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TOP STORY

MPS students write of pandemic fears, victories

By Tom Scanlon, Tribune Managing Editor

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Superintendent Dr. Andi Furlis congratulated all the essay winners, like Gina Mazzucco.

Courtesy of MPS

Other than healthcare workers, few groups have been challenged harder by the pandemic than students.

With their health and welfare as the rationale, Gov. Doug Ducey started their exasperating cycle last March when he ordered every school in the state to temporarily close.

For students, the “no problem, just a little break” took a dramatic turn two weeks later, when Ducey extended his order throughout the remainder of the school year.

The “COVID rollercoaster” went into a series of high-speed dips and sudden turns during the fall, when classrooms opened as the pandemic declined — then snapped shut during a series of surges.

How did students deal with the uncertainties of the last year?

The Mesa Chamber of Commerce sponsored a contest to answer that question. Winners of the “Resilience in the Pandemic” writing contest were announced at the March 16 Mesa Public Schools Governing Board meeting. Winners in various grade groups received \$200 Amazon gift cards.

Common themes in the essays: boredom, loneliness, fear and confusion.

Many students wrote that they learned to be resilient through self-sufficiency, with an extreme example being a high school student who served as a translator for father at work and tutored his younger sister at home while maintaining the drive to be an honor student earning college credits.

In the third- and fourth-grade category, Navy Halverston of Zaharis Elementary School tackled the essay with the kind of blunt honesty you get from a 10-year-old:

“At the beginning of the pandemic, I was scared,” Navy wrote. “I thought we would die. I was lost, confused, sad and worried. But I had my family with me, and I learned I was not alone. My summer was weird, but fun. We went to Colorado.

“It was so fun but we had to wear a mask and I have asthma, so it was hard to breathe when I wore the mask. And it still does but I want to protect people, so I wear a mask. I wanted to play with my friends, but I couldn’t and I faced it. I got through the year with my family by my side the whole time.”

Analisa Torrez of Highland Arts Elementary took the challenge to a new level, writing “Remote At Home,” an epic, 70-line poem that begins:

Home means family.

Home means love.

Home means a place

to live and learn.

But in this case...

Home means trapped.

Home means stuck.

Home means no friends and no muck.

Chelsea Reeves of Mesa Academy for Advanced Studies found a humorous approach in her “A Real Hero” essay:

“The day COVID hit, no one was ready. The day I, Chelsea, came home from a beach vacation on spring break, I was my happy self. I told myself, ‘nothing is going wrong.’ I had never been so wrong in my life.

“A few days later, my parents told me, my sisters and my little brother that there was no more school for the rest of the year. Me and my siblings cheered. Wrong again. We had to play in our yard instead of a park. Legos instead of Legoland. Our fish instead of an aquarium. My annoying siblings instead of friends.”

Who is Chelsea’s hero of her essay?

“I happily and safely survived COVID-19. I was my own hero. If I can be a hero of my own, so can you.”

Pandemic pet and learning glitches

In the fifth- and sixth-grade category, Landon Isingoma of Washington Elementary describes the solace of a pandemic pet:

“I haven’t invited a friend over in more than a year. Before the pandemic I used to invite a friend over at least two times

a month. Now that I can't invite my friends over, it is one of the hardest things for me because I am a very social person. But in these hard times there is one thing that helped me get through and that was my cat."

Landon, an only child, developed quite a friendship with Kitty (the cat's "real name" is Star, it's a long story):

"Sometimes I would even build a fort for her out of blankets and pillows and we would spend hours in it together. I would sneak her some cat treats in the fort even when my mom didn't want me to.

"One time I even tried making her a cat vending machine; it was a ball filled with cat treats with holes in it, and when she played with the ball, treats would come out."

Cecilia Flores of Edison Elementary School wrote about her family's challenges, thankfully with a happy ending.

"Something happened in my family like some of them got COVID-19 and there was a little fighting and plus I can't even see them because of COVID-19, they may have COVID-19 or they don't know if they have it still so it's not safe.

"We were low on money, we could not afford food, clothes and more stuff. My mom would work hard but only get like \$2. Now we have money to get food, clothes and stuff for my mom's house!"

You don't have to be a Charlie Brown to appreciate the title of Kendall VonBurg's essay:

"Good Grief Remote Math Is A Happiness Thief."

Kendall, a Mesa Academy for Advanced Studies student, writes of not being able to hear an online teacher.

"I gestured angrily to my virtual classroom window where I could see the other remote kids complaining about the audio in the chat. Fifteen minutes later, my math teacher sent a collective chat – 'There's nothing I can do right now. Just leave the meeting. Talk to you on Friday.'"

Another happy ending: The teacher fixed her audio glitch.

In the seventh- and eighth-grade

category, Alexis Kelley of Mesa Academy for Advanced Studies starts a winning essay with the joy of hearing about schools closing.

“We have listened to and considered feedback from a variety of sources. As a result, district schools will not open on Monday, March 16.’ Those words held the air of relief. My phone was already buzzing with the news.

“Remarks like ‘YAY’ or ‘Finally! A smart decision!’ appeared on my screen. I couldn’t help but look forward to the upcoming days off. As a 13-year-old seventh-grader, it was natural to want a break from school.”

The joy quickly flipped to anxiety, however:

“At first, it was easy. Everything was so overwhelmingly easy,” Alexis wrote. “There were no responsibilities, no work, and no worrying. The only thing I had to focus on was my friends and spending quality time with my family.

“This state of relaxation was short-lived. Soon it was clear this virus wouldn’t go away in a matter of weeks. The ‘extended spring break’ was quickly becoming the end of my time as a seventh grader. Events I was looking forward to were canceled, I lost touch with my peers, and I was losing motivation to complete assigned work. I spent most of my time on TikTok.”

Bleak to rugged resilience

Among the high school winners, Dallin Bowers of Mountain View High School gets into deep, dark Beckett territory:

“How maddening the silence. I don’t quite know when he came, but alas, he has arrived and claimed his space in a seemingly endless void. I’m unsure what day it is, I hardly understand time anymore. I don’t really understand why any of it matters to anyone – it’s all darkness in the end.

“I think it’s been three... no four,” Dallin continued. “Four months. Four months since we were told to hide, to stay away, to self-isolate. How long will this last? Every day is a week, every week a day, and I am losing sense of it all rather quickly.”

A stained-glass project became an escape from meaningless lethargy.

“There is hope in work. There is hope in joy. And now, there is hope in my eyes. A bright future awaits us all if we are to genuinely seek it. Otherwise, like a miscut piece, we will shatter, requisite to wait for another chance at life.”

Efren Trejo Pntaleion of Mesa High School struggled to find time to fulfill endless responsibilities.

The child of immigrants who don't speak much English, Efren at first had to go to a construction site to help his father communicate with his co-workers, then became the de facto teacher of his younger sister as she struggled with online learning at home.

“The approach of the end of the first semester was coming. All the late nights teaching my sister how to write or how to say certain phonics sounds would come to an end ... so we thought. Before the beginning of the second semester my mom would get a call from my sister's school saying she would not be able to return to in-person learning due to the fact that there were not enough teachers on the school campus. My sister was disappointed and so was I.

“I would dread the upcoming semester because of how stressful it was being a teacher for a first grader,” Efren continued. “I decided that in order for my sister and I had to have a more productive semester I would have to put more of my energy into helping her than doing my own work.”

Efren not only will be the first in his family to attend college, after taking classes at Mesa Community College, he will begin post-high school life with a sprinting start:

“I will soon graduate with enough credits to be a sophomore when I enter university.”

Most students summarize the pandemic in three words: What a year!

As Navy Halverston of Zaharis Elementary concluded:

“2020 was hard to face, but I did it with my family with me. My family is the main reason I am writing this piece today. This writing is telling you how I got through the year and that family is the answer.”

Or, as young philosopher Alexis Kelley mused:

“Resilience doesn’t have to come in the form of life-threatening hardships or incredible acts of determination. No matter how small, everyone has displayed their own show of resilience. It can be as simple as getting up every morning or continuing with life when it tries its hardest to knock you down.

“Overcoming our personal struggles while trying our best to understand the world around us is what gives meaning to our lives.”