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Perspective

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Lesson Learned from COVID 19: A High School Student's Perspective

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Perspective

I was attending a boarding high school in New York City when COVID 19 was reported in my home country of China. The news was more relevant to me than other non-Chinese students, but I was not immediately impacted until the afternoon of March 8, 2020 when the announcement of needing to evacuate the boarding school shocked us to the core. All classes would be cancelled until further notice for online learning, after-school activities and social gatherings were not allowed, and we were required to leave the campus within one week.

As all international students would have to refuse outside school, most of us wanted to go home. Day students went home immediately, and we didn't even get to say goodbyes. Everything happened so abruptly. I turned to crisis survival mode, weighing options which were none but to fly back home to China. I remember feeling panicked at the thought as I was petrified of catching the virus on my way home. Everyone was left on their own to scramble up an exit plan.

Despite my fear, it became clear to me that getting the earliest flight back to China would be the best thing for me to survive this chaos. I hovered over my computer trying to secure an airline ticket home, which proved to be very difficult. Tickets were selling fast and each time a new flight opened up, the tickets would vanish within a few minutes. I was fortunate to have my parents who joined in what felt like a ticket lottery game. They stayed up almost twenty-four hours trying to secure a ticket for me, and they were ultimately able to get me one.

My journey home was another dramatic experience brought on by the virus. I speed packed luggage with only essentials to flee from this calamity. In the airport, there was nothing but chaos, like a citadel in crisis: faces were covered by layers of masks; some travelers were in full suits as if they were in Chernobyl. Passengers were rushing through the gates as if they were escaping Dante's Inferno and their lives were at stake. Panic and tension reverberated in the air, and my heart thumped violently, and I shivered uncontrollably. Aboard the aircraft, I compulsively sanitized myself and the chair. I washed my hands so many times that they started to crack and appeared raw. In addition, I wore a head-to-toe protection suit and an additional pair of goggles, concealing my body tightly without any space being exposed. The air of anxiety inside the cabin was palpable. The 15-hour flight felt like centuries for me. It was a torrid time sitting in my seat, not getting up for fear of catching the virus. The mask and suit made me sweat and my goggles were foggy with mist nearly the entire ride home.

Upon landing in Shanghai, my sense of relief quickly turned to grief. We were placed in lines for hours to be cleared by checkpoints, provide a nasal throat swab, have our temperature checked, and complete an intensive interrogation on our recent whereabouts and our possible exposure to the COVID 19 virus. The situation was made worse by the fact that my cell phone was low on battery, and I knew that the battery had to be reserved for emergencies. Unable to use my cell phone; I had no distractions and stood in line wishing I could escape to the game world. After these vigorous checks and interviews, all travelers were required to isolate themselves in a hotel for 14 days of quarantine.

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Revisiting the memory, I am glad that I survived my first true hardship alone. I have matured as a result of this experience and am more compassionate towards people in need. I no longer feel as though I am living in a cocoon built by my parents. I am more confident in taking on challenges or facing perils. What I learned on a personal level is to always be prepared for any crisis. On a school or community level, I wish that our school had kept us more informed and that we didn't lose our footing abruptly as we did. An organized standard procedures and action plans for emergencies would have helped tremendously on that day, including psychological counseling or moral support for those of us who had never dealt with such a crisis on our own before.