

My Heroes of COVID-19

“Even as we grieved, we grew. Even as we hurt, we hoped. Even as we tire, we try.”

~ Amanda Gorman

I recently heard a radio story of a first grade teacher who was teaching her students virtually when she accidentally released gas, making a loud noise. The response of the children was priceless. I laughed so hard at their joy, innocence and delight that tears ran down my face. Soon those tears turned to ones of sadness. Listening to the purity in the precious giggles of each child, on a computer in their home, connecting with their teacher and classmates, yet physically alone, struck me as terribly heartbreaking. ***These small children are my heroes.***

I know a seven year old boy who lives and breathes all things hockey. School, not so much! With ADHD he nearly climbs the walls and his single, working mama is nearly pulling out her hair! With the cancellation of his sport, this little guy is suffering through a loss so great, it is like a death to him. It was a lifeline not only for him but his exhausted mother. ***The kids who have lost their sports, music, drama productions and extra curricular activities are my heroes.***

Another child I know is supposed to graduate high school in June. Such a milestone to celebrate and a year that is meant to be full of memories, relationships and excitement. It is her last year at school and possibly at home, yet is filled with many disappointments and losses. Thankfully she is focused on exams, college applications and part time jobs or she, like many graduates, would sink into an abyss of desolation. Through tears, she sobbed, “it is not fair! This is not how my last year is supposed to go!” ***The graduating class of 2021 are my heroes.***

I was curious as to what others felt were the most difficult and what, if anything, has been positive about COVID. In conversing with other children, the predominant responses were: I miss my friends, I miss my cousins and grandparents, masks are annoying, I miss the freedom of sitting and playing with who I want. I miss my sports, my lessons, my practices, normal life.

An overwhelming response was: ***“There is nothing good about COVID.”***

On a personal level, I felt bittersweet sorrow observing my teenager build a snowman with her brother. Watching her giggle and be silly opened the floodgates for me. You see, this child has suffered through the deepest, darkest pit of depression I have ever seen. COVID seemed to slam the door on all hope, light and comfort. She retreated so far into herself I did not know if I would ever be able to reach her. But together, with the help of professionals, family and teachers, she battled hard, pushed through and celebrated the moments when the sun shone. Watching her now, I can cautiously say there are more good days than bad. I know the depression would have still been there, but COVID certainly accentuated the symptoms ten fold. ***The kids who are fighting through mental illness are my heroes.***

These stories are far from unique. COVID-19 seems to have brought a despondency and heaviness to our children unlike anything else. As parents, we cannot pull our children out of their despair by ourselves. We absolutely must **reach out to friends, family and professionals**. We must focus, point out and grasp onto the brief moments of **normalcy, joy and delight** like our lives depend on it. Maybe that is the secret to ours and our children's survival: **to seek out the silver lining**.

My message to the students in Northern Gateway Public Schools and beyond is this:

I am so sorry that everything is the way it is and wish I could tell you that everything will go back to the way it was before. I know it is not easy and you hate so many parts of COVID. I know your hearts are breaking and no one can stop the pain.

But I know that the adults in your life: parents, teachers, doctors, counsellors, grandparents, aunts and uncles are all so proud of you. We will continue to love you, stand by you, get you mental health help when you need it, rejoice with you in all you are succeeding at and all you are overcoming.

I am sorry that you are missing out on so much, but please do not overlook the strength and resilience that is growing inside of you. Just like precious diamonds are created by tremendous pressure, great beauty and strength is being created in you. You are learning to think and act for yourself. You are learning to question everything you read and hear.

You are learning that the **most valuable things in life are not things** but people, relationships and connection. I know this because that is what you are telling me.

As I reflect on the past 10 months, I believe that the real heroes are the children. May we all continue to savor in their resilience, adaptability and tenacity. Please, tell a young person today how very proud you are of them. Please tell them that **they are your hero**.

[For Mental Health Support go to www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/page16759.aspx](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/page16759.aspx)
Call Helpline 1-877-303-2642 or Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

“Perhaps the butterfly is proof that you can go through a great deal of darkness yet still become something beautiful”

~Beau Taplin

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to promote success in school. Tammy advocates for students and families, providing a link to the community programs. Tammy has been a registered social worker for more than 20 years and is a mother to 4 teenagers.