

RITE OF PASSAGE

Dedicated to improving the lives of youth, families and communities.

FINDING A SILVER LINING AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

Access to Technology

Exploring the “digital divide” and understanding how lack of access is leading some students to fall behind.

Finding a Silver Lining

In the midst of a pandemic, ROP educators found innovative ways to engage students and provide meaningful instruction.

Empowerment Through Education

ROP graduate and Passageway Scholar Jay shares his inspiring educational journey and aspirations for the future.



WWelcome



Every day, I see my colleagues work tirelessly to adapt academic instruction by alternating between in-person, virtual, and workbook-based teaching methods, all while maintaining a sense of normalcy and calm for their students. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed forced instructional changes for millions of learners worldwide; and it has also revealed disturbing trends in educational inequity in the United States.

Research shows us that academic and social disparities relating to the pandemic are more prevalent in lower socioeconomic areas, especially for students in special programs, girls, and children of color. Emerging data also indicates that virtual learning students retain only a fraction of the material they would otherwise gain through in-person instruction; meaning many students could miss out on foundational concepts that prepare them for a lifetime of learning and working. Based on these trends, our educators spent the past year implementing creative and innovative solutions to keep students engaged and learning at the forefront.

I am honored to introduce this year's Rite of Passage magazine, which explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of education. Across our agency, we have witnessed innovative approaches at the classroom and school leadership levels, heightened our awareness of cultural diversity and equity, pursued aggressive technology integration, and bolstered our mental health services. As National Director of Education for Rite of Passage, I am thankful to work beside a driven, gifted group of educators and leaders thoroughly committed to inspiring the next generation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracy Bennett-Joseph".

Tracy Bennett-Joseph,
National Director of Education

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This Issue

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY, DURING COVID-19

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forcefully initiated a novel way of life that included social distancing, mask-wearing, and greater time spent at home.

Schools quickly closed, and millions of students suddenly found themselves working from their bedrooms and living rooms. In the midst of this disruptive shift, however, the virus revealed a disconcerting and worsening trend: a chronic lack of access to technology in lower-income households. Now that technology is a necessary asset for continuing one's education, students with limited access are falling behind, thereby furthering an already significant socioeconomic divide.

In a recent survey of over 1,600 school superintendents conducted by Edu Group, 81% of respondents cited a lack of internet access as the biggest obstacle encountered during the shift to distance learning. Jessica Vensel, assistant principal of Southwest Leadership Academy (SLA) in Phoenix, Arizona, reflected this sentiment, noting how the gravity of the issue was more serious and pervasive than expected. SLA's student population, which is primarily comprised of youth from low-income households, was experiencing significant barriers to getting online.



Vensel’s observations highlight a nationwide trend: as students continue their education from home, those living in higher-income households have greater access to technology and other helpful resources, such as tutors. Many of their parents hold jobs that enable them to work remotely, allowing parents to provide more oversight and academic support for their children. Disadvantaged students, however, whose parents are more likely to be essential workers and therefore absent during much of the school day, lack such resources.

Chief among these deficits is a critical lack of accessible technology. Over 12 percent of households earning less than \$25,000 annually reported that a device “was rarely or never available for a child to use for learning.” Just under ten percent said the same of the internet, according to surveys conducted by the Brookings Institute.

This constitutes a significant reason why in-person, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students is crucial in equalizing access to education and learning.

Post-secondary education has also been severely impacted: recently, 1,500 Arizona State University students described how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their education. The researchers found that the virus-induced learning environment almost doubled the GPA gap between lower- and higher-income students.

This striking disparity illuminates the educational importance of technology as the country continues to adapt to the ever-changing nature of life amidst a pandemic. In order to prevent this “digital divide” from creating further educational disparities, many Rite of Passage programs have implemented creative strategies. Dr. Catherine Gammage, principal of Silver Oak Academy in Keymar, Maryland, ensured that all students were provided with Google Chromebooks to continue their education from home.

If internet access was an issue,

Dr. Gammage helped families fill out applications for discounted internet service. Additionally, while technological availability proved to be more of a struggle for SLA this past semester, Assistant Principal Vensel confirmed that the academy will provide its students with computers and hotspots moving forward.

Other Rite of Passage programs employed similar solutions, constantly looking for new ways to ensure access among students. School leaders provided maps of safe locations within the community, such as public parks, where students could access free Wi-Fi in safe, outdoor spaces to complete their coursework. Education-based portals and software, including Power Schools and Edgenuity, were also used to provide aid to students and to establish a greater connection to their teachers.

In addition, educators and administrators made use of social media platforms—such as YouTube—to share education-based Public Service Announcements communicating school safety protocols. But hardware and software are not the only areas requiring novel flexibility: teachers have also made themselves available during off hours to provide consistent support for their students and assist them in navigating unfamiliar technology from home.

The pandemic continues to expose disparities that prevent many students from gaining access to critical educational resources and hinder their ability to learn; but these realities remind us that our work as educators extends beyond the classroom and past the curriculum. Schools, including Rite of Passage’s, are continuing to learn and adjust as new information becomes available. While the pandemic has indeed disrupted daily life on many levels, it has also provided some unexpected guidance on how best to adapt to the changing face of education. ■

...81% OF RESPONDENTS CITED A LACK OF INTERNET ACCESS...



The past year has presented a uniquely challenging trial in flexibility. Canyon State Academy has not only adapted to these new obstacles, but has thrived.

When faced with the challenge of reimagining classroom instruction to address the new health and safety concerns posed by COVID, Canyon State rose to the occasion. Recognizing that in-person instruction is more effective than remote learning, teachers and faculty opted for modifications that still allowed students to remain in the classroom and to safely receive direct instruction five days a week. Rather than teaching specific subjects to a rotating roster of students, teachers adopted a cohorting system in which they taught one smaller group of students a variety of subjects in a socially distanced setting.

Teachers saw these changes as an opportunity to foster close connections and provide an even more meaningful education to their students.

In addition to teaching the standard core subjects, Canyon State's teachers also focused on providing life skills that, unfortunately, are often never taught in schools. Students learned how to change a tire, tie a tie, and balance a checkbook. To increase the positive energy and help mitigate any virus-related anxiety, these skills were incorporated into what was known as the "Life Olympics"—orchestrated in large part by Toya Kinnett, the Academy's interim principal—during which student cottages competed against each other in an effort to accumulate the greatest number of points. Cleanliness and time spent reading were also prime point-earning opportunities.

The Life Olympics presented an opportunity for teachers and staff to more meaningfully bond with the youth. This, in addition to the revised cohorting

schedule (in which students remained with the same teacher during formal instruction), as well as greater interaction outside of the classroom, increased the familiarity between students and teachers. As a result, teachers cultivated a greater sense of connection with their students. In fact, this new education model proved to be so rewarding that the academy intends to keep several elements moving forward.

Change is never easy, especially when it must be implemented urgently and unexpectedly. But despite the stress and anxiety that may accompany it, change often presents hidden opportunities for growth. As Albert Einstein said, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Canyon State Academy certainly embraced this positive mindset and discovered ways to adapt, have fun, and grow amidst a pandemic. ■

FINDING A SILVER LINING AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

Canyon State Academy provides normalized, youth-centered, evidence-based programming for at-risk and vulnerable youth. The program aims to inspire learning, growth and positive change, while helping youth develop skills and embrace opportunities that allow them to achieve their unlimited potential.

CELEBRATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENTS

In many ways, graduation is the ultimate rite of passage, punctuating the culmination of many years of hard work and dedication. It is an event meant to honor students, recognizing all they have accomplished to get to this point, and signifying an essential beginning to an entirely new period in their lives. The profundity of graduation—an event many ROP students never thought possible—cannot be overstated.

Despite uncertain global circumstances, Uta Halee Academy, an all-girls school in Omaha, Nebraska, honored seven graduates this year, with three separate socially distanced ceremonies. Barbara Wild, the academy's principal, ensured each graduate received the recognition and celebration she deserved. The graduates, donning traditional caps and gowns, marched outdoors along a line of cheering students and staff. Posters, flowers, and the triumphal notes of "Pomp and Circumstance" all contributed to making the ceremony feel as normal—and special—as possible. Principal

Wild emphasized the importance of graduations, noting that they promote a strong sense of community while also instilling hope in students.

Meanwhile, in nearby Colorado, Ridge View Academy staff also organized a socially distanced ceremony, held in the school's auditorium. Students wore caps and gowns while flowers, balloons, the school's marching band, and a special banquet reflected the sincere efforts made to make students feel honored. During the ceremony, students watched a recording of LeBron James' national address to graduates, in addition to a unique speech recorded specifically for Ridge View by Rhonda Fields, who has served in both the Colorado State House of Representatives and Senate.

In most ROP programs, including Uta Halee and Ridge View, administrators were forced to grapple with the inability of visitors, guest speakers, and family members to physically attend the ceremony. However, Wild and Lesley—



Top
A Desert Lily Academy graduate poses in her cap and gown.



Left
Silver Oak Academy staff gear up for a safe ceremony.

in addition to Ridge View Program Director Jay Koedam—shared that they still found creative ways to engage the students' families and involve them in the momentous occasion. Both schools videotaped their ceremonies and sent the recordings to families, along with formal pictures of students in their caps and gowns.

Ultimately, the class of 2020 maintained positive attitudes and recognized that they were not alone, as virtually every graduate across the country faced similar obstacles. Wild saw Uta Halee's

graduations as successes, noting that COVID did not hinder the spirit of celebration. The gravity of their accomplishments was not undermined, and it is important to emphasize just how impressive their successes are, especially during this time. As Wild stressed, they had to overcome many obstacles to reach this milestone. Koedam, too, applauded his students' perseverance, a testament to their inherent strength. "Our kids are really resilient," he said. Indeed, their determination is something to be celebrated. ■

STAFF SPOTLIGHTS

MICHELLE HARRIS Guidance Counselor, Southwest Leadership Academy



Rite of Passage's education staff consistently go above and beyond to support their students. Michelle Harris, a guidance counselor at Southwest Leadership Academy (SLA) in Phoenix, Arizona, is one such individual. Mrs. Harris has always been passionate about supporting her students—many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds or are the first in their family to finish high school—working tirelessly to ensure that they graduate.

Despite the challenges of the past year, Mrs. Harris remained committed to doing whatever it took to “make it happen” for her students, even if that meant “getting on their last nerve.” She constantly pushed her students to complete their work: texting and calling them, and even using social media to reach out to them. In one instance, she located the girlfriend of a student on Facebook, and messaged her in order to communicate with him. She enlisted the community's help as well: her husband, a supervisor for Phoenix's Valley Metro Transit System, found creative ways to deliver schoolwork to students at their jobs.

When you speak with Mrs. Harris, it is immediately clear that she has cultivated close and nurturing relationships with her students. When asked how she has been able to do so, she shared how she “treat[s] them as if they were my own.” Indeed, she views herself as an “extra mom” of a large family—a sentiment shared by the students and staff at SLA. Mrs. Harris truly believes that guiding her students is what she was meant to do, and her job has become a critically meaningful part of her life. Her love for her students and her desire for them to be successful propel her forward. This is her calling, and, in her own wise words, “if it's not your passion, you shouldn't be doing it.”

R I T E T R A C K

Youth Services

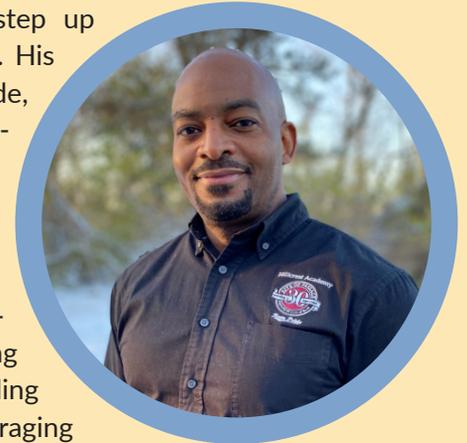
Staff at Rite Track have worked to ensure that their students' accomplishments continue to be celebrated. Earlier this year, the staff organized a festive graduation parade, and at the start of the fall semester, they put together a snow cone and school supply drive so that every student would have the necessary tools to continue their education. From art classes and cooking demos to delivering hygiene packs and Thanksgiving goodies, Rite Track's staff embody kindness and compassion in everything they do.



M A R I O R O B E R T S

Orientation/Vocational Specialist, Hillcrest Academy

Mario Roberts never hesitates to volunteer or step up in a time of need. His positive attitude, contagious enthusiasm and friendly approach to each day are a refreshing gift to anyone who has the pleasure of interacting with him. Spending long hours encouraging his students with meaningful conversations, he models the conduct Rite of Passage asks daily of our students. Mr. Roberts has been an invaluable source of calm in a time of uncertainty.



B R I T T N E Y H O F F M A N

Assistant Principal, Ridge View Academy

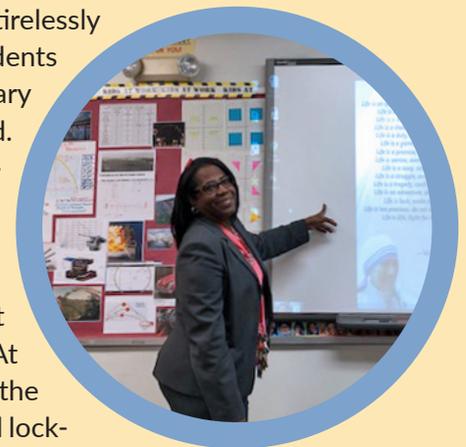
Brittney Hoffman is an invaluable member of Ridge View Academy's team. She eagerly and effortlessly takes on any task, whether it be filling in as a substitute teacher, facilitating GED testing, or coordinating services for students with IEPs. With a passion for helping others, she can be found counseling and motivating students in and out of the classroom and supporting the Group Living Staff. Ms. Hoffman puts her heart and soul into her work, and Ridge View is a more vibrant place as a result.



D R . C A T H E R I N E G A M M A G E

Principal, Silver Oak Academy

Dr. Catherine Gammage has spent her career working tirelessly to ensure her students have the necessary tools to succeed. This year presented new challenges, which she met with creative solutions so that no student would lag behind. At the beginning of the coronavirus-imposed lockdown, she helped students fill out applications for a discounted internet service so that they could virtually attend school. In addition, Dr. Gammage organized a virtual graduation in order to properly celebrate all of her students' hard work.

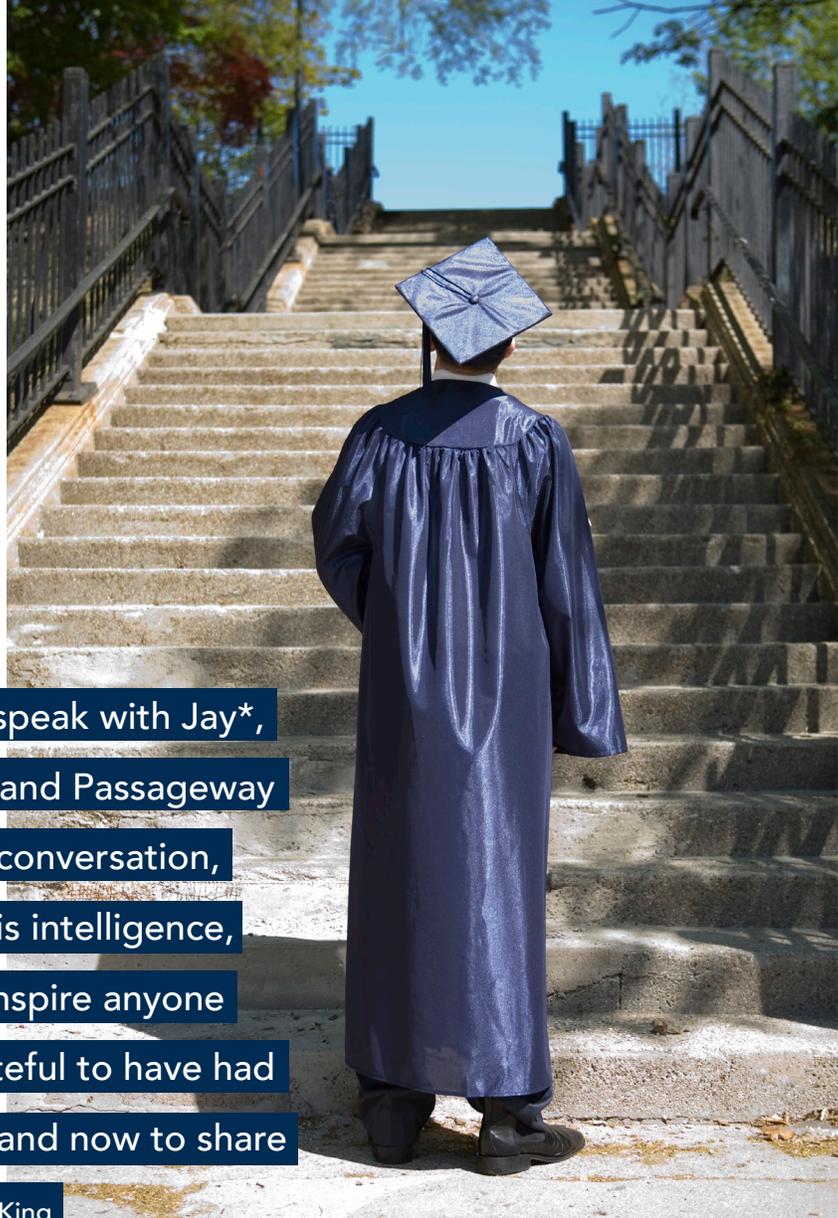


EMPOWERMENT

THROUGH

EDUCATION:

Jay's Story



I recently had the opportunity to speak with Jay*, a Rite of Passage (ROP) graduate and Passageway Scholar. During the course of our conversation, Jay never ceased to amaze me. His intelligence, kindness, humility, and drive will inspire anyone whom he encounters. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to hear his story, and now to share it with all of you. – Staff Writer Matigan King

**Jay's name has been changed to maintain his anonymity.*

Anyone who has the privilege of speaking with Jay will inevitably learn multiple science-backed facts centered around self-improvement. He speaks with a scientist's objective matter-of-factness, while simultaneously exuding warmth and kindness, humbly sharing his abundance of knowledge. His love of learning is contagious, and, despite the unfamiliar learning environment of this COVID era, he has not ceased to pursue an ambitious academic path.

Jay recently graduated from Arizona State University (ASU) with a degree in bioengineering, a field that includes rigorous mathematical requirements. Though daunting, Jay felt drawn to bioengineering because he saw it as an opportunity to better understand himself. He could learn about human health optimization and therefore improve his own health. "It really helped [me] understand myself more [...] You learn about your own health; you learn about your limitations," he said. Jay has certainly used his scientific inclinations to focus on his personal health and longevity, and has learned how to formulate his lifestyle in a manner that amplifies his strengths while mitigating his weaknesses, thereby increasing his chances of personal success. But learning such tactics required time and perseverance.



Passageway Scholarship Foundation has provided over \$1,000,000 in scholarships and helped thousands of students pursue their academic goals. Funded in part by our own Rite of Passage staff, this non-profit makes college and vocational trade schools attainable for underrepresented youth.

Growing up, Jay lacked a stable homelife, having to move between various foster homes. With complicated family dynamics (Jay has eleven siblings), domestic violence, and often negligent, distant parents, Jay felt that his environment was not conducive to positive growth.

At age sixteen, and without an available foster care placement, he was enrolled at Canyon State Academy (CSA), an ROP facility in Queen Creek, Arizona. Initially, he did not want to be there, but after meeting some of the other students and getting involved in various sports—wrestling, cross country, track and field—Jay grew to like it. Eventually, with the encouragement of CSA's staff, Jay enrolled at a local community college and received a valuable taste of higher education before transferring to ASU to pursue a bioengineering degree. He had forged this path for himself and enthusiastically embraced the intriguing, albeit difficult, academic exploration of what he had grown to love.

When Jay was younger, he often felt “stupid,” positing that he must have had “mental problems,” but this was primarily a result of lacking a reliable family member for academic accountability and support. Feeling largely alone, and with the insatiable desire to excel in school, he realized that he would have to seek help independently. Jay researched resources online and paid out-of-pocket for counseling services. At ASU, he partook in the university's therapy service and felt much better as he finally spoke openly about the struggles and trauma he experienced as a child. He began to understand that he was not in fact inadequate, but rather lacked resources and opportunities that could have helped him develop academic-oriented skills. Jay realized, for instance, that a significant hindrance was his poor time-management, so he deconstructed his day and analyzed the times at which he felt the most productive. With this self-collected data, Jay structured his routine around his natural strengths and weaknesses, performing certain tasks at what he determined to be the optimal time for each. With his more efficient schedule, in addition to many diet and lifestyle improvements, Jay thrived—not only academically, but personally.

He has made the deliberate decision to focus on the positive aspects of his life, refusing to spend valuable time on those things which do not contribute to his

positive outlook. His enthusiasm and zest for life are evident in his insatiable curiosity, but also in his inherent resilience. Jay was forced to make several difficult decisions, one of which was to leave his family to pursue his education. “I have to view everything that's positive and apply that for myself,” he said, “while at the same time being far from them.” Faced with the unfortunate realization that his home environment was not conducive to growth, Jay knew he had to leave. “If I'm around people that are a certain way, I will become that.”

But Jay is currently only looking towards his future. This upcoming school year, he will matriculate at ASU's masters program for computer science. But, he says, he eventually wants to earn a PhD in engineering or become a doctor. Still, Jay is drawn towards the more research-oriented elements of medicine, as he prefers to delve deep into a subject and partake in the development of specific therapies, as opposed to their application. He envisions himself enjoying the field of synthetic biology, which, he says, “loosen[s] the disconnect between medicine and engineering.”

The possibilities are vast, and with the guidance he received at ROP, and later at ASU from his professors—his greatest sources of inspiration—Jay has taken the initiative to construct an enjoyable and rewarding life, one rife with opportunities to ceaselessly learn and grow. For Jay, information is power, which is why he wishes to share his story. “There could be a lot of schools, or resources, or educational opportunities,” he said, “but you might not be talking to the right people; you might not know what's there.” He learned that, with proper communication, one can access a host of resources about which one would have otherwise been unaware. Education empowered him, and with this knowledge, he intends to empower others, too. ■



COPING WITH TRAUMA

The far-reaching effects of the pandemic are realized as a public health as well as a mental health crisis. Public health actions such as social distancing can increase levels of stress experienced in daily life; leaving individuals feeling isolated and alone.

The University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences explains that “We are all either vicariously witnessing trauma, through media or through supporting others, or directly experiencing trauma, by becoming ill, isolated, or experiencing the plight of close others.” But for school-aged children who lack lived experience and vital long-term coping mechanisms, this trauma is especially harmful.

“We are all either vicariously witnessing trauma or through supporting others, or directly experiencing trauma by becoming ill, isolated, or experiencing the plight of close others.”

Not surprisingly, ROP youth have been strongly affected. Jennifer Siozos, ROP’s National Director of Integrated Care, notes a rise in anxiety, depression, addiction, and family conflict during the pandemic. Such issues, she adds, are related to children being out of school and forced to stay home, thereby losing an important sense of routine. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has advised schools to create a routine—even when implementing distance learning—as doing so helps establish a sense of normalcy and reliability during such uncertain times. Siozos stressed that routine provides structure to one’s day, creates predictability, and gives people a sense of “the known.”

This hits home: at ROP, living in a pandemic means youth are less able to partake in fun, collaborative, and stress-relieving activities such as sports. “COVID-19 has limited our student’s ability to utilize healthy coping skills, such as physical activity through sports teams and being able to see their support system (family) in person,” says Jill Follensbee, ROP’s Director of Clinical and Student Services. This, she adds, “has affected their ability to self-regulate when upset or triggered. We see this in the increase of anger, restlessness, anxiety, and desire to find ways to get ‘back to normal routines.’”

In order to cope with the anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of the pandemic, Siozos advises that we focus on what we can control. Ensuring that teachers and staff work to create new routines, while also validating students’ feelings, is imperative. As UCSF points out, “routine and ritual are restorative to us. Our brain wants predictable activity so we can relax our vigilant nervous system.”



TRAUMA



uma, through media
xperiencing trauma, by
plight of close others.”



As pandemic lifestyles become increasingly normalized, students have continued to demonstrate their flexibility and grit. “Overall, the students are resilient and adapting to the ongoing changes pretty well given the chaos that is present in the world,” Follensbee shares. “I think this has a lot to do with the proactive and supportive approach that ROP has taken to foster a supportive and communicative environment as best they can, given the circumstances.” Increasing the amount of phone calls, implementing fun activities, creating informative PSAs related to the virus, and providing therapeutic outlets for youth to process their emotions have all been part of our response to the stressful disruptions of daily life.

Going forward, Siozos suggests that we remind each other that there will be an end to this pandemic. And though no one can deny that this national emergency has created personal loss and tragedy for many Americans, there is a small glimmer of an upside: American youth and adults are now reaching out to one another and their communities, openly seeking support in unprecedented numbers. “The phrase, ‘We are in this together’ is a way to remind us to seek support and reach out when feeling depressed, alone, or in need of help,” Follensbee says. “I feel that this mentality can help us improve [...] The more we come together, the better chance we have to process our feelings and support each other—whether from afar or inside the home.” ■

“The more we come together, the better chance we have to process our feelings and support each other..”



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