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### The Monster's echos: How the Pandemic Changed Me from Bully to Advocate

Let us set the scene; you are an 18-year-old college student authoring an essay about your life, as a middle-class white man. Being a majority in this country, many would assume that my life followed the same trajectory as many: humble upbringing surrounded by family, angsty teen years, and the growth from the college experience. However, being a child of generation Z, my life was changed forever due to circumstances out of my control. This is reflection; how an event which changed the world as we know it affected a young high school kid. How my personal lived experience and upbringing instilled within myself the capacity for empathy and perspective, unrealized until outside circumstances forced me to see it. And the steps that led to revaluations about the framework of the systems that give me privileges others do not have based on their race, sex, gender identity and sexuality.

When you are young, politics and government mean nothing. You are too focused on walking, babbling, playing with toys, and messing with the neighbor's kid to give a damn about immigration and public aid. Being born in Toronto on the city's west side, I grew up around a diverse collection of cultures. My friends had parents from the Carribean, Somalia, Pakistan, and Indonesia, along with as many whites as the snow which littered High Park in the Ides of January.



Fielding L. David, "High Park at winter", gailatlarge.com, 30/12/2012, [Winter Scenes In High Park · GAIL AT LARGE](#)

The salad bowl of culture I grew up with painted an image of the world as this big, colorful ball where everyone existed separately from each other. City life has a habit of uniting everyone under the general banner of survival; complaining about taxes, talking about who died, who was born, who was getting married, and, more generally speaking, who was who in general. It was only when I moved to the U.S. and left the great Canadian salad bowl when I realized the truth; we may live together, but the frameworks which we all lived under didn't see us as equal.

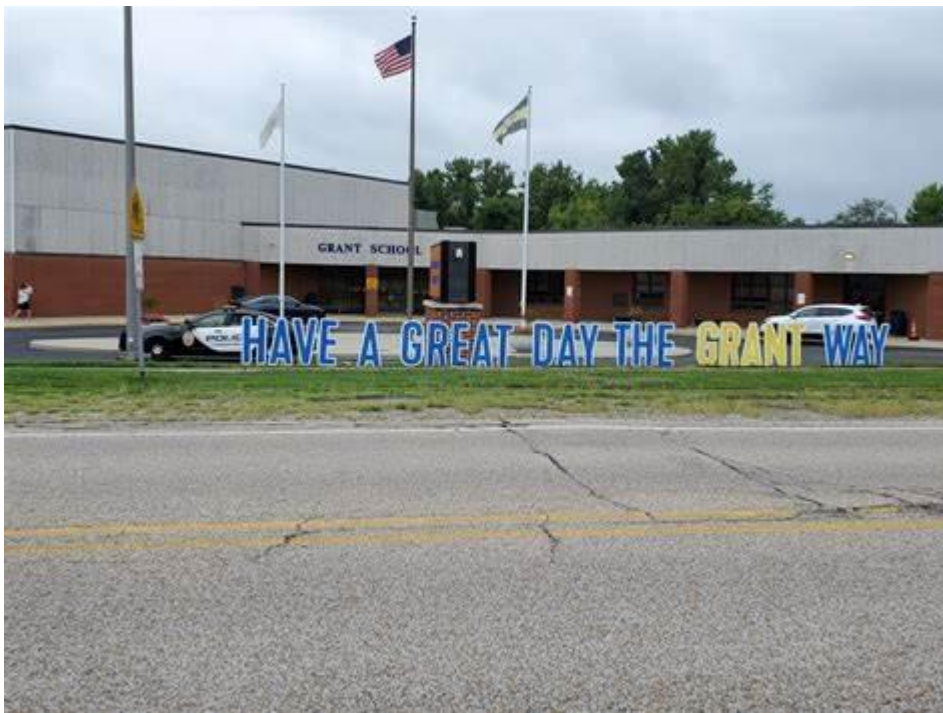
I moved to Fairview Hights in 2012. Life as I knew it stayed the same, (I was 7 at the time) but going out I noticed a lot more people who looked like me and a lot less who reminded me of my friends. I moved from an apartment on the west side of T-Town to one of the middle-class suburban ranch houses All my neighbors were white, older homeowners who drove the same cars, ate the same awful family dinners, and watched the same mass media headlines every day. The sense of community I grew up around disappeared before my 7-year-old eyes, leaving behind a big, white void in its place. Culture was reduced to a monotonous system of events, and once I entered public education that sense of boredom was amplified.



Kendall, Kay, "216 Pleasant Ridge rd.", realtor.com, 8/25/24, [For Sale: 10 Meckfessel](#)

[Dr, Fairview Heights, IL 62208 | realtor.com®](#)

Public school in the U.S. is not too far off from a penial colony; the same repetitive structure drilled into the minds of every child, teen, and young adult throughout America. The feelings of boredom and repetition I had been feeling since moving were amplified, as I was in a foreign place with people who held foreign values. Boys were athletes who were not allowed to show emotion, while girls were emotional and artsy. I struggled to make friends in this new environment; going from hanging out with older kids on the corner to immature suburban spawn who were in no way ready for the “real world”



Horrighs, Rocky “Grant Middle School”, dist110.com, 6/12/23, [Grant Middle School | Grant CCSD #110 \(dist110.com\)](#)

Once I entered middle school, the natural need to conform took over. For a few brief years I was the popular kid, embodying the athlete persona thrust upon me by the society I inhabited. It didn’t matter if the team was terrible or if I was a moody, obnoxious preteen, but

it was my being which attracted others to me. I was a bully, picking on the “weird” kids who were going through the same things I was. I wish i could go back and smack my younger self for the way I behaved, but 2019 did that for me.

We all got the message: two weeks off from school due to some random virus in China. As a 13-year-old, it seemed like the coolest thing ever to get out of school early. It was a rarity reserved for holidays or broken bones which prevented you from walking to class. It was called COVID-19, a name which now lives in the minds of everyone on earth, but back in 2019 it was a novelty. 2 weeks turned into 4, which then turned into 8. This novel virus turned into a monster; taking control of every aspect of our lives. We were robbed of our freshman year, with hybrid schedules and remote learning becoming commonplace. The smell of sanitizer and lack of toilet paper on the shelves of stores became inescapable. The monster was around every corner, on every tv channel, and stalking all our social media feeds. I was alone; the feelings of apathy and boredom which plagued me throughout middle school were back tenfold, and it gave me a unique opportunity for reflection.

Self-help books and therapists push the idea that to understand why you do, you must understand who you are first. That is much easier said than done. It’s a painful, draining experience which steals the air out of your lungs and gives you an unfiltered look at all of the negative aspects of oneself, especially when you were a terrible person. The “friends” I had in middle school disappeared, along with any of the clout I had, and I was left alone. Remote learning was unfulfilling, and the days crawled by at an insufferable pace. I only cared about living, and even that slowly slipped away from me. I remember watching Evangelion in my room

while monotone teachers rambled on about chemistry or math or reading. A switch flipped off in my brain, and overthinking became a hobby. I was 14, smoking weed and crying because I felt like such a failure. To a certain extent I was. The same stories about death and misery blurted out over the news, and the negativity which surrounded me overtook all my faculties. I wanted to die, not just the death of the body but the death of the spirit. I was a husk, withdrawn and amorphous, and I wished to disappear.

As the year churned on and freshmen turned to sophomores, the monster slowly died off. I was changed, as were many, and the veneer of pride I wore in middle school had fully fallen off. I was a background character of Belleville East High; a wallflower stuck somewhere between bathrooms and lockers. I lived life passively and avoided people outside of the tight knit group of junkies and thugs I fell into. Skateboarding with my friends in between shit talking sessions in Collin Miller's garage was the daily routine. AP classes and Honor roll somehow intertwined itself with drug deals and fistfights. This double life kept me going, but I knew that all the egos I surrounded myself with would boil over some time. And they did, when a kid I barely knew stabbed a kid I didn't know, but guilt by association prevailed and I ended up in the questioning room of the Freeberg Police Department.

I cut all ties. I had too. The downward spiral I found myself in during COVID came back again, and I needed a way out. I needed hope. My grades were slipping further and further, and between the ex-girlfriends that wanted me dead and the school administration who wouldn't let me breathe, I was lost. I found solace in the one place where I could use my body to express my emotions: Boxing. I was weak, overweight, and tired, but I was determined to see myself succeed.

I started going to the gym religiously, putting my body to work after years of abuse. I felt better than ever before, both physically and emotionally, with such improvements showing in the classroom as well. I found purpose in life and began to get invested in helping other kids like me succeed. The ability to exercise my demons through physical activity gave me an outlet to heal; a place to process the trauma and pain I've witnessed throughout my life. I was a mad preacher, finding lost souls to save through the pursuit of activity.

I joined the Workers Vanguard, a socialist newspaper which sought to help the poor and underprivileged people of America and beyond have a voice in politics. After graduating from high school, I began to work with the PSL, Party for Socialism and Liberation, on getting socialist candidates on the Illinois ballot through community outreach and fundraising. I watched poverty and death plague the families of my friends, and I became determined to do my part in fighting for the rights of the people. My life was given new meaning, and now, for the first time, I can honestly say that I truly know my place. I walk through life with a level of confidence that invites others to join me in my pursuit of happiness. I know what I'm here to do and how to do it.