

Shan Kerrigan

Shan is a 13-year-old middle school student who lives with his mother and sister in the Baker Neighborhood of central Denver.

In March 2020, Shan Kerrigan was a 12-year-old student at Grant Beacon Middle School looking forward to spring break. His family -- a single mom who works as a physical therapist and a year-younger sister -- were just beginning to feel “normal” after waves of serial losses. Shan’s father passed away from early onset Alzheimer’s in August 2018. At four-month intervals, his grandfather passed away from cancer and his grandmother from old age. The consecutive losses were particularly overwhelming because there was not time to grieve one person before the next loss came, Shan remembers. They felt lucky to have the support of a strong community of friends and neighbors.

Of all the historical precedent-setting events of 2020, COVID was the one that pierced the rhythms of family and school for the boy. “I was in 6th grade, busy with school and about to go on spring break. Then the pandemic hit, and they extended spring break. I thought it was just for a few weeks, so it was kind of fun, honestly.”

And indeed, the break was fun. COVID did not seem so serious in this time before masks became commonplace for kids his age. Shan enjoyed his close friends in the neighborhood. “I hang out with three other boys I’ve known for nine years. Our families know each other. We can do really cool things together and still stay safe. You could call that podding, but it wasn’t in relation to school.”

“I don’t love the pandemic, but one of the things I do love *about* the pandemic is that it gave us a lot of freedom in school and work. I and some other fortunate people got to use that freedom to not feel so rushed.” Still, Shan is aware that others are not so lucky. “Even within my own family, people aren’t as lucky to have such great people surrounding them. My sister’s friends don’t live in the neighborhood anymore. I can bike to see mine. I am lucky.”

After the third week of spring break, school resumed online. It was okay, Shan says, though clearly cobbled together for the emergency stand-up. “All [of the technology platforms] were very new and teachers, students and parents were all struggling a lot. It was hard.”

Still, Shan definitely preferred the online version to regular school because of the freedom it afforded him. “Most students love the social interaction of regular school, but I already got a lot of that from my really close friends. My school had an advisory check-in every day; otherwise, you got class assignments and had until the next day to complete them. You could check into Google Meets to ask a teacher for help if you needed it, but otherwise could do schoolwork at your own pace.” That structure went on until end of the semester.

Summer break was challenging as Shan got a little bored. “I did have my friends, and we played ping pong, went to the park to play hide-and-seek, chatted together outside, and played with our nerf guns. Sometimes we would pick up lunch.” But the arcades and trampoline parks that had featured in the before times were shuttered because of COVID.

While he was nervous about returning to school, Shan approached the fall determined that he had done this before and could do it again. “They delayed starting school for a long time before returning remotely.” By January, students were divided into three groups, with one group selecting to stay home and two groups returning in person. Everyone got the same lessons and assignments. Shan chose remote learning for its added freedom. While this year’s foray into online learning was “more coordinated, with fewer miscommunications, and better academics,” Shan says, it hardly seemed robust. “It is good, much better, but not good enough for long-term.” Shan anticipates returning to in-person school for the first time in April 2021, when he will spend the fourth quarter of 7th grade back in the classroom four times a week.

“I’m kind of nervous to go back, but I want to return now. Two of the friends I hang out are there. I know that in 8th grade we’ll be fully back in person, so I want to get prepared.”

In the way of life, trouble does not go away just because you have had your fill. “My last grandma, my mom’s mom is really sick now and Mom has a lot on her plate. My sister is lonely. She hasn’t seen her friends in months whereas I see my friends every day.” But once again, Shan looks to the strength of community to help the family cope with life’s difficulties. “My aunt is in town and my uncle just came in to help my mom and aunt take care of my grandma. And we have friends.” So, the emerging teenager plunges forward with optimism, kind of nervous but ready to meet what comes next.