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### Isolation of Young Students: The Aftermath

It started little by little. She was a very big presence in the house before the pandemic, so what really tipped me off that something was wrong was the lack of energy flowing through the house. Gloria (Copeland) would come out of her room at around 12 o'clock with dark circles around her eyes, having not eaten anything all day and just coming off of her zoom school. She had been stuck in her room for the entire week and it was starting to show. 5th grade was not meant to be experienced through a screen. Gloria was a relatively happy and productive student before the pandemic hit and the effects of not seeing her peers and friends was detrimental to her mental health. The pandemic brought her to truly newfound lows and threw her curveballs that she had never encountered before. We also explore the recovery and coping methods she has gained and learned through her journey in the pandemic. Gloria Copeland is an adolescent student that has faced mental health struggles throughout the pandemic who has voiced her challenges that she has shared with many young students that struggled with online school and the isolation of the pandemic.

Before her time in online school Gloria was a very happy if not a little sporadic and lively elementary schooler. She would often stay after school to engage with her friends, playing on the playground, inviting them over for playdates and having a great time with them at recess. She would participate in extracurriculars with many of her friends including sports and contributing to her girl scout troop, and it seemed that she was a truly endless source of energy. She would always be waking up early and starting the day with the excitement and anticipation of each day in front of her. Being her older brother, I recall becoming irritated at her relentless amount of energy, partially because I was envious of her excitement for her daily routine and partially because of the ruckus that she would make before school. I remember she would run around the living room doing laps around the couches and sliding across the hardwood floor on her socks just excited at the prospect of getting to see her friends at school.

Seeing the difference between Gloria from her pre-quarantine energy filled personality to a tired and demotivated frame of mind was a clear indication that the pandemic had clear affects on her mental health. Probing Gloria (Copeland) about the nature of her school experience during the pandemic, she takes an exasperated sigh and reveals some of her thoughts and participation in adolescent online school. "When we moved onto virtual school my immediate thought wasn't this was going to be horrible and awful, but looking back on it, I literally learnt nothing ... It wasn't school, it was like weekly seven hour torture." Gloria's blunt description of her time during her online school explains

the dramatic mood shift I saw from pre-quarantine to mid pandemic. When schools cannot even do their main function of effectively teaching bright and promising students, it reflects the flaws of the system rather than the dedication of its students. Elementary school is meant to be a place where young people learn to interact with peers and develop work ethic and a sense of community with fellow students. The pandemic essentially halted all social development because young children were forced to distance themselves from each other and while they were unable to interact with their peers, their social skill became increasingly impaired and the feeling of community broke down that little bit more. Gloria (Copeland) was asked how she felt in the thick of the pandemic while full isolation was in effect.

“I'm not someone who can function or be happy without seeing my peers or my friends or something that brings me a little bit of happiness at least...Not being able to see my friends in person was really hard for me. I just couldn't get by.”

Hearing this from someone who just a year ago was excited and looking forward to going to school every single day, it becomes obvious that Gloria Copeland's relationship with socialization had taken a massive hit from being quarantined and separated from those who she could more easily relate to: her peers. School was meant to be a haven for young people to grow and develop together while kindling relationships with one another, and the execution of online school left students unable to interact halitly with their peers or their work. An excerpt from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention website mirrors this idea that adolescents are affected heavily by traumatic events and they struggle greatly with overcoming these difficult obstacles.

“Adolescence is a time of big changes. Adolescents can be particularly overwhelmed when stress is related to a traumatic event, expressed as excessive worry or sadness, unhealthy eating or sleeping habits, and difficulty with attention and concentration. Adults can provide stability and support to help them cope...”

Gloria has become a stronger person by overcoming these adversities and she wants people to learn something from her experience so they don't have to go through it alone. She wants others to avoid the mistakes that she made and have a headstart on problems she has already encountered and overcame. “I think it is very important for people struggling like me to understand that the thing you are going through is something that lots of people go through. When I've felt alone in my struggle I try to remember that everyone has been there at one time or another.” Gloria wants to let other young students that have been after the pandemic know that they are not alone. Letting others know that their struggles are heard and they are not alone in their fight with isolation can make the biggest of differences. Gloria (Copeland) wants her audience to feel understood and her story stands out as a beacon in the dark to those struggling silently. She has gone through isolation at the worst of the pandemics and is addressing that it's okay for people to struggle especially in times that are difficult. “Going through things is hard and really sucks sometimes, but it's all about how you react to them,” Gloria says near the end of our interview. “...you just have to believe that it's going to get better, and do what you can to help yourself get there” Shooting this message out to all of those who struggle, Gloria Copeland's story will forever be a testimony to those who struggle silently and heal invisibly, representing their pain by putting her own on display, and letting them know that they are not alone.