

Rising Voices Fellowship Roundtable: RVF 2019-20 Experiences During COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has radically changed our everyday lives. People throughout the world are dealing with their own sets of disruptions. People are getting sick, people are dying, and people are losing loved ones. As of March 26th, [3.3 million Americans](#) have filed for unemployment, signifying a loss of income that will likely have effects far longer than the disease itself. As schools across the nation close, [education gaps will likely grow](#), affecting students for years to come. As Rising Voices Fellows, we want to give a glimpse into what these disruptions look like in our communities and our lives as high school students. It can be overwhelming to read or watch the news while dealing with the disruptions in our own lives. We hope that we can all find ways to stay connected and compassionate and to support each other through this epidemic, and in rebuilding and reforming when it is over. – Ellanora Lerner, Rising Voices Fellow 2019-2020

1. How is your school addressing the rise of COVID-19 in the United States? What do you think about this approach? How has it affected your learning?

Ilana Drake: On Sunday evening, March 14th, we were notified that Mayor DeBlasio would be closing the New York City public schools until at least April 20th. The next day, our teachers began preparing for our School to begin remote learning. We have used various platforms such as Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, Zoom, and PupilPath to assist us with real-time lectures and assignments. Ironically, I feel as though I have more freedom due to distance learning. Normally, my school day lasts from 8 am to 3:35 pm, with only 45 minutes for lunch and no free periods. With this modified, I am expected to be available on the computer from 8am until 12:50pm, which means a shorter school day, and I even have “free” periods scattered throughout the week if I have gym or a teacher simply posts the assignment. This means that I am able to balance my day in a way that I enjoy, and am able to be more reflective by jogging or walking in Central Park or along the Hudson River. Perhaps I feel so happy because I continue to feel connected to the outside world, as I live in a small apartment and my parents and brother are home, too.

Lilah Peck: My school has transferred to remote learning which essentially means all of our classes are done online. We communicate through PowerSchool learning, email, and Microsoft One Note notebooks. They have cancelled all athletic events (and all events in general) and closed campus. I am very extroverted so it is very challenging for me to keep my energy up all day as I sit at my computer (regardless of if I am inside/outside wherever). Despite my love of scheduling and organization, it is very challenging for me to enforce (enough) structure and routine into my days. I feel far less energized and excited to learn, though normally I love school and learning. I feel kind of pouty and in a funk but I think as I get a better routine I will get over it.

Ella Plotkin-Oren: My school communication was poor from the beginning but in this circumstance I understand because the administrators weren't sure what to do. My last day of high school was March 12th and we were supposed to resume school on April 6th. This date was pushed back (not surprisingly) to May 1st. My district found it unfair to assign work over this period of time because not every student has access to the same resources and wouldn't be able to complete the work. Since the initial announcement, the district has concluded that online school will be a requirement starting April 13th, but it isn't clear what they are doing to solve the previous issue. At this point, I'm not that stressed because I am a second semester senior, but my younger siblings and friends are worried to how this might affect their classes next year. I'm also a little worried and hope I'll be able to graduate on time!

Ellanora Lerner: During the first two weeks that my school was cancelled, teachers sent out individual assignments. After that, the school set up a schedule of online classes. I am very lucky to attend a very small school where we all have access to school provided laptops. This is a privilege and one that makes it much easier for our school to switch to an online model. As a second semester senior, I'm not greatly concerned with my own loss of learning. However, I worry that the lost time will impact the younger students at my school, and at other schools around the country. I am also disappointed that many events and projects I was looking forward to this last semester have or likely will be cancelled. It has also affected my college decision process because it has caused the cancellation of admitted students' days and final campus visits.

Neima Fax: My school switched to online learning two weeks ago. I think this was absolutely the right move because there was a large group of kids in my school who went to AIPAC, and someone there had it. But I do really miss my grade and the general school environment. Personally, online learning is not for me. I get very easily distracted and it's hard to stay motivated because it doesn't feel like real school. And one of the things I love about my school is the times in between classes and during free periods when I am joking around and hanging out with friends. Without that it's more of a chore, and classes aren't as enjoyable.

Ellie Klibaner-Schiff: For the past two weeks, I've been learning online via Zoom. I'm super grateful to have online school, and I recognize that, unfortunately, so many schools around the country don't have the necessary frameworks in place to make distance learning possible. I have school every day from 9 am to 4 pm, so it takes up most of my time, and I still get lots of homework. The level of productivity in my classes has been diminished, and I find it much more difficult to understand complex topics when trying to read my teacher's facial expressions and motions through a screen. That said, I do feel that I am still learning and making progress in my different subjects. Most of all, I appreciate how school has helped me maintain some sense of routine and normalcy during this tortuous time of anxiety and unpredictability.

Sasha Rosenfeld: This transition to online classes has really been hindering my ability to learn and retain information, especially because my school hasn't yet started online teaching (we just have assignments posted on google classroom). This also reminds me how fortunate I am to

have my own computer and working wifi so that I can complete these assignments on my own schedule and to the best of my ability.

Maddy Pollack: School has been cancelled indefinitely for me. Being a senior, the cancellations have been a little bit heartbreaking because I'll be missing my prom and graduation ceremony, which my friends and I have all been looking forward to for all of high school. My principal said our administration is working on alternative options but I know it won't feel the same. Our spring break got extended by two weeks and after that, we're starting online school. I know we still have to keep doing schoolwork but with the combination of senioritis and COVID, I'm feeling pretty unmotivated.

Lila Goldstein: My school has begun online learning in response to the pandemic. Although our school has utilized online programs (like Google Classroom) to aid instruction in the past, shifting education online completely has been a struggle. Daily lesson plans are mainly up to the individual teacher, which means more now than ever that my educational experience is inconsistent from day to day, and always dependent on technology/internet that doesn't always work. Although I know there is little that my teachers and administration can do in this situation, this approach is unsatisfactory all around. I am privileged to have access to computers and steady internet access, but I am unsure of my classmates without that privilege are coping with remote learning. I am grateful for my teachers, who are trying their hardest during this time to continue supporting us.

Ari Fogel: My school has been out of session since the 13-14th, and we won't start classes until April 6 per the governor's (Tim Walz, MN) orders. This is primarily due to the majority of our state's public schools scrambling to provide iPads/laptops to their students to work remotely. At this point, I haven't started classes but I'm anticipating that it will be challenging. I know that I'll be surrounded by distractions and will have trouble preparing for AP exams, but it will be nice to have some structure to my days. This is obviously not the senior year that I envisioned, but my high school experience has had no shortage of challenges, so why not have a pandemic to finish out these past four years memorably?

Dahlia Soussan: We've taken to distance learning until May 1st. In the meantime, all our classes are still going on, plus clubs and other extra-curricular activities, over Zoom. I recognize this is a privilege because a lot of schools in my area are just not having class due to equity concerns. In turn, I'm incredibly grateful that my learning this year will not be ruined by COVID-19--I recognize that won't be the reality for many schools across the country and in my area.

2. How does where you live affect how you are interacting with this time?

Ilana Drake: I live on the Upper West Side of New York City. I feel fortunate to have the ability to clear my head by walking outside. I also live in a neighborhood that has diverse food options, so we have been making more of an effort to support local cafes and restaurants. However, this

week my apartment seems to have become smaller because my parents, brother, and I are working at home and all of the common areas in our building (conference rooms, play room, and gym) are closed. As a result, my parents have opened our shades as much as possible, in order to increase the natural lighting and allow us to see the world around us. This allows me to still have some interactions with our neighbors at a safe distance.

Lilah Peck: I live in Charlotte, NC and thankfully we have a gorgeous spring. I really enjoy taking walks outside. I also live in the suburbs so it isn't so challenging to go out without seeing anyone (we all live pretty spread out anyway and nothing is ever really crowded normally). Otherwise, where I live hasn't really impacted my experience in any way I can pinpoint specifically.

Ella Plotkin-Oren: I live in the Bay Area and our state has taken many precautions. All six districts in the Bay Area have closed school until May 1st and we've been in a shelter-in-place for almost 2 weeks now. There are many cases of COVID-19 in my area and because of that I haven't really interacted with anyone other than my family. It's a little bit scary but really sad.

Ellanora Lerner: I live in an area where natural spaces are easily accessible which has made this time of quarantining much easier by providing a safe way to get out of my house. I also live in an area where a lot of people have summer homes. There has been a recent influx of people going to these homes in an attempt to escape places such as New York City which are hotspots of the disease.

Neima Fax: I live in a very concentrated Jewish part of Los Angeles which is nice because when I go on socially distant walks or runs, I see a lot of people I know. This past Shabbat when I was walking around with my parents and hung out with my friends for a little (6 feet apart, don't worry), it was nice to see so many Jewish people who I recognized out and about. Even if I didn't know them personally, it felt nice to have that sense of familiarity and community for a little bit.

Part of living in Los Angeles is being constantly aware of how dire the homelessness situation is. If you drive through the underpass of a freeway, there are tents lines up on both sides with clothes and garbage strewn around. It's heartbreaking. Because it's such a constant in my life I am painfully aware of the families who have it way worse than me. I am upset about school trips being cancelled, while they worry about losing their homes because they can't work, and not knowing where their next meal is coming from. Crises such as this one do a great job of highlighting the economic and social imbalance of our communities. It's also a rude awakening that we should all check our privilege, and do what we can for those who are in need.

Sasha Rosenfeld: I live 30 minutes away from New York City, which currently is the most at-risk place in the United States. One of my moms lives there, and because of that and the fact that she is a doctor who still works and sees patients every day, I can't visit her. The closest we have

come to hanging out is her driving here and standing 10 feet away from me in my backyard, where we converse at above normal volume to hear each other through the large space.

Maddy Pollack: Austin, obviously being a city, had to shut down a lot of institutions. I don't follow the local government super closely, but I think our mayor has done a pretty good job. The city has restricted basically everything which is good because Austinites are super active and without rules, probably would've kept going out a lot.

Lila Goldstein: On a normal spring day in Florida, the streets in my neighborhood are filled with bikers and runners, the tennis and basketball courts are filled, and the beaches are packed with tourists and locals alike. When the calls for social distancing were first made, I found my community and state slow to act; outdoor and social activities are a part of everyday life that are extremely difficult to part with, especially for an unknown length of time. Thankfully, I have seen a gradual acceptance of the new social rules set forth by the pandemic.

Ari Fogel: Minnesota doesn't have too many cases at this point, but our governor, Tim Walz, has been very proactive in his attempts to flatten the curve. All restaurants have been closed for in-house dining for weeks, and he recently issued a shelter-in-place order for the entire state. I don't live in a crowded, metropolitan area, so it has been relatively easy to stay away from people and socially distance effectively. One of the biggest challenges for me is not being able to spend time in nature. Minnesota weather is notoriously frigid, even into late March/early April. I woke up this morning and there was snow on the ground, but next week we'll have temperatures well into the 50s. I wish I could go for walks or spend time at the lakes, but the weather simply won't allow for it at this point. I'm starting to experience cabin fever and I'm craving some fresh air.

Dahlia Soussan: I'm in the Silicon Valley Bay Area so it's a particularly hard-hit area. We're living with a shelter-in-place order and the streets are incredibly empty. I imagine much of the country is in the same boat because most states are adopting the same measures, but I think the anxiety here is heightened because there are so many cases and soon there won't be enough local hospital beds, even though we have particularly good health infrastructure. It's interesting to live in such a purportedly advanced society and watch the entire community cripple.

3. What do you see happening in your communities around COVID-19?

Ilana Drake: I think that COVID-19 is making us become more aware of how our behaviors impact others. Although I would be unlikely to become critically ill if I were exposed to COVID-19, I could transmit this virus to my parents or, even worse, my grandparents. I also am very concerned by the economic and social impact of the closure of stores and community-based organizations will have on New Yorkers. For example, I have become close to one of the small-business owners who owns a cafe next to my School. I worry about the impact of COVID-19 on her cafe, as both my high school and City College (which houses my high school) are closed. I

also worry about vulnerable population subgroups, such as the elderly. I now volunteer for Invisible Hands, which delivers food across New York City, and I have been amazed to see how Slack, a work platform, has become a way for our community to communicate.

Lilah Peck: Everything is closing. It is pretty much that simple. And that depressing. Events to look forward to are all gone. They just vanished! It's hard to find stuff to look forward to which makes the whole experience that much more challenging.

Ella Plotkin-Oren: All community events are cancelled/postponed due to COVID-19. One positive thing I see happening and have participated in is organizing help for the elderly. They are at risk and so different communities have been setting up grocery runs for them. I've been helping my elderly neighbors with whatever errands they may have and just staying as safe as possible.

Ellanora Lerner: The local school districts have worked previously to create systems to distribute food to students during the summer. This has helped the response to COVID-19 because the systems were able to be implemented basically as soon as schools were cancelled. Local organizations are working hard to meet the increased need for food but many struggle themselves with having enough money to meet the need.

Neima Fax: I think COVID-19 effects the Jewish community in a very unique way because we are a community of gathering and celebration. We pray together, we have meals together, we celebrate Jewish holidays together, and we eat in the same restaurants (for those who keep kosher.) Every aspect of our lives is touched by our Judaism. I thrive off of my community. It is such a strong supporter of my Jewish faith. The classes notion of you don't know what you have until it's gone has been extremely relevant recently. The fact that we are separated truly reinforces our appreciation for communal gatherings and celebration.

Sasha Rosenfeld: I have constant community outreach within my Jewish, camp, and neighborhood communities. I love how everyone is staying in constant contact during this time of isolation. My camp and synagogue are both hosting zoom sessions almost daily, with topics ranging from Zumba to Havdalah services to virtual jam sessions and family dinners.

Maddy Pollack: One of the communities that's been hit really hard by COVID is the service industry. I work at a restaurant downtown and I got laid off along with a lot of my coworkers. Luckily, it doesn't affect me terribly because I'm still supported by my parents, but I know some people in the industry that are really struggling right now. In general, I think everyone is trying to protect and support each other, from practicing social distancing to donating money to relief organizations. It's refreshing to see the Austin community taking the pandemic seriously.

Lila Goldstein: In my community, I see more and more individuals practice social distancing with every day, with fewer and fewer people out shopping every time I find myself out of the house. Similarly, I see a growing mindset of social responsibility and gratitude amongst my

neighbors every day; many houses on my street have left out care packages for delivery drivers, and I have seen many heartfelt messages of thanks for healthcare workers on social media.

Dahlia Soussan: Personally, I am just avoiding all news, but I know our case numbers are really high so we are trying to stay away from public spaces. My Jewish community has been hit really hard; the JCC had to furlough all employees and I imagine synagogues, which are already very small, will be in the same boat if this continues. To connect, my parents have been going to a lot of livestream talks, concerts, etc. and listening to podcasts, but most of these things are in the broader community and non-specific to Jewish or general life in the Bay Area.

4. What are you doing to ground and to stay connected?

Ilana Drake: I am continuing to be part of my current communities, but I now participate online. These Zoom calls enable me to socialize and feel “connected.” I also am able to “see” my classmates during the week through remote learning, which makes me feel like I am still in school and engaging with my teacher and fellow classmates. I feel more connected with nature through my jogs in Central Park, and now am paying closer attention as the apple and cherry trees are blooming along with the daffodils and crocuses. In addition, through doing my work in the hallway, I have gotten to know my neighbors better. Because we have not been able to see other relatives, our family is planning a seder over Zoom. So far, more than 50 people have been invited, and I am excited to celebrate the story of Passover with so much of my family.

Lilah Peck: I haven’t figured that out yet. Honestly, I am still overwhelmed by this change. I enjoy talking to my friends over facetime and social media. It makes me feel a lot more connected to them because I miss them so much. It's hard to know that my friends are under a mile away doing nothing and yet I can't see them. At least they aren't sick (. . . yet).

Ella Plotkin-Oren: I've been going on walks everyday (unless it's raining). It gives me a chance to get out of the house and breath in some fresh air. I call at least three friends a day for hours and it feels like we're hanging out, just in separate houses!

Ellanora Lerner: The amount of time I have free has been a shock to my system but one that has given me the time to focus on what I’m most interested in. It has shown me how important social interaction and my relationships are to me and reminded me that I need to consciously put energy into them, especially now. This continued social interaction grounds me in my life outside of my home. Also, reading.

Neima Fax: I think routine is important while socially distancing. I make sure to get dressed every day, wash my face and brush my teeth right when I get up, and have three meals. I try to stick to it as much as I can because it separates the days out from one another. If I were to roll out of bed at 2:00 every day, snack until I was full, and do all my work last minute, I would be miserable. I think it’s also important to keep your spaces clean. I make sure my room stays clean, because for me, a messy room is a messy mind. That's when I start to procrastinate and

stick to my phone. I've also been spending time doing art projects. I knit my first beanie, I sketched a little, and I plan on painting a wall in my room. Art is a good break from staring at my screen all day. It's also a break from all the bad news circulating.

Ellie Klibaner-Schiff: My friend and I started a lighthearted newsletter called the Quarantine Chronicles to keep our school community connected and updated. Students and teachers submit photos or vlogs of what they've been up to, book/movie/music recommendations, or any other content they want to share. In our most recent issue, we had a section called "Pandemic Fashion" featuring pictures and drawings of people donned in protective gear during other pandemics such as the Spanish Flu of 1918 and the Bubonic Plague. I've also been making a really conscious effort to reach out to my friends who I don't see in class, because it's so easy to fall out of touch when you can't say hi walking down the hallway.

Sasha Rosenfeld: I'm trying to keep a schedule for myself now that I don't have a rigid schedule around school. This includes running every day, trying to eat healthy, keeping a normal bedtime, etc. To stay connected I have been facetimeing friends and participating in zoom calls with my family and friends. I have also had the time to participate in Shabbat, which I have zoom called into with my whole camp community.

Maddy Pollack: I've been extremely lazy during the quarantine. I'm pretty much in bed all day bingeing Netflix and eating everything in my pantry. I initially made a to-do list to try and be productive, but I scrapped it because it was stressing me out. That sounds bad, but hey, sometimes the best thing to do is nothing at all. I've been calling my friends a lot to keep in touch and I'm grateful that I have friends that I can talk about absolutely nothing with. The fact that we're still talking every day actually makes me feel closer than ever to them, so that's definitely a positive out of this whole situation. I feel like everyone is appreciating their loved ones.

Lila Goldstein: Every day, I try and reach out to my core group of friends and family, making sure that everyone is safe and has the opportunity to converse as if it were a normal day. Moreover, I try and stay to a normal daily schedule, and continue to write and create art as I would after a day of school. Even though watching the news can be difficult and distressing, I find that staying informed has allowed me to feel more connected with current events and other people.

Dahlia Soussan: I have been focusing on calling my friends every day and making time to talk in the middle of the day as if I were at school. I face-timed with my extended family in Toronto and got them to walk me through their homes on FT to feel a bit more connected. My grandma is living on her own as well, but I respect how she's made a conscious effort to learn how to use video conference software to stay integrated and I try to help her get practice with video chat as well because it's grounding for me to spend time with family face to face and important for older people to stay integrated during a time when they are often forgotten.

5. What's giving you hope for the future right now?

Ilana Drake: I am hoping that some of our current restrictions will be lifted by summertime and that the New York City Department of Education will not require us to attend summer school. Over the past couple of weeks, I have applied to summer fellowships both in the United States and abroad, and just completing these applications gives me hope. Because I live in New York City, I am now considered “high risk,” and I do not know how this will impact my ability to travel. I am hopeful that a vaccine for COVID-19 will be discovered as well as an effective treatment. I am hopeful that one day I will tell my children the story of this plague, perhaps even in the context of my own Passover seder!

Lilah Peck: I know this will all pass, it's just a matter of time. I am pretty optimistic and I like to think that this spring is the peak of all of this insanity. I think I'm pretty hopelessly optimistic and I'm probably wrong, but it's what's getting me through so whatever. Also, the fact that people are working on it and we have a lot of technology not only to develop and communicate solutions but to communication information in general and to keep systems going remotely. I feel grateful that so much can happen online and we have so many means of carrying on and staying connected. We have ways of establishing a new normal for the time being.

Ella Plotkin-Oren: I'm really glad that California is taking this so seriously. We could be in a worse situation. Personally, I'm looking forward to next year and college!

Ellanora Lerner: Although this is undoubtedly an awful situation, and one that has had many negative impacts on my life, I also know that as a young person coming out of this I will be more grateful for what I do have. It has motivated me to live my life to the fullest and to work to remedy the gaps in our social infrastructure that have been made clear by this epidemic.

Mica Maltzman: Walking through my neighborhood at noon on a weekday and knowing that every house is filled with people at that moment is what gives me hope for the future. In my short 18 years on this planet, I have never seen, not just my neighborhood, but nearly all of society commit to such a drastic lifestyle change. While slower than needed, the nearly universal quarantine people have adopted still boggles my mind every day. Having seen such a commitment to mass action, I have hope that our nation can mobilize again on issues new and old. There are no excuses now that combating climate change is too daunting of a task or mobilizing the electorate is some unattainable goal.

Neima Fax: Communities across the country within days came together to create plans for flattening the curve, and I truly believe they can continue to unite and cooperate on the latest, pressing issues.

I think people are now realizing the true value of human connection. When we are free from our homes again, I know that for me I won't ever want to have a lazy day in again. I won't take advantage of being able to go outside. I will take advantage of the communities I come a part of because I know that they can be taken away from me at any second. I truly think this

experience will change people for the better. I also think it is making people more aware of the true backbones of our society. The workers, the doctors, the people working in grocery stores, etc. They are the people who run our society, and we are thankful for them now more than ever. My hope is that that appreciation doesn't fade.

Ellie Klibaner-Schiff: The way in which COVID-19 is testing our country reveals so many inconsistencies and unnecessary barriers that are set up in our society, functioning every day to preclude equality. For example, in Michigan, shut-off water was ordered to be restored, leading us to wonder whether people should ever be deprived of such a basic necessity during times of hardship. I hope that after this horrific pandemic passes, and we begin the process of returning to normalcy, people in positions of power will think twice about reinstating harmful systems. Little glimmers of humanity have shone through the horrors of illness, attempting to lighten the load during this heavy time. All I can hope is that this bright light of humanity remains once the heaviness is gone.

Sasha Rosenfeld: It's amazing to see how many groups and parts of my communities have come together electronically during this time, through zoom and email. It has given me a chance to check in with relatives and people I don't talk to on a normal basis. It's also inspiring how many people I see participating in social distancing, and it really reminds me how our community can come together for a greater cause when really necessary.

Maddy Pollack: I'm in a very privileged position, considering my parents are able to work from home and I haven't really had to put much of my life on hold. What keeps me going is the thought of seeing all my friends again and getting to celebrate the (strange) end of high school with them.

Lila Goldstein: I have hope for the future based on the hard work and projections made by healthcare professionals and scientists from across the world. Every subsequent time I leave my house to get groceries or pick up prescriptions, I see fewer cars and individuals out, which fills me with more hope that people are social distancing and doing all they can to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Ari Fogel: As our country shifts towards more socialist policies during this time of fear and anxiety, I have a lot of hope that Americans will realize that socialism is possible in the US. People have been begging for expansions to the health care sector for years as the military budget is inflated by trillions every year. I'm hopeful that people will realize how inequitable our health care system is and that serious, long-lasting reform is ahead. As horrible and devastating this pandemic has already been, even in its early stages, I hope that our country will be able to take this experience to create a progressive change that is long overdue.

I have a feeling that the Trump administration's abysmal response to the pandemic, especially Trump's constant spread of misinformation and the inability of Americans to rely on the WH for information, will cost them the 2020 election. I believe that our country will see

how dangerous their policies truly are; however, it is disheartening that it took a pandemic to realize that.

Dahlia Soussan: I am relying on the hope that there will be vaccines available soon and trying to think about being with my family as shortly as possible because normally I would be spending Spring Break with them and not being able to is hard. I am also trying to lean into the positives of such a horrible situation. It's nice to have so much time, even though it comes amid these circumstances. I've really reconsidered my priorities and focused on getting more exercise and doing other things that are just nicer for my mental well-being.