last time we see each other.

We took some photos, and I gave her a gift for just being my person. The only person I can count on in the end has always been there for me – during the good and bad times. We always have each other's back. I felt happy and emotional that I was able to see her again in person before we went our separate ways into high school, but I know that no matter what, we are able to text each other and visit each other. I love her and she will always be my best friend.

GEAR UP has inspired me to never give up on my education. :)

ANONYMOUS

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

There were rumors that school was going to close for two weeks. Everybody was convinced that school was only going to shut down for two weeks, but little did we know what was going to really happen. To be completely honest, I was delighted that school was moved online. I was expecting to have a whole school year online. Before the pandemic, I had A's and B's and a few C's, but ever since the pandemic, my grades have dropped a lot. During the end of 7th grade, my grades still maintained the same levels, that is, up until 8th grade.

Seventh grade had finally ended, but for me, it felt like nothing had changed since it was all the same ever since the pandemic started and school went online. That wasn't the only change the pandemic brought about. People also had to start wearing masks. At first, when I wore a mask, I experienced a weird mixture of feelings. At first, I felt uncomfortable wearing a mask because I wasn't used to it. When I finally felt comfortable, I wouldn't ever leave the house without a mask, because I love it.

Later, the new school year started. I had to get used to a new schedule. When I first tried to log in, I had a bit of a hard time since I had never logged onto class online. When I finally logged in, I was feeling nervous and anxious. I felt nervous because I didn't know anybody in the class. I also felt anxious because I didn't want to speak in person. The reason why I didn't like speaking in person is because I didn't know if there was going to be a problem with my mic or camera. I also felt weird because I had never done that before.

By the end of 8th grade, we began attending class in person, but we had to wear masks when we went in person. Going to school in person was weird, because one day I would go, and the next day I would stay home doing schoolwork online. I felt nervous because I wasn't ready to go back in person.

Since returning to school in person, I have had to take the COVID-19 test every week. People began getting vaccinated, including people in my school. My parents and grandparents already got their vaccines. I am confused about whether I should get it or not; however, I will most likely get it. A lesson I learned is that even if you feel nervous about trying something new, you should still do it, because you never know what you can get out of it.

GEAR UP: They helped me understand that sharing my emotions isn't a bad thing.

LINDZAY SKY HERRERA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

When COVID-19 hit, it was something new that I had never experienced. I had to wear a mask, which I had never done in my life. I had to stay in quarantine and not go out and do a lot of things. When it first started, I had to adjust to it. I was stuck at home all day, which is pretty boring; but as time passed, I began getting used to it.

I had to do online school. I had to wear a mask and not go out, so I had to find a hobby to do during quarantine. I decided to start skateboarding. I fell a lot of times, but the whole point of skateboarding is getting better at it. Even though I did skateboard almost throughout the whole quarantine, I sprained my ankle and I had to stop for bit. I was bored again, because it was the same routine, and I didn't like it.

After some time passed, I discovered anime. At first, I was a little bit iffy about watching it, but I was bored, so I watched my first Anime called "Orange". It was the best thing ever! I cried on every episode. It was amazing, and that was how I discovered a new hobby.

I actually have a lot of hobbies. I watch Anime, I skateboard, I play video games, and I like to bake sometimes. That's how I would usually spend my days, and on some days, I would also talk on the phone with my friends.

After places started to open and I began going out, the first place I went to was Six Flags Magic Mountain. I went with four of my closest friends, and that was one of the places I really enjoyed. I also went to Universal City Walk with my cousin for my birthday, and I bought a lot of stuff and ate some amazing food! I had so much fun, and I'm so happy the country is starting to open up, because I missed the feeling of going out and spending time with people. I love going out to eat at restaurants with family and friends, and I'm so happy that I have been able to go out. It has made my life so much better.

One way GEAR UP has impacted me is that it has helped me find out things about myself that I did not know. It also helped me have more confidence.

ANTHONY ORELLANA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

I remember when COVID first started, everybody was nervous, and stores were starting to get empty. We began wearing masks so that no one would get infected. At first it was hard to breathe, but I'm getting used to it now. I was home all day, but I liked being home, because I could play online with my friends until late and not get bored.

During the pandemic, I remember when schools were closed and I was nervous, but at the same time I was happy because I didn't have to wake up early. I was also nervous because it was the first time that I had online school classes. At first it was hard because I didn't have my teachers helping me. But my mom motivated me to try my best.

One obstacle I faced was my parents started to lose days of work, and it was harder to get money, so they would stress out. That would stress me out, too, but now that things are going back to normal, my parents are calmer and so am I.

GEAR UP has inspired me to try my best and be confident.

ALICIA TORAL

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

El momento que nunca voy a olvidar de la pandemia es cuando tuvimos que estar en clases en línea. Nunca nos había pasado eso de que cerraran la escuela y que tuviéramos que estar en línea, porque cuando la cerraron solo nos dijeron que iban a ser dos semanas. Y ya después que pasaron las dos semanas, ya no regresamos a la escuela y ya no nos volvimos a ver en persona. Luego otra cosa que no voy a olvidar es que tuvimos que tener clases por medio de una computadora, y ya usaba la computadora pero era para hacer trabajos y para imprimir, pero nunca había tenido una clase por la computadora .

Pero uno se acostumbra y rápido me acostumbre, y me gusta estar en línea. Pero también ya quisiera ir a la escuela para poder ver a mis amigas aunque ya no nos vamos a ver porque ya estamos en otra escuela. De todos modos nos podemos ir a un lugar después de la escuela porque ya tenemos casi dos años, pero ya que se acabe la pandemia vamos a poder ir a la escuela y vamos a podernos ver otra vez.

Yo digo que esto es lo que nunca olvidaré en mi vida. Yo creo que nada de lo que está pasando como que tenemos que traer cubrebocas o que tenemos que distanciar 6 pies, yo digo que nadie se va olvidar esto que está pasando y es lo que yo nunca olvidaré en mi vida .

Me gusto mucho todo lo que hicimos en las dos clases.

ENGLYNN ROWSEY

9TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

At the age of 13, you think life will stay the same every day. That changed when January 2020 hit. It was hard to accept all the changes going on. The changes included going to remote learning, to having to wear masks, to having to be quarantined, to getting to only see people on screen, and to having so many restrictions on what we can and can't do. Then, the family or friends who are in the hospital, only one person is allowed in the room with them and sometimes no one can be in the room with them.

The people who were dying because of COVID were dying with no one to talk to, with no one to see, with nothing to do except watch TV and sometimes not even that, or they were only able to lay down in a bed and sleep. It was hard to accept remote schooling—knowing I had to see my friends and teachers and everyone else over a screen. I along with a lot of others had so much trouble with online school. I know not everyone had trouble, and some people even loved online learning, and it was easy for them; but some of us, including me, just weren't among those people.

Some students weren't taking remote learning seriously, and many teachers weren't taking it seriously either. Most, but not all teachers, were just giving us assignments on top of assignments on top of assignments, and never really explaining to the kids how to do it. Remote learning itself was just not it!

Having internet issues was the worst! And sometimes while teachers were explaining, it was hard to understand, because my Chromebook was lagging so much. Some people's cameras wouldn't work, and when having to do assignments, some websites wouldn't work, and it took forever to load. When it finally did end up loading, class was over, and it was on to the next class.

There were teachers who would just talk the entire time, and when they got done, there was only 9 minutes left of class and only 9 minutes to do the assignment. Everyone has a grade they didn't get to finish. I didn't get to finish 7th grade, because that's when we had to quarantine. Eighth grade promotion was a let-down, but it was the best they could do.

Going out in public was just horrible because you had to wear a mask. Personally, I like wearing the mask, but others had problems with it because some people have asthma or breathing problems. To make matters worse, people were unable to see family in other states or other countries because of the quarantine.

Out of everything that happened, though, we made it through, and things are starting to get back to normal and COVID is beginning to somewhat settle down.

Most of my life I've been kind of shy and quiet; I did not have a whole lot to say and mainly just wore a smile until GEAR UP seventh grade came along. Never would I have imagined I would have joined a program that would make such an impact on my life or my social standing. I have struggled for some time to get out of my comfort zone but never knew what it would take to make that happen. Last year was such a weird year for everyone, and it was nice to see that America was starting to open up again. It was exciting to know that summer was right around the corner and that I would be able to spend the summer with friends. The friends that I made in GEAR UP are friendships that will last forever. I'm sure some friendships will turn into mere acquaintances, but they are still a part of my memories.

GEAR has helped me to find myself, find my voice, helped me to know that I can be a leader in a group full of followers, and that I can be strong and independent. I want to thank the GEAR UP program/ equity warriors for helping me see what potential I really do have. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for pushing me. Englynn "She warrior" Rowsey

CONNOR ZIMMERMAN

10TH GRADE • HAYSVILLE GEAR UP

The pandemic started in early March, and everyone was scared and worried as to whether they were going to get it.

The pandemic really did affect kids and older adults. Everyone was restricted to their home and not allowed to go anywhere if they had a fever or a cough. If you did need to go to the store or your job, you needed to wear a mask.

Everyone was buying toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and masks to sell them for three times for what they actually paid for them. The older adults took medicine, and if they ran out, they would have to go to a hospital or a store to buy more. If they were unable to buy from those places, they would probably have to find someone who had what they needed and get it from them.

With me having severe asthma, it makes it a lot worse because of the stress and anxiety. I think my mother had to pay four times the regular amount just to get me my medicine.

Another thing is that parents who have two or three kids and both parents work, then one of the parents might have to quit their job to watch the kids.

The last thing is that I wasn't allowed to get a job because I couldn't wear a mask, because wearing a mask drops my oxygen level. Even if I got a note from my doctor, they still wouldn't let me work.

GEAR UP has affected me in a good way. They helped me through summer school and, no matter what happened, they were there all of the time helping and giving me encouragement.

ASHLEY PINEDA

9TH GRADE • GEAR UP 4 LA

It was around May, and I was really hoping to have a culmination ceremony—or at least a small celebration from my middle school—which would make me very happy. I was losing hope because the Coronavirus had been very overwhelming and stressful. I was not the only student asking our teachers and counselors when our culmination would be and if we were actually going to have a celebration at all. Weeks had passed and there had been no announcements from them.

The deaths and the people being infected kept increasing; there was really no hope of anything special to come. Near the end of the school year, our teachers told us that our 8th-grade culmination was going to be done virtually, and that we were only going to go to school to receive our certificate and our yearbook. At that moment, I blanked out. I really could not believe it! I felt terrible and very sad about this situation.

The day of our culmination ceremony came. I got dressed as if I was there in person. I was seeing the names of all the 8th-graders on the slides that were being presented by the principal. When my name came up and I saw my 8th-grade formal picture, an image came to my mind: I had a flashback, and I remembered the happiness and joy that I had back on October 4th when it was my pin and ribbon ceremony. That ceremony demonstrated that each and every 8th-grader was capable of culminating and was going to culminate. Internally, I burst into tears thinking about everything.

This year, I was not going to be able to go and walk up to the stage and receive certificates for classes or receive medals or trophies for accomplishments or improvements. Also, I was not able to have my teachers, counselors, and my friends to sign my yearbook, which would be lasting memories for me.


In my pin and ribbon ceremony, which was in October, I said to myself, “I am going to walk up to the stage, just like today in my culmination; and most importantly, I will take a picture with my friends at the end of the culmination ceremony.” I was really looking forward to it, but unfortunately, it did not happen. I was not able to say goodbye to all my friends since I was going to see them in “2 weeks”.

For a period of time, I really felt down and was having thoughts streaming and flying all around my head not going away. I was only thinking of the uncertain future lying ahead. How is suddenly the whole world in a crisis that cannot be cured right away, and many people are dying because of it? I was very overwhelmed with thoughts and wishing that all my friends would remain healthy and safe.

I wanted to have the opportunity to see them again. There was anxiety and a feeling that we did not leave middle school the correct and complete way in order to make a new transition into our new life called High School.

While time passes, I still have the aspiration to see my friends one day in the future and to share moments together. I just accept the reality and the fact that life keeps going and that all memories that were made before all of this chaos, trouble, sadness, and world crisis, are important and never to be forgotten. As a result of all this melancholy that is happening, I learned to value life and to experience every moment to the fullest. I learned to be grateful for what God has given me in life: like my family, my friends, and my health. I am glad that my family and I are being safe from the Coronavirus and I feel happy that we are able to bless others, although there is this crisis happening all over the world.

GEAR UP has made a change in my life by giving me helpful support through my counselors and by guiding me into my college adventure.



**THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO
READ THESE STORIES;
THEREBY, ENSURING THAT OUR STUDENTS'
VOICES LIVE ON.**

**YOUR ACTIONS LET OUR STUDENTS KNOW
THAT THEIR STORIES MATTER AND THAT THEY MATTER.**

You didn't pick up this book by coincidence.
You were meant to read these stories.
But these aren't just *any* stories...

GEAR UP, in collaboration with PLUS ME Project, provided an opportunity for GEAR UP students and coordinators to share personal stories about how the pandemic affected their lives.

The goal was to archive this momentous time in our history by sharing real stories from people who lived through it. These stories will provide future generations with a glimpse of what life was like in 2020.

Thank you for engaging with these stories.

For more information about PLUS ME Project, visit
www.theplusmeproject.org

“We are living through an era that is sure to be studied in the history books. The Pandemic Perspectives series not only helped our students work through the collective and individual traumas faced with the pandemic, but also provided the unique opportunity for their thoughts and experiences to be memorialized.”

Summer Steele: GEAR UP Director

“The Pandemic Perspective collects students' feelings and experiences in an extraordinary time. It's as much a shared diary as it is a time capsule.”

Lois Bramwell: GEAR UP Director