

8th  
Annual

# STUDENT VOICES PROJECT

Our eighth annual Student Voices Project brought in writing from 123 middle and high school students representing eight U.S. Friends schools, two international schools, and four monthly meetings. We selected 20 honorees whose submissions are featured here. Due to space limitations in our print issue, we're unable to showcase all honoree submissions in their entirety. Some have been excerpted on pages 17–19 with the rest of each piece appearing in our online edition available at [Friendsjournal.org](https://Friendsjournal.org), where we've also posted a full list of all 123 participants.

## PROMPT

Learning from 2020:  
Write about what you  
have learned about yourself  
and your community in  
the past year.



### The Hard-won Wisdom I Have Earned

**Awaliyat Oyenuga (she/her)**  
*Grade 6, Friends School of  
Baltimore; attender of Stony Run  
Meeting, both in Baltimore, Md.*

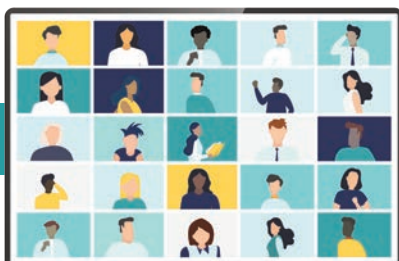
Photos courtesy of the students

The class of 2027 gathered anxiously in the 5B homeroom. My classmates and I shifted restlessly, awaiting the school nurse's visit. She was expected to tell us about the new coronavirus disease. Once she arrived, the grade settled down to listen.

The nurse told us all she knew about the virus, which really wasn't very much because it was still very new. She tried to iron out the rumors, answer our questions, and reassure us that we were perfectly safe from harm; after all, most of the cases were in China, and we had nothing to worry about—right? We whispered to each other, going about our business and half-joking whenever somebody coughed or sneezed that they had the coronavirus. We laughed amongst ourselves, unafraid and naïve.

About three weeks later, we were kicked out of school early for spring break and never allowed to return. This was saddening and traumatizing, not to mention discomfoting. Thus was the transition to distance learning, which was surprisingly easy despite the circumstances. But there was a lot going on at my home once school got out.

Amidst all of the confusing online schedules, my family was dealing with an emergency bathroom renovation! Plumbers and workers pounded and hammered around upstairs, which meant no access to our toilet, sink, or



bathtub. This was indeed as tough as it sounds, especially since we had to mask up and keep our distance from one another, but our community supported us so much. One of my uncles came from Texas to help for a week; various friends and neighbors loaned us their bathrooms; and even my meeting, Stony Run, supported us. We were still shown love through the masks, gloves, and devices. God sent many wonderful people my family's way during that time.

Over the summer I was looking forward to returning to school, which had promised reentry come fall, so I geared up accordingly. Friends and family from all over the country sent me comfortable, handmade masks, all of which I greatly appreciated (and still appreciate!). My mother looked into getting me protective shields and gloves and bought more pencils and notebooks. It was like the lightning before the thunder.

About three days before we were scheduled to return, we received *the Email*. The Email announced that I would indeed *not* be returning in a few days due to unprecedented developments. I must admit, I took this news very hard. I cried, lamented, and fumed. Eventually I got over it, but the Email changed everything: my mother decided that I would be online the whole school year to avoid more emotional stress and turbulence. This too I was very upset about, but I now realize that her decision was best.

I've gone through some pretty dark times since the beginning of this school year. I've felt isolated, hopeless, helpless, and broken. I'm a very social person, and I've felt the strain of not seeing, hugging, or talking to friends in the flesh. I've struggled with anxiety, but thankfully I have many empathetic teachers that have helped me through this.

Overall though, God has helped me most. I'm a devout Christian, and my faith has kept me strong. On the days I felt (or feel) like dying, I go to Him in prayer for strength, guidance, or support—often all three. He soothes me and often calms me down so that I can think positively. I've also attended Stony Run Meeting, and sitting in silence outdoors has a very calming effect. As I sit under the big oaks in the stillness, I contemplate life and my place in it and know that I have learned that God dwells within each of us. □



## Small Acts of Kindness

**Isabel Merideth (she/her)**  
*Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School  
 in Washington, D.C.; member of  
 Bethesda (Md.) Meeting*

It sure feels different doing it from home. When I would walk into the Quaker meetinghouse, I felt a sense of calm, but joining for worship virtually feels less connected. My Bethesda Meeting community has found ways to adapt, but I can't tell if it's working. I've lost my sense of normalcy, which I didn't even know existed before. Before the pandemic, I used to take little things for granted: seeing my friends every day at school, seeing someone smile, giving someone a hug.

During our virtual meetings for worship, I've noticed the number of people who log on is much less than in-person. I think about the struggles others might be going through that we don't even know about, especially the older members. The reason they haven't been able to join could be as simple as they don't know how, but this lack of connection can really decrease their joy. I carried this troubling thought for days, then came to the realization that I could be the person to cheer up those who were feeling so disconnected. I didn't have time to waste; this issue was just getting worse.

The Shine Bright Committee is just what was needed. My brother and I started it together, and our purpose was to give joy to others, especially members who were isolated and feeling disconnected. We would start small, then grow into something bigger. When we began in April 2020, we painted and sent colorful cards to people with the message that we were thinking of

them and that there were brighter days ahead. The response was incredible. People reached out to let us know that receiving the card really brightened their day. Some even told us that they put the card on their refrigerator or fireplace mantle where they can see it every day. Receiving these thankful messages made me realize how much this positivity was needed.

We started looking for other ways to help people stay connected. We noticed that some meeting members continued to struggle with the virtual worship format. I decided to reach out to a few people to offer help. My brother and I had one-on-one meetings to teach about this new technology and answer any questions. We could see how much this assistance was appreciated: more people were joining the virtual meetings! This experience was extremely meaningful. Reaching out and providing help gave me joy while also giving back to the community.

We decided to end the long year with one more project by the Shine Bright Committee. We made and sent uplifting Happy New Year's cards to more than 30 members of our meeting. Some we sent with handmade bracelets enclosed. Making the cards gave me a sense of joy that I hadn't felt before, and seeing the impact that these small gifts had on people was one of the best parts.

The feeling of being isolated during this time can be very overwhelming, no matter what your age is. Creating the Shine Bright Committee helped me feel more connected to others within our meeting. I consider it a silver lining of the pandemic that I have gained many friendships from this outreach. I've learned what a huge impact one small act of kindness can have on another person. Making a difference matters. □



## My Virtual Bar Mitzvah

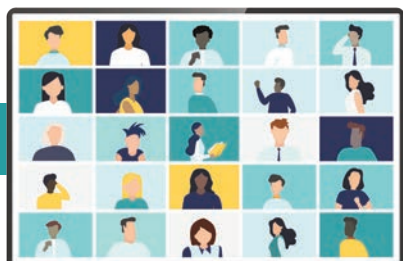
**Chance Biehn (he/him)**  
*Grade 7, Carolina Friends School  
in Durham, N.C.*

View the full photo of Chance, complete with a Torah scroll, online at [Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021](https://Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021).

I had expected that my bar mitzvah (Jewish coming of age ceremony) would be awesome but normal. I thought that I would have an exciting party with a rock-and-roll theme, a DJ, catering from a Mediterranean restaurant, and fun activities. I remember having a party planner come to my house to help with the setup, which made me excited. I imagined I would be showered with congratulations, surrounded by my friends and family at my synagogue. But it turned out that this was not to be.

My bar mitzvah party was postponed to my fourteenth birthday instead. Rather than being together with my friends, I had to do my bar mitzvah at home virtually. At first, my mom gave me the option to have it in-person with masks, which I chose, but subsequently it had to be virtual for safety purposes. I was discouraged by this at the time. I also thought I wouldn't be able to read in Hebrew from an actual Torah scroll, which disappointed me strongly.

But in the end a Torah scroll was loaned to me before my bar mitzvah started. My rabbi led the services at his house; I read from the Torah; and my family led some of the prayers. Hundreds of people from my community were watching me online, which made me nervous in the beginning. I wore dress clothes, an embroidered prayer shawl from Israel, and a *kippah* (traditional head covering). I stood with my parents and brother at our dining table. Seeing the Torah in front of me made me feel righteous. Connecting with God in these circumstances gave me the powerful feeling



that you can worship God anywhere.

I learned a few things from my bar mitzvah. I enjoyed the preparation because I learned about the deeper meanings of the Torah, and I was interested in it. I also learned that you don't need a party to have fun during your bar mitzvah. The people in my temple have a good sense of humor, which made everything easier. Being encouraged by my friends and my rabbi made my bar mitzvah meaningful.

My school experience during COVID has been almost identical to my bar mitzvah experience. I initially thought that virtual school would be lonely and frustrating, and that our meetings for worship wouldn't give us any feeling of connecting with others or with God. But it turned out that I didn't feel lonely, and I did feel a caring bond with my peers and teachers. The virtual meetings for worship were actually an improvement from the in-person ones because people goofed around a lot less! I still feel a link with God during the silence. Just like with my bar mitzvah, I had a positive outlook on remote learning once it happened.

The past year flipped the way we look at our lives. I might have expected too much of my pre-COVID coming-of-age experience. I had low expectations for my virtual bar mitzvah. I thought I probably wouldn't learn anything from it. But God has given us the strength to overcome our problems, and God gave me the strength to connect with my community in spirit to celebrate my coming of age. I was able to do this because all the churches, meetinghouses, and temples are not just places—they're people coming together. □



## Parents Are People Too

**Anna Weinberg (she/her)**  
Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School  
in Washington, D.C.

**P**arents are people too. It's a strange statement, as it seems so obvious. But throughout this pandemic, I've learned what it actually means.

Parents are special people. They make sure their children are happy, safe, and healthy. They make special sacrifices for those little toddlers who break things wherever they go, for the annoying kids who run around the house all day making messes they don't clean up, and for those teenagers who think they're better than everyone else and do whatever they want no matter what parents say. They make sure we have what we need, and in return, what do we do?

Early on in the pandemic, my grandparents decided to leave the senior citizens apartment complex they had just settled into in Arlington, Va., not all that far from our house. With much help from my dad, they packed up and moved down to a country home in Rappahannock County, Va. The property there also has a guest house, which in these pandemic months, my family tries to go to almost every weekend. My dad has been staying with them since April to help with my grandmother, who hasn't been in perfect health, so it's fun to see him on those weekend visits. That leaves my mom and brother with me back home. Let's start with Mom.

My mom is a therapist. It's her job to comfort people and make sure they feel secure. Her patients confide in her, which means she needs the utmost privacy during appointments. After she moved to teletherapy, maintaining that privacy has become tricky. She calls her patients from her "office" in the attic, but she can still easily hear us from downstairs. This means that my brother and I can't interrupt or ask her any questions except for the last five minutes of the hour. This is tough, especially since she works from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. most days with a break only at 12 noon.



My brother has especially struggled. He is a senior in high school, and has been applying to a lot of colleges (but not able to visit many places in-person). Many of the SAT sittings he registered for were canceled, and he is really annoyed that his last year at school is “ruined.” He’s been taking his anger out on us, and doesn’t do a lot of the things asked of him, which ends up rebounding on me in a negative way.

Amid all this, I think I’ve realized my role.

I’m the girl who wakes up almost 20 minutes after her alarm goes off, with multiple prods from her mother. When she finally gets up, she only has ten minutes left before school starts, in which her mother always reminds her to do all her jobs and eat her breakfast, and then stays around to make sure she does it, sometimes causing her to be late for her first patient. I’m the girl who stays in her room most of the day, complains about what’s for lunch, barely gets outside, fights and pushes the boundaries.

And yet, still Mom wakes up early to make me breakfast and make sure I get up on time, uses her one break to make me lunch, encourages that I get at least a little outside time every day, and comes up with solutions to the problems I create.

She shouldn’t have to do all this.

That is what I learned—a little late, and it took a global pandemic, but nobody’s parents should have to do all this for children who don’t give anything back. I wanted to make her happy. I wanted to make up for all the struggle, and late nights, and early mornings, and stress that I’ve caused her.

So I have—or at least, I’ve started. I make my own meals sometimes. I clean the kitchen every few days. I get up on my own, do my jobs myself, and stay calm when trying to come up with different boundaries.

Not everyone realizes how much parents go through. Being an adult seems hard enough, but having to also deal with noisy, unhelpful kids? I don’t know how they handle it. What we all need to understand is that parents are people too, and they should be respected and treated accordingly. □

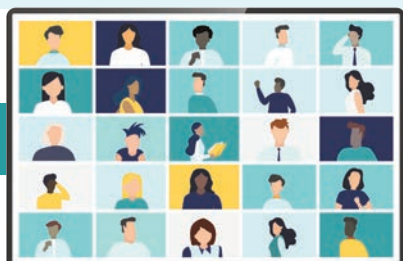


## Always Trust in Him

**Janae Canty (she/her)**  
*Grade 12, New Garden Friends  
School in Greensboro, N.C.*


I never thought that the start to my senior year of high school would include my mother being taken to the hospital for COVID-19. August 24, 2020, was the scariest day of my life. I already felt stressed and overwhelmed, not only from beginning to look at colleges, but also that initial stress of starting out a new school year. It wasn’t like the beginning of years prior. This time I had to navigate the new format of being a remote learner. School had only started a week before, so things were a little crazy in my house. It was hard for me to give my teachers 100 percent of my attention because I was constantly afraid that the next time I went to my mother’s room, she would not be breathing. COVID has affected so many people, but I never thought it would directly affect my family.

My mother and I both work at a nursing and rehabilitation center. Through this pandemic, nursing homes have been hit extremely hard. My mother is such an inspiration to me. Being a nurse, she puts herself in harm’s way every single day so she can help others. Nurses will often



prioritize others before they care for themselves; and this describes my mother perfectly. She hadn't been feeling right for many days, but she just pushed through and continued to be there for others. Eventually she just couldn't go anymore, and that's when we found out the most heart-wrenching news ever: she tested positive for COVID-19. Even though she was positive and she knew she needed to focus on getting better, her only concern was the safety of me!

Those next few weeks were a living nightmare. My mother fought with all of her might to stay out of the hospital; and I was there by her side every step of the way. At that point, the exposure to COVID was not my main concern; it was being with my mother. I was scared that I would lose my favorite person; and the thought of that genuinely scared me. My mother stayed at home in my care for a week until finally her body just couldn't do it anymore. Her oxygen level had dropped to 83 percent on room air (the normal range is 95 to 100 percent). She was unable to move or do anything for herself. She was extremely short of breath and was in a very bad way. We had no choice but to call the ambulance. As I watched the paramedics take care of my mother, all kinds of thoughts and emotions were going through my head. My mother was admitted to the hospital; and I was not allowed to visit her there due to the risk of exposure. It was very hard for me to see my mother struggling and fighting for her life and not being able to help her at all. I couldn't even hold her hand or touch her during the scariest time in her life.

I caught myself asking, "Why my mother? Why my family?" I was mad at everyone and everything. My faith was being put to the test, and I sometimes caught myself being mad at God. I soon realized that it was not the time to draw away from God but to draw even closer to Him. I knew that although this seemed like a very devastating time in my life, something good would come out of it. After my mother's hospitalization, God showed me His glory and how this whole situation was actually a blessing for my mother and me. My mother had to take a medical leave due to the side effects of COVID-19. This leave allowed us to develop an even closer bond. She was there to assist me with my online schooling, talk to me during difficult times, and just have quality time with me that ordinarily she wouldn't have been able to do. This time also allowed her to reflect on her own life and put things into proper perspective. Her relationship with God became stronger; and she developed a whole new outlook on life. Today she is completely recovered from COVID! 



**Be**

**Paulette Dela Cadena**  
(she/her)

*Grade 6, Greene Street Friends  
School in Philadelphia, Pa.*

**T**he months, each a different flavor, a different emotion. The first few, a learning experience. A shift from walking into a classroom to sitting in front of a computer screen. The first days were giddy, an excuse to get up later than usual. Of course, I knew this virus was deadly. I knew it wasn't safe, but somehow I could still smile. My mind was still full of impossible utopias and quick recoveries. Being oblivious was less painful than accepting the truth. Walking around with blindfolds and a mask, only pretending to know what was happening. When the cases began their treacherous trek upward and lives ceased, ignorance was no longer an option. Mornings dragged on monotonously, but as long as there were still people around, everything would be all right . . . right?

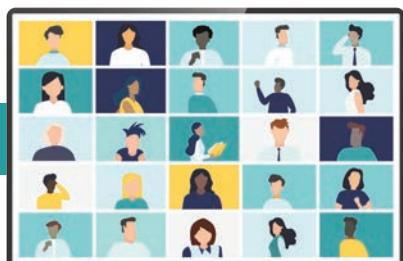
Skip ahead, boring months painted in blue and grey. Then a droplet of rain in the still waters. The singular droplet soon became an onslaught of water, the ripples spreading throughout the world. "Black Lives Matter," letters written in bold, begging to be seen, acknowledged, heard. Finally the oppressed having had enough. In the presence of one hopeful sentence, sticks and stones were

thrown. Tear gas. Rubber bullets. Screaming, sobbing. Watching the television, solemn face, I learned things. With the swipe of a cruel hand, the droplet evaporates into a nearly forgotten void.

July slowly crept up on me. Pins and needles would relentlessly follow me that month, and I was clueless to the events about to unfold. A loss, like the falling of a flower petal, a butterfly taking flight, the song of an unidentified bird. Confusion and pain piled up, slowly and unconsciously the walls were built. A new loss unfolding. The loss of friendship. I slowly learned that not everyone would love me, regardless how I made myself appear. I still tried too hard to be liked. Changing, deciding which personality trait to pick up—and which ones to leave behind. Silently losing myself in an invisible forest of prickly thorns. I quickly learned that I was a good actress. I allowed jokes to lose humor, and learned to keep quiet. So very quiet. The world seemed to lack sound. Where were the tunes that once upon a time gave me life? Searching, getting desperate, I could not find them. I racked my brain, looking for solutions to questions that hadn't been asked. In the process of becoming someone else, I had lost the person that mattered the most. Me. Running without rhyme or rhythm, I convinced myself I was having fun. Slowly my mind turned off. Blinking lights powered down, traffic lights stopped working, all activity stopped. I was convinced there was nothing more to the world other than this bleakness, like an early morning fog. I learned another lesson. You can't change the past.

I took all my lessons—few in my mind but overflowing in my arms—to September. I stalked through my endless forest, growing familiar with the feeling of thorns pricking my skin, until I heard a familiar noise. At first just static, for I had forgotten just how beautiful music was. I allowed the music to take me far away from my mind, allowed it to speak to me, tell me secrets, funny jokes, sad stories. Finally that loud silence was replaced by the sound of hope. My world was blank, until I finally realized what I had been missing. The clock silently strikes 3:00 a.m., and sleep does not yet take me. My thoughts come and go, stopping by occasionally to chat. The early hours, such beautiful underrated things, when the sun shares its opening scene with the world. I wake up for the sole purpose of seeing the beautiful display of colors. I allow it to repaint my bleached world, and help me remember. 2020 was an impossible year—one I certainly won't forget, but will try to learn from.

This year, I learned to be in the moment and to ask for help. It wasn't until the little things I had taken for granted left me that I began to cherish every moment. The loneliness I felt could not have been soothed if I had not reached out to my friends and family. I try to make the most of this pandemic because there is no telling what might happen next. Instead of trying to fix the little mistakes of the past, I have decided to let them go. From now on, I will enjoy my life, be me, and be in the moment. □





## Adjusting to the New Normal

**Alex Garrett (he/him)**

*Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School  
in Washington, D.C.*

**2020** has been a life-changing year. Everything that was considered to be normal has now changed.

Due to the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, we must all take precautions to keep each other safe: stay six feet apart, wash our hands, and avoid crowds. Travel restrictions have prevented me from visiting my grandparents, cousins, and friends. It can be a very lonely time. Video calls and text messaging can help with staying connected to loved ones. During the holidays, I hosted an ugly-sweater Zoom party with my cousins. Seeing the computer screen filled with cubes of their faces wearing hilarious sweaters was the best.

I've had to adjust to many changes. My travel basketball season ended early, and I was devastated. I am a power forward and would play year round with games every few days. A few months later, I joined an outdoor league with a limited number

of players and mandatory masks. I have learned that wearing a mask is not such a hassle. We practiced a lot, and now my three-point shot has really improved. I've also had more time to ride my bike, read books, hang with my family, and take walks.

I've also learned more about the struggle for racial justice in this country. Last summer my classmate Chase and I had a socially distant hangout at Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, D.C. The fences around the White House were covered with posters and signs demanding a stop to police violence and injustice in the Black community. People of all colors were walking around the plaza. I heard their voices chanting, "We want peace!" and "Black lives matter!"—their words echoing in the streets. Concession stands covered with t-shirts of pioneers like John Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ruth Bader Ginsburg filled the crowded sidewalks. It made me feel proud to know that everyone there was fighting for the same rights as me: true equality for People of Color. Over the summer, I watched in disgust as peaceful protesters were tear gassed and hit with rubber bullets by the police. It seemed like a replay of the 1960s race riots. They were protesting against the killing of George Floyd and the many other Black people who are dead from the pandemic of racism—people like Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and Trayvon Martin. They were killed, and the people who did the violence never seem to get in trouble.

The difference in treatment based upon skin color was very clear on January 6 of this year. On TV, I watched a mob of rioters storm into the U.S. Capitol with seemingly no fear about getting arrested. They easily entered the historical building and threatened guards and security. The rioters broke windows and stole important documents from offices. When it was over they just left. Why was there such a difference in how the two groups were treated? It is important that we talk about these things and that we work together to make a change. As a new Black sixth-grade student at Sidwell Friends, I feel very comfortable here. I like to listen to my classmates' views and share my opinion about current events. My teacher replayed Amanda Gorman's amazing inauguration poem, and we analyzed its meaning. The school encourages everyone to share their voice, and we talk about justice, peaceful protests, and coming together to help each other.

The main thing I have learned about myself from all the challenges of 2020 is that I cannot give up in tough times. I have to keep moving forward and adjusting to the new normal. ■





## A Piece of a Much Larger Beginning

**Livingston Zug (he/him)**

*Grade 11, Wilmington Friends School in Wilmington, Del.; member of Birmingham Meeting in West Chester, Pa.*

**O**n a weekend in early February, I attended the Quaker Youth Leadership Conference (QYLC) for the third time. Unlike previous years but in accordance with the times, the conference was hosted virtually by Friends Select School in Philadelphia, Pa. While this format limited the conference in some respects, it also allowed for the inclusion of multiple international Friends schools, including Brummana High School in Lebanon and Ramallah Friends School in Palestine. The conference spanned three days of activities; highlights include discussing plans to buy a communal cow; playing PowerPoint charades (when a student presents a PowerPoint they've never seen before and must act as if they're the world expert in that topic); arguments over whether milk is, in fact, just thick water; and the award-winning journalist Ernest Owens. Light-hearted moments were mixed with grave ones as we reflected together on the past year. The panel, featuring Owens and two other Philadelphia-area activists, discussed the wide-ranging implications of the summer's protests and calls for racial justice.

QYLC almost felt like a summarizing of the past year's chaos. Quakerism, remote learning, the pandemic, and racial justice all found their way into one

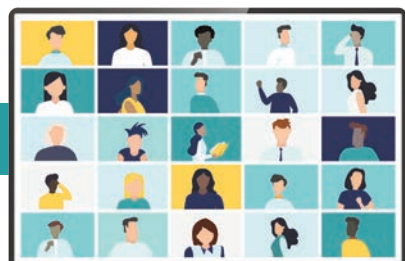
30-hour conference of 100 curious and enthusiastic students passionate about making the world a better place. It made me think back on all that had happened since the pandemic's escalation in March, and think ahead to all that might come after.

Remote learning was an odd combination of freedom and loneliness. I was curious at first; it was new and somehow charmingly scintillating. Some teachers, especially my English and math teachers, managed to keep it that way until the end of the year. School was still as it always had been, but it slowly took on a feeling of repetition. Things settled into a rhythm of synchronous and asynchronous classes, usually with more of the latter. Obligations, aside from the play and most in-school clubs, were not canceled but moved online. Not having to travel meant extra free time. It was during those unoccupied hours that I discovered my deep passion for Roman language, literature, history, and culture. In the spring and early summer, I worked on a lengthy essay project about three famous Roman poets; by the end of the summer, I started taking Latin outside of school.

Early in the pandemic my family retreated north to my grandparents' cabin in the Poconos. I felt lucky that I was distanced from nearby hotspots of the crisis, unlike many of my peers. I kept in touch with a friend in New York City; there the pandemic seemed to be going from bad to worse. I must admit I didn't think much about my privilege and took my safety for granted. I was in the woods by a lake, taking long walks on old logging trails and running for miles down empty dirt roads—nothing to fear, except the occasional trip to the grocery store. What a privilege that was!

At QYLC we participated in an activity called "Silent Movement" in which every person started with their camera off and would turn it on when they identified with a given label. This exercise revealed the range of ways that privilege manifests itself in different categories. For example, I am privileged because I am White; I am privileged because I am male. That security was given immense context as the summer unfolded.

George Floyd's murder last May had a major effect in my home city of Wilmington, Delaware. Black Lives Matter signs went up; statues of Caesar Rodney (a slaveholding Continental Congress delegate from Delaware) and Christopher Columbus in the city were taken down; and I participated in two protests. [Read the rest of this essay online at Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021.](https://www.friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021)





## A Year of Protest

**Robert Rayner (he/him)**

*Year 12, The Perse School in Cambridge, England; attender of Huntingdon Local Meeting in Godmanchester*

“A year of protest” doesn’t exactly have positive connotations, yet 2020 most definitely was full of protest, and it is hard to say that we ended up worse for it.

Most people in the United States and United Kingdom will immediately think back to the summer protests against police brutality, sparked by the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The whole world looked on to see a country writhing in an uncomfortable reckoning with pervasive systemic racism. Society questioned its reliance on the police to solve our collective problems.

According to a Morning Consult poll conducted in mid-June 2020, 87 percent of Britons said they had seen, read, or heard “a lot” or “some” coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests across the pond. This awareness isn’t that surprising considering the size of the movement and the media coverage dedicated to it. As reported in the *New York*

*Times*, four different U.S. polls estimate participation in the June 2020 BLM protests to be in the range of 15 million to 26 million people, about 4.5 to 7.9 percent of the U.S. population, perhaps the largest social movement in U.S. history. Yet the majority of adults in the United States and Britain remain largely uninformed about protests elsewhere in the world.

Beginning in late May 2020, the ongoing political demonstrations and protests in Belarus against President Alexander Lukashenko’s regime have become the largest anti-government protests in the country’s history. On August 23, a rally of approximately 250,000 people packed into Minsk’s Independence Square—more than protested for the country’s independence in 1990. Over the entire country, estimates put the number of protesters out that day at 500,000—about 1 in 20 Belarusians were in the streets, a similar participation level to the U.S. protests. Western news coverage of the day was paltry.

The same can be said for student-led protests in Thailand: up to 100,000 Thai protesters gathered on September 19, 2020, to demand an end to Internet censorship, human rights abuses, lèse majesté law (under which an “insult” against the monarch comes with a 15-year prison sentence), and the abolition of the military-appointed senate. Few U.S. media outlets covered the protests with much depth after the first rallies.

Protesters in Poland continue to demand the reversal of a constitutional court ruling in October 2020 that effectively imposes a near total ban on abortion in a nation that already had some of the strictest abortion laws in Europe. Following the ruling, a week of large-scale demonstrations ensued, with the police estimating that 430,000 people attended more than 400 protests around the country, the largest in Poland since the collapse of communism in 1989.

End SARS, the Nigerian protests against police brutality and political corruption (specifically targeting the notoriously abusive Special Anti-Robbery Squad), reignited for weeks during October 2020, expanding into the largest popular resistance the government has faced in years. Although their demand for the dissolution of SARS was met within days, government plans to merely reassign the unit as well as the announcement of a new Special Weapon and Tactics Team (SWAT) have shifted the focus of the movement, which continues today.

Maltese protests that started in November 2019 spilled over into 2020, mainly calling for the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat. Governmental influence on the judiciary and Muscat’s alleged role in the 2017 murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia motivated up to 4,000 protesters to surround the Maltese Parliament building in Valetta. Muscat announced his resignation amid the protests, and stepped down in January 2020.

Learning about these extraordinary yet commonplace examples from around the world, I recognize that the right to protest, no matter who you are and no matter what for, is extremely important and must be protected. [Read the rest of this essay online at \*Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021\*.](https://www.friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021)



## We Would Still Be Here

**Madison Rose Maas**  
(she/her)

*Grade 6, New Garden Friends  
School in Greensboro, N.C.*

Whether or not the world became what it has become,  
You would still be here.  
Whether or not the door to this unsolvable escape room  
We have trapped ourselves in was ever opened,  
We would still be here.  
Whether or not you were still contemplating  
The day that everything changed,  
Everything would still be here.

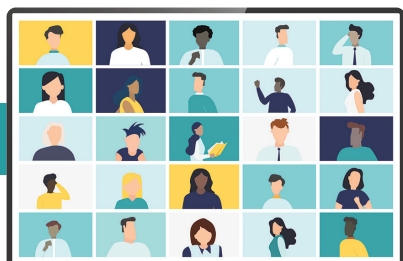
We would still be trapped inside of our own minds,  
Worse than any lockdown we could ever imagine.  
We would still be getting burned by the heat in here,  
Way worse than any wildfire we've ever seen.  
We would still be left crying with no one to wipe our tears,  
More painful than any tear gas ever used.

We would still be alone  
No matter how many people we were with.  
We would still want  
What we could never have.  
We would still be wishing that the world was different,  
Even though we know we still wouldn't be happy.  
Because we never will be if we're thinking like that.

There will always be something stopping us.  
"Get up," they say.  
"Shut up too," they say.  
"Be more social," they say.  
"But you are annoying so never mind," they say.  
"Grow up," they say.  
"You know you're still a kid, right? Stop acting like an adult," they say.  
"You should stand up for yourself," they say.  
"It was just a joke," they say.  
"You have to love yourself," they say.  
"You're so self absorbed."

It would be like this whether or not this year happened how it did.  
So instead of drowning in your thoughts about all the imperfections,  
Just think about how amazing your life is.  
And how amazing you are.  
Whether or not the world became what it has become,  
You would still be here.  
So why not make the most of it?

**Read an expanded version of this poem online at**  
[Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021](https://Friendsjournal.org/studentvoices2021).



## MORE SVP HONOREES

Read the rest of each piece online at

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“In 2020 I learned how to garden. I learned how to delicately place each tiny seed deep into the rich, brown soil. I learned how to water the seeds—not too much and not too little. I learned how to be patient and let each seed sprout, knowing that one day it would blossom into a beautiful plant. I learned that plants need a specific environment that they enjoy. They have to feel comfortable and relaxed. Any time I buy or grow a new plant, I give it a name and keep it in my room for a while. I do this so that the plants will feel an emotional connection.”

—“*Plants Are Like People*” by Jake Snow (he/him),  
Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C.



“This past December, I celebrated Hanukkah in a way I never imagined. Usually I just play dreidel about half of the days and say the prayers with a party every few years. However, this year we had a party outside because of COVID-19 and included our neighbors. . . . We had a fire going because we were outside at night and it was cold. We had a fire pit so why not? The smoke kept following us, even if we walked to different places. It was like 2020 because you can’t escape the problems; all you can do is adapt and adjust.”

—“*A COVID Hanukkah*” by Eli Harris (he/him),  
Grade 6, Greene Street Friends School in  
Philadelphia, Pa.



“Imagine this: an 11-year-old boy hears about an opportunity to be in his school’s production of *Newsies*. He stays late one Tuesday afternoon with other kids who have similar intentions. He sits outside the chorus room getting increasingly more nervous, and when he is called in, he performs to the best of his abilities. A week later he receives a letter stating he has been cast as Les, one of the main characters. Over the course of the next few weeks, he stays up late to practice and spends his break time memorizing his lines. Meanwhile, there is a pandemic brewing in Wuhan, China. The week leading up to the performances, D.C. had its first two cases of COVID-19.”

—“*The Beforetimes to Now*” by AJ Valbrune  
(he/him), Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School in  
Washington, D.C.



“Running has also helped me a ton during the pandemic. It has helped me disconnect from my social life and calms me down. Getting fresh air while running is also a really good balance to playing a lot of video games indoors. I do long-distance running, which is very meditative and helps me think. When I get mad at my parents, or otherwise just need a break, I can go run. . . . It sometimes gives me a weird feeling that almost feels like I am not physically present. It is this good feeling, very meditative and calm, that makes running more fun for me.”

—“*Virtual and Physical Connections in 2020*”  
by Kavi Gibson (he/him), Grade 7, Carolina Friends  
School in Durham, N.C.





“For the first few days, we were sure it would end soon, as we were not happy about being stuck together. My brother was annoying and had too much energy to be locked indoors. My sister and I would argue with him over silly things like a toy or who gets to play with the puppy, and we’d end up annoying our parents. We just didn’t like each other that much and didn’t fit well together during a pandemic. Before we knew it, my brother, sister, mom, dad, and I were all trapped in the spiderweb of the lockdown.”

—*“The Spiderweb of the Lockdown”* by Tyler Mitroff (he/him), Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C.



“My father had never worked in D.C. or anywhere near my house. He’s only worked in Denmark, China, Singapore, and now Connecticut. He would never be home to take me to soccer, help with homework, wake me up in the morning, drive me to school, or make dinner for the family. He would leave early Monday mornings and come home late Friday nights. . . . The coronavirus outbreak happened, and we were all sent home. My father and mother started to work from home. We were all so confused, but I was happy that my father and mother were home.”

—*“More Time with Family”* by Nadia Stendevad (she/her), Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C.



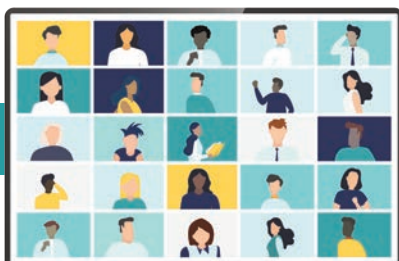
“Some of my friends are less cautious than others. Some say we can have playdates if we are outside. Some say we can be inside with masks. Some don’t care and will do whatever the other person is comfortable with. I make my decision based on how much the other person has been exposed. I’ve played outside a lot with friends: laser tag, football, and other fun activities. Currently though I have been doing outdoor playdates with masks on because my mom works at a hospital. So if she gets sick, her patients could be exposed and it could be life threatening. We want to stay safe as well as keep other people safe during these tough times.”

—*“One Crazy Year”* by Theo Chaney (he/him), Grade 6, Greene Street Friends School in Philadelphia, Pa.



“As lockdown became the new norm, I began to form new habits and customs. One of them is my daily silent contemplation, during which I like to reflect upon my day and focus on what I’m appreciative of. I remember my first silent reflection: I sat down on the floor, legs crossed, and let my brain do the rest. I thought about how I was so fortunate to have a place to sleep, lots of food, and such a loving family. When I opened my eyes again, I was strangely filled with guilt. I realized I had taken for granted what others called novelties before the pandemic.”

—*“Privilege Is to Be Appreciated”* by Ruhan Khanna (he/him), Grade 6, Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C.







“Bzzzzzzzz—I could hear the buzzing of the saw as it got closer to my skin. I could really feel the heat now. *A few more eighths of an inch and we’re there*, I said to myself. *You can do it. You can do it.* The buzz of the saw rose to such a high pitch, I could barely stand it. It started to tickle! I knew we were close. . . . During the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered that I had a relapse of clubbed feet. Since most of our usual summer plans were canceled, we decided this would be a good summer for me to spend six to eight weeks in casts.”

—“*My COVID Summer in Casts*” by Lian Petrella (she/her), Grade 7, Carolina Friends School in Durham, N.C.



“Going to Catholic school for 11 years was rough—I mean, *really* rough. From first to eleventh grade, I spent most of my days clad in uncomfortable uniforms walking the halls of schools that made me feel uncomfortable in my own skin. It ended only when I managed to walk out the doors of my Catholic high school for the last time . . . and straight into a pandemic. After three years of an awful high school experience, I finally convinced myself that it would be better for my mental health to switch to another school. I ended up selecting New Garden Friends School and made the transition in mid-March.”

—“*Learning to Be Happy*” by Sophie Wells (she/her), Grade 12, New Garden Friends School in Greensboro, N.C.



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