

Emma Lundin-Martinez

Emma Lundin-Martinez is a 17-year-old who lives with her mother in the Green Valley Ranch neighborhood of Denver. Emma is a member of the Dance Department at Denver School of the Arts and grew up in the religious education program at First Unitarian Denver. (The following is based on an interview with Emma as ghost-written in first person by the interviewer.)

The opening of 2020 was very different from the way the year progressed. I was in the 10th grade, a dance major at Denver School of the Arts and performing in a very busy competition season. I spent four hours dancing each day, between my major at school and competing with EVQ Elite Dance Studio. On Sundays, I ran my own dance program through a non-profit organization for children aged 3-14 to help make dance classes more accessible and inexpensive. I tend to be an extrovert, and my life was basically rehearsing and hanging out with my friends all the time outside of school.

The COVID shut down came on Friday, March 13 which was my brother's birthday. My Mom and I drove up to Fort Collins to see him, which ended up being the last time for a while. After what I thought would just be an extended spring break, school started up again but with everything online. Dance, academic classes, and studio work. At first, teachers and students struggled to figure out how to work online. All our grades for the semester ended up being pass/fail. Everybody was just doing their best to survive. The end of the 10th grade year was terrible.

I was used to living between my mom's and dad's house, where he lived with my grandma. When my Grandma contracted COVID in early April 2020, we decided it best that I stay with my mom to avoid getting the virus and to limit the risk to residents in the nursing home where my dad worked. My grandma came back really quick and recently celebrated her 90th birthday. Though Grandma recovered, my dad's cancer diagnosis worsened. My dad, John Martinez, died in August. It was really tough because I didn't get to see him much. We were all very scared at the time and I did not want to put him at any risk.

My mom took COVID very seriously. Early on, no one really knew what this new virus was or how it transmitted, so we wiped down all the surfaces we touched all the time, wiping every grocery item before we put it in the cupboard.

In the fall I returned to remote school. Over summer, teachers got the hang of organizing online teaching and acquired some better programs. Still, remote learning was not great. I'm good with technology, but I have trouble self-motivating when I'm sitting in bed all day on my computer. It is hard not to drift off to sleep and exhausting to be on a computer from 8:00 a.m. to almost 10:00 p.m. every day. All that screen time contributed to bad migraines. Thankfully, my major involves movement, and our house is not super-small, so I danced on Zoom from my bedroom and loft for hours each day.

School moved from remote to a hybrid model in February 2021. I look forward to returning to in-person learning for the first time after the April 2021 spring break.

Most of what I learned in 2020 was outside of school. It was a long year during which I spent lots of time with myself. I felt helpless that an unseen virus was shutting down the world and the only thing I could do was stay home. But it gave me a long year to focus on what small things I can do to help the world and make myself a better person.

It can be difficult to separate myself from other people sometimes. I have been figuring out my own personal morals and beliefs and how to not let that be changed by who I am around.

I grew up in FUSD, assuming fundamental values like Black Lives Matter that fit with those of my parents and church community. "I feel lucky to have grown up in our church, lucky for my parents. Both are roots of a lot of my core beliefs."

But in 2020, I was kind of shaken to learn that some of my friends, even some people in my family, do not share those core beliefs. The events of the year changed my awareness of politics. The presidential campaign was so divisive, and it separated so many people. This year caused such an angry divide between people. Even different beliefs about simple things like social distancing and masking for the pandemic caused hard feelings that still haven't been fully resolved. As a person, I've always tried to understand different beliefs and to look at both sides of an issue, which can always be challenging.

I am concerned that the huge political separation has seeped into people's morals and core beliefs, and that it may last a lot longer than the election. It has been so eye opening for me to really look at how different people are in our world. Hopefully, we can find a better way to move forward.

On a personal level, I worry about the lingering effects of this COVID year on my education. It was not a good year for learning. I worry that my education has been set back and feel super unprepared for things like taking the SAT tests for college or finals. I try to remind myself, though, that education is more than cramming my head full of standard information so I can perform well in standardized tests. Sometimes horrible experiences can make better people.

I feel loss of connection with friends I haven't been able to see in a year; I worry that we will not feel as close to some when we are able to see each other again. I feel that I lost a lot of social ability, and even get anxious at the thought of going back to school. Sometimes it is as though I forgot how to start conversations. I fear it may be nerve-racking to be back in the classroom and having to be prepared and presentable all the time. Generally, though, it is good to go back into routine and commitment, to start a more normal life after being in pajamas all year.

Family and friends helped me cope with the year in isolation. I also had confidence in knowing that we would eventually come out of this and be stronger, learn from it. I have a 2-year-old puppy and a cat who both have a lot of energy, and they were a big help.

My mom was really good support. My three brothers are all much older than me and we had not been as close before, so it was an unexpected blessing to get closer to them this past year. My mom and I have talked about what a blessing technology has been, letting us have a way to connect with people and do school online even if the circumstances are not ideal. It has been really important.

I got to see my boyfriend over the course of quarantine. That was an unexpected blessing. We got together right before everything shut down. It was important to have another person in my life supporting me through a tough year. Other than that, I haven't seen my dance or school friends. I miss hanging out with people, hugging people, touching, and dancing with them. That has been hard.

I feel lucky that our house is not too small, so that the third floor could be adapted to a dance studio and my mom and I were able to have our own spaces. We were lucky. Some people were stuck in really small spaces with their families and that was more challenging.

My routine through COVID has been to dance an hour and a half every weekday morning with school. I dance three hours each night and most Saturdays with my studio. On Sundays, I co-direct my non-profit dance company in Thornton to give young kids from low-income families access to dance. We maneuvered through the year to keep the dance company going because a lot of our students didn't have other activities, so it was good for them to have something to do outside of their houses. We're taking them to their first competition in April 2021. We have had to be super smart about keeping things safe with COVID.

Regarding the gains from this past year, I now value any time I get to spend with people. It has become real to me that time does not last forever. I hope that people will learn to be more mindful and open to understanding other people, where they come from, and why they hold their beliefs.