



2020

# NeON SUMMER

## NYC



Funding provided by:

**NYC** Young Men's  
Initiative

Photo by: Lynn, Cohort 26

# NeON Summer NYC

I found my experience with NeON Summer program to be interesting. I have been in summer programs before, but this is the first time I've done it online. I find it fascinating to be able to connect with my peers all over NYC at the comfort of my home. Every day we discussed relevant topics.

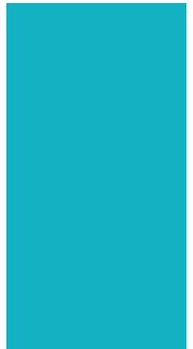
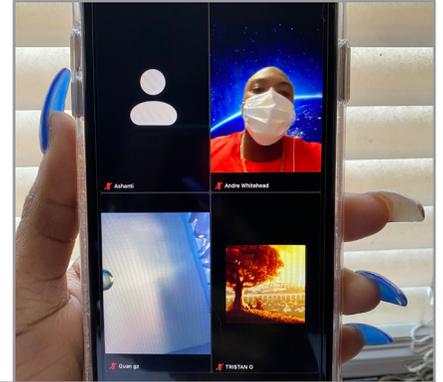
JAYLEN, COHORT- 9



Crystalie, Cohort 46



Ashanti, Cohort 46



## NeON Summer NYC: Overview

Along with the entire nation, young people in New York City had their lives turned upside down by the worst global pandemic in a century. And as the months of isolation wore on, a resurgent call for racial justice spread. In this historic context, NeON Summer NYC was launched to provide paid learning experiences, social connection, and opportunities for creative expression to some 2,700 New Yorkers between the ages of 14 and 24. These young people were selected from neighborhoods most affected by Covid-19 and those that are disproportionately impacted by the justice system.

A majority of the NeON Summer NYC participants were female (59%) and Black (40%) or Latinx (33%) and 18 years old on average. Many were from low-income households; twenty-seven percent reported household incomes under \$15,000 or between \$15,000 and \$50,000 (51%). Fewer than 25% lived in homes with incomes above \$50,000.

Covid-19 effected and without equitable mitigation will continue to effect young people's educational and vocational progress, mobility, and socialization. These young New Yorkers living at the epicenter of the pandemic endured weeks of isolation, often confined to their homes to avoid becoming ill. They frequently cited the

closure of public spaces such as parks (76%) and restaurants (65%) as having a negative impact on them. In addition, sixty-eight percent noted reduced public transportation had a negative effect on their ability to get around the City. The closure of high school (49%) and college classrooms (48%) required adjusting to new ways of learning for these youths as they adapted to virtual learning platforms.

In response, NeON Summer NYC supported important developmental needs—the formation of social bonds with peers, the pursuit of educational and employment opportunities, and the space to think about securing their futures and the pursuit of goals. By the culmination, NeON Summer NYC participants felt safe in their groups (96%); saw themselves as an important part of their cohort (81%), found their group leaders listened to them and cared about them (94%); and shared things about themselves that they would normally not share with others in a school setting (44%). They also learned important job readiness skills and how to manage their finances. And, together with other young people, they were able to share how Covid affected their lives.



Jalen, Cohort 26



Tristan Cohort 46

## Inside Voices: Helping Youth Cope During the Covid-19 Pandemic

When the pandemic hit and New York City school buildings were closed, young writers working with Youth Communication, a New York City non-profit dedicated to engaging young people through teen-written stories, continued to write. They turned their attention to their experiences during the pandemic, offering comfort to their peers who were experiencing similar struggles, while also helping adults understand what teens were going through during this difficult time.

A selection of these stories formed the basis for the six-week Social Emotional Learning program used as part of NeON Summer NYC to help youth talk about, write about, and process their own experiences, turning a stressful time into an important learning opportunity and celebration of resilience.

### Topics include:

- o Dealing with disappointment
- o Making responsible decisions around protecting yourself and others
- o Fighting discrimination
- o Managing stress
- o And more...

The collection of stories, reflections, poetry, and photos on the pages that follow is a lens into the work and writings by NeON Summer NYC participants!

# Highlights from our virtual NeON Summer NYC program July - August 2020



Lynn, Cohort 26



Brisa, Cohort 26



6

WEEKS

107

COHORTS

2,700

NEW YORKERS AGES 14-24



Rebekah, Cohort 26

# Dear Future Self

Dear Suyee,

It is alright to feel down and maybe even overwhelmed. And it is alright to feel scared about new or uncertain things. It is a very natural thing to feel and sometimes it can't be helped. Try to calm down by maybe taking some time away from the stressor or doing something else to keep your mind occupied. You can just take a break and let your mind cool off. Then when your mind is clearer you can come back to what problem you have and face it. Also, it is very probable to have bad days. Sometimes there are just days that are great and then ones that are not-so-great. It just happens sometimes and some stuff is just out of your control. Taking some time off and then coming back to fixing the issues that you can control can help ease your mind. And taking deep breaths and talking to friends or family about your issue can also help get a clearer perspective on things. You can do it, just remember tomorrow is a new day.

Sincerely,

Suyee

COHORT 24

**Write a letter to your future self to open the next time you feel stressed. Offer yourself some encouraging words and advice on how you got through it.**

Tristan, Cohort 46



# Sincerely, Me

## Bryant, Cohort 38

Dear Future Bryant,

I'm writing this to let you know that you can't always control what goes on outside, but you can always control what goes on inside. In times of stress, it's always best to keep busy, to plow your anger and your energy into something. Do your favorite hobbies like go to the park and play baseball, or workout, anything to distract you. Keep your head up and keep pushing you got this.

Sincerely, Past Bryant

## Shanjida, Cohort 24

Dear Shanjida,

How are you? What are you doing? There's so much to ask about you considering that you always tell people you're okay, you never really take the chance to open up about anything that bothers you or of any problems you're ever having in life. So now let's take a seat and really talk it out. What a hypocrite for telling others you care for that they can always come to you to vent out their issues, yet here you are always bottling up your emotions, rarely taking those chances yourself. But I don't blame you for acting this way. You're afraid that no one can give enough comfort or even understand your situation as much as you do. Sometimes it's better to talk to yourself about it though, at least let out your emotions from time to time. I know especially for you that these past few months ever since Covid-19 interfered with our lives, that it's affected you massively. You seemed more hopeless and down, and I'm sincerely sorry that two of your loved ones have been infected. But the great thing is that a month ago they've recovered, and things have gotten better slowly, has it not? I am just trying to give you the best advice at this point in your life, as you seem to struggle taking your own advice that you give to others. It's still summer though, that means you still have time. You have time to improve on yourself, achieve on any personal goals, work on your mentality, and so much more. I want you to take every day to use to accomplish anything set on your mind, even the littlest things like enjoying food. I want you to make yourself happier. I know that this pandemic keeps you away from seeing friends but, that is also why I want you to focus on yourself so much more, because before you know it, you won't have time for self care. It's okay to make mistakes, because at the end of the day you still are capable of taking the time to learn from them and therefore grow. I want to see growth in yourself as time passes by, I want you to appreciate yourself more rather than beating yourself up. Please treat yourself gently, I know how fragile you are when it comes to self love, care, anything involving you. Take care girl, I love you. Please try loving me more as well.

Sincerely, Shanjida

## Emediong, Cohort 39

Dear Future Self,

When stressed, think about the good things you have accomplished. Don't burn yourself out thinking a lot about things that are impossible. Make the impossible, possible and believe in yourself you got this. An advice for you when you feel stressed is to take a break and do something you love, dance, sing, cook etc to get your mind off of what you're going through!

Sincerely, Emediong

## Lisbeth, Cohort 39

Dear Lisbeth,

If you're reading this it's because you're feeling stressed. It's nothing new you always stress out a lot, so it's good for you to read this when you feel that emotion. Listen girl you need to learn how to be more chill and not be so concerned about something that won't be done in two seconds. Here's some things you can do when you are stressed, read the Bible or do Bible studies, listen to music, clean. I know how much you love to clean, sleep, go for a walk and last but not least cry if it gets that far. It isn't good to stress out but it's natural, make sure you do things that won't stress you out. When you feel like you're going to get stressed out, take a break from what you're doing. It's also good to talk to someone when you're stressed to relieve emotions. But lastly it's not the end of the world if you stress out, everyone does but just don't stress out.

Sincerely: Lisbeth, tu mejor amiga

PS: I forgot to mention, think about Dominican Republic.

## Josh, Cohort 24

Dear Josh,

The next time you ever feel stressed about anything just remember you don't need weights to work out. You have a hoop in your backyard and you have brothers who are willing to play catch with a football. Some encouraging words are no matter what happens you can change the outcome of it and there may be problems ahead, but I am capable of facing it head on. Some advice on how to persevere through tough times: It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer. Albert Einstein stated. In the Japanese Proverb there is a piece of text that states fall seven times and stand up eight.

Sincerely, Josh

Cohort 19



# Dear 2020,

You know  
 You really tricked me on New Years Eve  
 Oblivious laughter formed bubbles that floated in the  
 relaxed air  
 Toast went around for what is to come  
 Feet stomping on the ground as we land from our jumps of  
 celebrations  
 With flags gripped in our hands as our banner of hope

You really tricked me  
 You really had us thinking this was going to be a great year  
 and great new start  
 But I guess not  
 This is **not** what we were hoping for  
 2020 you have **ruined** us with Covid-19  
 Having the virus was the worst thing ever.

It basically took everything from us, from the restaurants and the movies and all the other hang out spots we enjoyed together

Adjusting to the new norm of wearing masks and social distancing has affected us all mentally and emotionally

Being away from friends and some family for many months has been tough

Our social life has all been washed

Not only have we been faced with this detrimental virus  
We are living our worst **nightmare** of racism all over again

They never lied when they said **history repeats itself over again**  
The ones that are supposed to be protecting us are killing us over and over again

Black men being killed one by one for no reason and the killers walk free

Black women being killed one by one in the comforts of their homes while the killers walk free

The system is **broken** and continues to fail us

We need **change** We need to raise our voice and march down the streets regardless of the ob-stacles that might stand in our way.

Hand by hand.

Politicians being used as distractions to blind us from the truth of what they are failing to provide into our community:

Together. Love. A way for us to truly live freely.

When 2020 only brung us distance.

How can we come together when society wants to separate us?

Divide us as if we aren't **one**.

2020 showed us the ugly **reality**.

There is no **normal**.

Life is what **we** make it to be.

We lived in fear of WW3

We watched as our president was impeached

SO many celebrities caught for sexually assaulting women

Plane crashes left and right

People losing their jobs

Hispanics being dragged away from their family to cages where there is no social distance

A boat filled with staff and passengers stuck on water for months because countries are shut down due to Covid-19

Dear 2020,

You really tricked us

We thought you would keep us in our comfort zones

But you exposed bones that were decorated as fences

Fences that have block us from seeing the truth about ourselves

Dear 2020,

You have exposed our trauma

You have **exposed** the ugly in America

You **exposed** the ugly of mankind

You have **stripped** us naked of all false pretenses

Our febrezed reality was taken apart and we were shown the garbage and carcasses that we so happily played with because it was " normal"

But there is no normal

You have exposed our weakness

Therefore, you have revealed our strength

You did this for us to wake up

For us to stop playing with the dead and instead call dry bones to life

**There will be unity**

**There will be togetherness**

**There will be justice**

**There will be an end to racism and systematic abuse of all kinds**

**There will be freedom**

**There will be life**

**There will be Love**

**There will be focus**

**There will be change**

Dear 2020,

**Though we curse you out,**

**We thank you for showing us the truth**

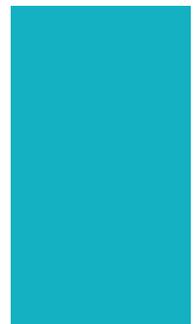
**Because now we know, standing up, fighting, educating ourselves, and doing our part to bring forth the healing we want to see**

**Starts with us**

**Sincerely,**

The Youth

COHORT 19



NEON SUMMER NYC | JULY - AUGUST 2020



# Knowledge is Power

Christopher, Cohort 5

There aren't many ways to learn about someone else's experience from the comfort of your home better than reading a book and educating yourself. Listed below are a mix of books that have expanded my consciousness and I hope they do the same for you.

In no specific order:

*Souls of Black Folk* by  
W.E.B. Debois

*The Autobiography of  
Malcom X* by Alex Haley

*A Raisin in the Sun* by  
Lorraine Hansberry

*Invisible Man* by Ralph  
Ellison

*The Audacity of Hope* by  
Barack Obama

What  
would an  
ally do?

**01. What would an ally say to a harasser?**

An ally would try to educate the harasser. If not then they'll inform them of why what they are doing was/is wrong.

**02. What would an ally say to someone who faces harassment?**

The ally would say to the victim that the harasser is not educated to make claims like these and to try to comfort them.

**03. What would an ally think about?**

An ally would probably think about what's right and what's wrong. They'd also think about how to face and defend others from discrimination.

**04. What are there other important characteristics that make someone an ally?**

In order to be a good ally, you should be able to see things from someone else's point of view in order to understand them better. Being a good ally means being open-minded.

COHORT 26

Jakilah, Cohort 31



# Covid-19

## Patrick, Cohort 1

Before the closing of NYC schools, I was preparing to get inducted into the National Honor Society for the Frederick Douglass Academy I. The NHS is for students who have a 90+ GPA and have participated in sports and extracurricular activities along with community service. I was also planning to take my girlfriend, who is a senior, to prom. However our plans were ruined. I was working tirelessly for the upcoming football season, I wanted to impress the scouts and prove some doubters wrong.

When everything got canceled I thought it would be temporary but it lasted longer than 3 months. Everything I had planned went down the drain, it was a huge disappointment and frustration. I kept asking myself "why me?" "why this year?" I started to feel hopeless after a while.

We were able to have the NHS induction on Zoom, I was able to do football drills by myself at the park daily but prom never came true. I couldn't take my high school sweetheart to her senior prom. I am currently a junior and I will take her to my prom next year. Although things weren't perfect, we found a way to make it work. I still don't know if we'll have a football season or not.

## Nyasia, Cohort 37

Before the pandemic started, I was thinking about going back to school to get my GED but that couldn't happen, no schools were open. After that my job closed so I wasn't even sure when I was going to be able to work again and it kinda made me feel down because I didn't know what was my next move. This interrupted me because it set me back from actually getting an apartment because the money wasn't following me and my case manager didn't see that I was doing anything.

## SyrTaejah, Cohort 40

During this pandemic, my life has completely changed from the way I eat, managing my weight/ figure. Necessities needed for everyday life were now limited to my access and realizing that for not only myself but others around. I couldn't keep track of the things I ate because there wasn't much to do. I just ate a lot and slept most of my days. I would constantly hate going outside because my guardian would constantly routinely check to make sure I had everything needed to protect myself before heading out, which couldn't be a headache as a young adult who always wanted to be on the go. Eventually I just stood home so she wouldn't worry.

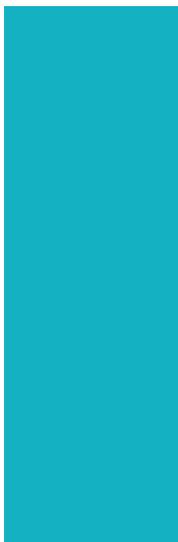
Write a story about a time when everything seemed to go wrong. Explain each event and how it made you feel. How did you deal with the situation? What happened in the end? End your story by explaining what you learned about yourself from the experience.



Rebekah, Cohort 26



Rebekah, Cohort 26



## Enso, Cohort 37

My educational plans were affected by the pandemic by causing me and countless numbers of other students to stay home and get the work done via internet. And that's a little frustrating for me because I personally work better in a classroom where the teacher gets in contact by just raising your hand instead of doing a zoom setting with them.

## Hector, Cohort 40

My Life has changed dramatically. I been isolated, jobless, and anxious. I'm feeling trust less from people that would sneeze. Can get enough of people nagging of the death toll.

Changes that affected me that now an face mask essential for me now. We have 6 feet social distance it's the law. Many people I know died.

I believe the Covid-19 lockdown created extra support for the black lives matter movement because a lot of people participate.

If Covid-19 reappeared in fall I would wear safety clothes and make sure I'm safe at all times.

## Christopher, Cohort 28

This pandemic affected me a lot these past months. Society has been a disaster and some people are barely surviving it. This experience is so different then what we're accustomed to and change scares a lot of people. I say there are a lot of pros and cons of this pandemic for me personally. The only pro I can think of is that we are staying safe. The cons are that now I can't see my friends and family anymore as I want to and school didn't feel the same virtually. So it's been kinda rough.

These past months I have been home doing the same things over and over. I start my day with school, then eat, sleep and play video games and repeat. At first it was cool but after the first month it was annoying. People were bored in the house all day and couldn't wait for this all to blow over and people wanted to go outside including me but nobody did because people were still scared. Being inside all day became depressing but people got through it one day at a time.

I can say one good thing came out of all this and that is people can spend more time with their family. I can say that I enjoyed the extra time with my family and it is nice to be with them. There were times during this quarantine where a lot of people still went outside unnecessarily and risked getting exposed. It was nerve racking at first because everyone was told to stay inside and if you do go outside wear a mask. A lot of people didn't listen and the death tolls were rising and I was scared because I thought this will never end. As time went by the number of deaths and infected decreased and eventually NYC went into phase 2 and we came along and now we're in phase 4.

This pandemic has taught me and showed me a lot. It showed me that us as a society can survive anything. I don't think that most of us has ever been through something like this, but we survived and we will never forget. I have become a better person because of this, I have learned to care about the safety of others and not just to care about oneself. This pandemic affected me mentally and emotionally, I now know that being kind and selfless is important.



NEON SUMMER NYC | JULY - AUGUST 2020



**Writing Prompt:** write a story about a time when you had to gather the courage to overcome fear.



# The Big Chop

Oladoyin, Cohort 9

I permed my hair ever since I was in the first grade. Perm was the only thing that seemed to work for my hair. It made it silky smooth for about a month and then it would become rough after that. When I was in the 9th grade, my sister introduced me to the natural hair movement. I was confused because I never knew about natural hair due to my mom perming my hair for nine years of my life, limiting my knowledge on my own hair under the hazardous chemicals. One day, my sister took me to the salon to watch her do "The Big Chop," when she cut off all her permed, damaged hair. I thought she was crazy for doing that. A couple of months after that, I saw her hair flourish into beautiful curls. I then contemplated if that's what I wanted to do. I was scared that my hair wouldn't grow and look like hers. I was scared that the little bit of hair that I had for nine years was going to be a waste of time. I was scared of what people in my school were going to say. Ultimately a week before I started my sophomore year, I big chopped all my hair. When I did it, I

was nervous. Seeing those scissors just cut the nine years of chemicals was overwhelming. After it was all done, I went home and started crying. I was still scared about what I was going to do and what people were going to say about me. Going back to school a week later was going to be an emotional hassle. I know people were going to think that I looked like a boy and they were going to question why I did what I did. However, it was the complete opposite. The fear of cutting my hair would've limited me to know nothing about my own cultural identity through my afro-textured hair. I was so used to seeing long, straight hair but having my natural hair made me feel like I stood out of the beauty standards the world has for women. After four years of being natural, I finally felt empowered and found self-love after sitting in that chair and cutting my hair. It felt like a new chapter in my life, and indeed it was. I am so glad I got over that fear.

**ANONYMOUS, COHORT 14**

# The Journey to Overcoming My Public Speaking

Have you ever had a fear within you that you held for a long time, that the moment to let it go finally comes seems relieving to you? Well, I've sort of felt that feeling a couple times. My biggest fear is being a public speaker and being in the dark. Today I will be talking about the time I would say I overcame my fear of public speaking, personally I am a really quiet and shy person that when it comes to public speaking, my fingers start to sweat, and my anxiety gets really bad. But you are all probably thinking that is normal, everyone gets these symptoms. But what if I told you that my nervousness for public speaking is very bad because my voice starts to sound shaky and if you are lucky enough to not witness, but there is always that one time where I actually will start to cry because my nervousness for public speaking is real bad. Until the day that I finally wanted to get rid of my fear showed up.

I remember it was during a school day, specifically during lunch time. I remember walking up from the basement floor all the way to the 4th floor, and let me tell you, I endured these number of flight of stairs for 3 years since the beginning of my high school time. Right after lunch I would have Advisory that just happened to be in the 4th floor and let me just say, it was hard, real hard. I had walked up during my lunch period and asked my advisor/teacher if I can practice presenting in front of her as a way for me to slowly overcome my public speaking without stuttering. And to my dear life she said, "Yes I will help you." I was so happy and excited to finally overcome my fear.

I walked up to the smart board and stood in front of it and slowly inhaled and exhaled before I started. But before

I started my teacher said, "It is ok to be nervous, just don't think about it, let yourself be free and let go, and you will slowly see yourself get comfortable". When she said this I followed what she said and let myself loose and find myself in a spot where I was starting to get comfortable and manage how I want to feel. Then the moment to start my presentation came, I slowly breathed in and made eye contact with my notes and my teacher before talking. And I tell you it was the most peaceful and happiest moment I have ever been in and felt. Right when I was done with my presentation, my teacher asked, "How do you feel?" I felt stress free and comfortable ready to present in front of my class.

After the bell rang, signaling that lunch was over and Advisory was about to start and as students gathered in the class getting ready to present one by one. When it came to my turn, I just let myself loose and breath in and out and carried on with my presentation. I started of with saying, " I decided to do my presentation on teen pregnancy" where I then later on explained all my facts, and stuttered here and there but not like before and also made eye contact with my teacher and audience. When I was done with my presentation all my classmates had clapped and said how much detail was added to my presentation. When everything was done and my teacher told me, "You did amazing" I was really happy and proud of myself.

The moment that I've been waiting for had come and my fear of overcoming public speaking came and it was just the start of my new adventure in life, and I will always and forever will be proud of myself.

**JULIA, COHORT 4**

**Write a story about a time  
when you had to gather the  
courage to overcome fear.**

**The fear could be “big”  
-- like an earthquake or  
pandemic or a small fear  
like public speaking.**

## Public Speaking

I remember when I was young, I was in middle school at the time. I was going to an after school program in my school (called Harlem Children Zone). It was a trip that day we were going to speak, not technically speaking about it but like seeing who can have the best arguments or who can build arguments about the topics we were talking about issues based on the world. They separated everybody in different groups and gave each group a topic to discuss upon but only one person in the group had to go up and do the talking for the group. We had 5 mins to discuss and then 3 extra mins to pick a person to speak for the group. Everybody chose me to speak cause at that time I was loud so active, good energy, always wanted to talk, but when it came to speaking in front of a crowd I was shy, sweaty, panicking and didn't know what to say. I started to get frustrated. But there was this one person in my after school program that I would always go to or ask for help or to talk or for anything. After I spoke to him I felt much better. I overcame my shyness and my group won the contest cause of me being able to speak on the topic and being able to build a great argument.

**KAHLIL, COHORT 27**

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# Overcoming Fears

Rebekah, Cohort 26



Adam, Cohort 46





## A Story About a Time I Needed Courage to Overcome a Fear

One story about a time when I had to gather courage in order to overcome a fear was back in 2014-2016 which was during the time of the Ebola outbreak. In the beginning of the Ebola outbreak before the disease got to America, the thought of catching it scared me because I didn't want to die from a disease. I felt like I was too strong to go out that way. So before I overcame the fear, the thought of just catching Ebola scared me at the time. But as time went on and as I kept seeing the people around just living life like it was normal and not living in fear, I told myself that I should do the same and not let the fear of catching Ebola stop me from living life to the fullest. So as I mentally convinced myself to live my life to the fullest I realized that that not only helped me with overcoming my fear of catching Ebola and dying from it but it also prepared me for the future with handling Coronavirus and it may still benefit me later in life when dealing with any outbreak. Therefore, that courage I got to overcome the fear was beneficial not only at that time but in future situations too.

**QUADEN, COHORT 4**

## Sickle Cell Anemia

Ever since I was born I had sickle cell anemia. I could say this is one of my greatest fears because it's my greatest weakness. At any moment my condition can render me sick and useless. Once I was old enough to learn the name of it I began to research what the disease was, how it ticks and how to beat it. Drink a lot of water, exercise, breathing exercises for the shortness of breath and just basically keeping a good physical and mental hygiene. When I was younger the pain made me cry a lot and gave me some sort of depression. I was so confused and didn't understand any of it. But my mother would massage the parts of my body that were in pain. Anytime of the day anytime of the night she's always made sure I was comfortable as possible. If things got worse she would sit in the hospital with me telling me how much she loved me. Nowadays I'm by myself eating away at the pain with whatever else makes me happy because to focus on this weakness is to give in to it. So I will not acknowledge it and keep trying to keep my body as strong as possible. Honestly, I always hear people talk about a couple of deaths from this at a very young age but I won't stop living. Too much to fight for too much to do.

**DAVID, COHORT 4**

**Write a story about a time when you had to gather the courage to overcome fear. Set up your story by describing yourself before you overcame that fear.**



## Hard Work

There was a time when I was in 10th grade and I wanted to test myself by taking a Regents test early. I was supposed to take this test in 11th grade not 10th. The test was an English Regents test I had to take and I thought it would be easy because the English class I have has given me a good score on my report card for the 1st semester... I was wrong. During the test I was so confident in my answers I was honestly sure I got a near perfect grade even before the tests were graded. I received a 64, 1 point away from a passing grade 65. Even though this was the grade, I did not let it affect me. Instead I took my experience from that test for the next year's English regents which I was supposed to take. I studied hard, and memorized many things about the test, and what type of tests they can give you. Rhetoric, argumentative, DBQ, all of them. The test I took was the same as the test I took early in 10th grade, but of course with different questions. Because it was so similar to the previous exam, I was able to run through it easily and receive a high grade of a 92. I never tried a test early though from this point on because I didn't want that type of luck to backfire on me someday, and actually ruin my score even more. Instead this showed me that experience and hard work can beat anything in your way.

ANONYMOUS, COHORT 39

## Hope

I deal with disappointment by having HOPE. Having hope for me is a key piece of dealing with disappointment because it pushes you towards positivity. Hope pushes you to believe that something better is always going to come; that whatever is happening right now in the present is just a little hiccup for what's to come in the future.

Disappointment is sometimes hard to deal with because it comes up as a form of truth. Although the truth is a great thing, the truth does hurt. It hurts because oneself has to come to terms with dealing with what they thought was positivity was really a form of negativity. In addition, dealing with what you thought was reality was just a false preservation of it. Lastly, because you as a person built up high expectations for that idea, person, or goal for it to not go as you planned it.

Some ways I've seen others deal with disappointment is by letting it go or looking past it. I've seen others pick up different hobbies and activities to push their feelings aside. Lastly, I've seen friends and family come together to push one's spirit up.

JASMINE, COHORT 9



**Write a story about a time when you didn't let disappointment defeat you. What was the disappointment? How did you deal with it?**



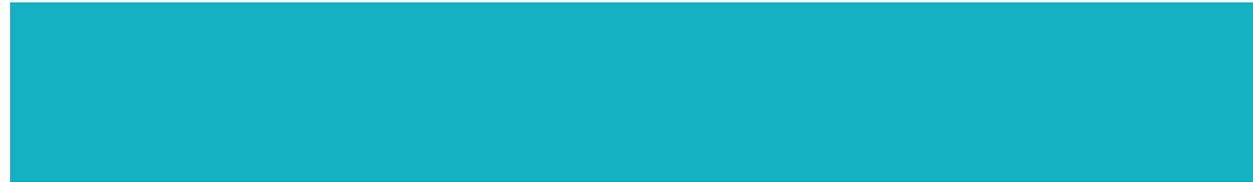
# Overcoming Disappointment

Crystalie, Cohort 46



Rebekah, Cohort 26

# Being Under Quarantine... The Pandemic



Since March, my life has changed unexpectedly. School came to a halt. Initially I was sooooo happy. Yay no school I said. One week, then two weeks, then I realized, this is not fun. I really missed my friends. I actually missed my teachers. I missed my mom waking me up. Rushing me to come on or we will be late. There are so many simple things and some that I thought were annoying. I miss so much now. Thankfully no one in my family has been sick.

During this pandemic, I reached my 16th birthday. I had dreams of a big celebration with my friends. Going on a trip. I wanted to go on a shopping spree. I didn't get any of that but I actually realized that those things are not that important when your life is at risk. This quarantine although not fun, has taught me to appreciate the simple things. My hair and nails not done stressed me out but natural beauty

is so much better. I have started to read more. Books can take you to places you have never been. I spend more time thinking which allowed me to realize that opinions of people are not that important.

Many people have died, have no money, and my mom pointed out that some families can't even afford medicine or a trip to the doctor. I am so fortunate and grateful that this does not apply to us.

This quarantine has not been ideal and even scary at times, but maybe we all needed a break. I really want things to go back as they were with everyone using this quarantine as a lesson. Be kind, be considerate, appreciate each other, and empathy is so important too.

**CODIE, COHORT 28**



Oladoyin, Cohort 9

# WHO ARE YOU? I ASK

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR ROOTS  
DON'T BE IN DENIAL, WALK DAY  
BY DAY PROUD OF YOUR SKIN  
AND HAIR AND BODY GOD  
BLESSED YOU WITH.

WALK DAY BY DAY IN SILENCE,  
WALK DAY BY DAY NUMB TO THE  
INJUSTICE AND DESTRUCTION

DRIPPING BLOOD, DRIPPING  
SORROWS FLOWS DOWN THE  
RIVER NEAR THE COTTON  
FIELDS. LOOK DOWN AT YOUR  
HANDS, WHO BLOOD IS ON YOUR  
HANDS?

WHO YOU ARE DOES MATTER,  
THE WORD "N\*\*\*\*\*" HOLDS SO  
MUCH

PENT UP WITH HIS ARMS  
BEHIND HIS BACK, HE SPEAKS "I  
CAN'T BREATH I CAN'T BREATH"

THE REPETITION OF HIS WORDS  
HAVEN'T STRIKED YOU IN THE  
EARS HARD ENOUGH MAYBE A  
BLOW TO THE HEAD WILL.

**ask your self why?  
why did i do this?  
you ignored, you  
choose to ignore**



fa5053817 FreeArt

## Omorogieva, Cohort 13

There are countless videos of cops running over young women with police horses, pushing down old men for no reason, rushing into crowds of peaceful demonstrators, and raining blows on young people and reporters. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into the neck of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. Police are supposed to protect the populace but according to Mapping Police Violence, 598 people have been killed by officers in 2020 as of June 30th. This number is very likely to increase as there is also rarely any punishment for the police who commit this crime. These cases have reinvigorated the debate around police brutality and racism. Systematic racism and excessive force have spread throughout the States and their police forces calling for a complete overhaul or dismantlement of police. Although the police have a large budget that could be dismantled and used to help other causes, police play a major part in the safety of many and therefore a complete reform involving changes to their current budget, training, funding and organization is a must in order to keep people safe and establish order.

## Ernest, Cohort 13

Throughout the events that have been taking place from the brutal death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor both were killed by police officers, this shows even though those two murders took place we can still stand up as the African American men and women we are. In the program I learned we can overcome the race issue with police just by complying and being respectful. Not all the time we have to assume that "oh they pulled me over because I was Black." It doesn't always have to be like that, some cops can be respectful and some can be aggressive plus disrespectful all we have to do is comply with them aggressive or not to prevent getting shot or choked we have to listen to them regardless the circumstances. If the cops stop you just speak to them calmly without the disrespect because that's when they will find you as a threat.

Jakilah, Cohort 31



Jakilah, Cohort 31



Jakilah, Cohort 31



# Embrace My Color

## Embrace My Color

They don't see beneath my skin,  
 Where I have qualities that have not been seen.  
 Color is just a noun,  
 But someone like us in you can never be found.  
 Don't lay me down on a bed because the color of my skin  
 is not what you expect. Instead treat me with respect,  
 The same you show everybody else but hate to admit.  
 I am as beautiful as they are,  
 I am as worthy as you all.  
 So when you see me embrace my color  
 And let me lift my head.  
 For it is what we most use but you can't, because  
 You're focused on the color of my skin instead.  
 I'd love for us to be equal,  
 But you're subtracting us rather than  
 Receiving all of us for what we bring is peaceful.  
 So when you see me embrace my color,  
 And let me lift my head.  
 when I say I have done nothing don't see that as a threat.  
 For I am telling you I've known the tears I've shed.  
 Fear is the guest that invites itself inside me, every time I  
 hear your voice besides me. "Put your hands up."  
 My body stops, my head falls down, but all my mouth can  
 do is shout  
 "Please don't shoot me"  
 Because in your hands I fear death  
 For you and your equals have made that your quest.  
 So when you see me embrace my color  
 And let me lift my head.

GLORIBEL, COHORT 30



Jakilah, Cohort 31

## Second chances

Second chances don't come often,  
 But when they do I take them as a dozen.  
 I remember a day I messed up,  
 For a second chance I asked,  
 A second chance I got.  
 I knew this time I had to apply pressure,  
 How could I not if this second chance came  
 as a treasure. An opportunity to redeem  
 myself.  
 I saw that as a nut in a shell.  
 Grab it and apply it.  
 Cuz why wouldn't I after all I tried,  
 One or two it was still something that I  
 bribed.  
 For a second chance I asked,  
 A second chance I got.  
 Wrong things happen but I rather make  
 them right.  
 For you never know when a person a second  
 chance could invite. Reverse the darkness  
 into light,  
 And persevere such as bright.  
 For a second chance I asked,  
 A second chance I got.  
 For forgiveness I asked for redemption I  
 begged,  
 I was given something that could not be  
 said.  
 The person had forgiven me for turning the  
 assignment late, I was quite in a happy state.  
 I was given a second chance to finally  
 upgrade.  
 For a second chance I asked,  
 A second chance I got.

**GLORIBEL, COHORT 30**

## I am a solider

I am a solider  
 I've been to war and back  
 I feel like I've seen it all in my time  
 And have not evening lived yet

I am a solider  
 Life goes up and down  
 Whatever you do comes back around  
 So I tend to be positive bout my situations  
 So I don't have to frown

**ROBERTO, COHORT 37**

David, Cohort 9



David, Cohort 9



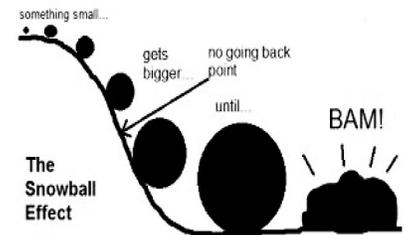


## Snowball

A little girl forms a wet pile of soft snow into a ball  
 Rounding and shaping it into a perfect size  
 However, the perfect size is no longer perfect

She wanted more  
 She wanted it to be biggest and best  
 snowball there was  
 Rolling it on the snow, down the hill  
 Its size slowly increasing  
 Bigger and bigger  
 She starts smiling with joy  
 The snowball doesn't need her now  
 It rolls itself down the hill as it picks up speed

Faster and faster  
 Bigger and bigger  
 The speed uncontrollable  
 The snowball grabbing everything in its sight  
 Dirty leaves  
 Yucky thick mud  
 A broken twig  
 The beautiful and simple little snowball was no longer beautiful  
 An angry avalanche pushing down and



grabbing everything in its way  
 People frightened and running

Faster and faster  
 Bigger and Bigger  
 BAM!

The scary avalanche crashed into a brick wall  
 Turning into a wet pile of snow like it originally was

A little girl forms a wet pile of soft snow into a ball  
 Rounding and shaping it into a perfect size  
 Well— it wasn't perfect, but it was the best she can make on her own  
 And she was happy

**YOSRA, COHORT 15**



David, Cohort 9

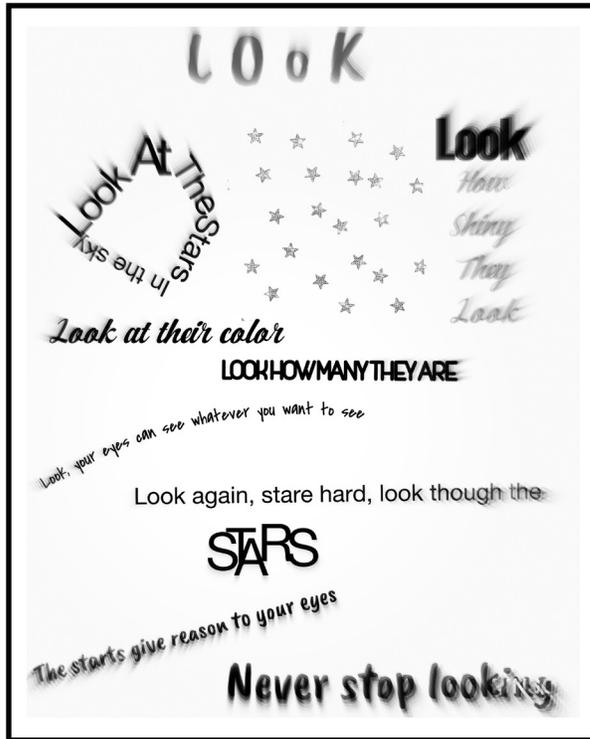
## Overcoming Challenges

Life is like climbing up a mountain  
 It will never be a smooth slope  
 There will always be ups and downs  
 No matter what, you should always have hope  
 Always have a smile on and never frown  
 Times may seem tough  
 You may fall many times  
 But it's about how you get right back up  
 It will never be an easy climb

**ANONYMOUS, COHORT 43**



David, Cohort 9



## The Roller Coaster Called High School

The stress of high school is rough  
 Remembering everything is tough  
 Meeting new people and remembering names  
 Getting bad grades with no one to blame  
 Studying all night and getting ready to grind  
 No mistakes, don't want to be left behind  
 Get your grades up it's easy now  
 Big test coming up, you can't fail now  
 Passing the test was a piece of cake  
 The good grades were easy to rake  
 Friends have already come and go  
 What next year has in stored, who knows.

LEMONT, COHORT 18

## Sidelined

The one that knows me, does not see me as  
 a reflection of him  
 An extension of his ego, an undead limb  
 The more I hold him close, the further he  
 pulls away  
 I can't keep his eyes steady, I can only hold  
 an idle gaze  
 The sounds that play over in my head, when  
 my mind ponders upon him  
 Is the sound of canaries screeching, the  
 unrivaled songs of the undead  
 I got to find my peace of mind, the peace I  
 left behind  
 In a shallow grave were my body rots,  
 welters and decays  
 My tombstone reads, "here lies a friend, a  
 confidant, and lover"  
 Three words were all he gave  
 Not one flower, not a single tear  
 For the rose that he plucked, broke and  
 buried  
 I cannot recall the pain of dying, as it was my  
 love for him that undid me  
 I relinquish my power the day I stopped  
 seeing myself as whole  
 For loving you and losing you has helped me  
 find myself  
 And I am forever in your debt.

TIANA, COHORT 43

# What is love

My love, you inspire me to write.  
 How I love the way you smile, dance and  
 joke around.  
 Invading my mind day and through the  
 night.  
 Always thinking of setting the next mood

How do I love you? Let me say the ways.  
 I love your innocence, heart and smile.  
 Thinking of you fills my days.  
 My love for you is past many states

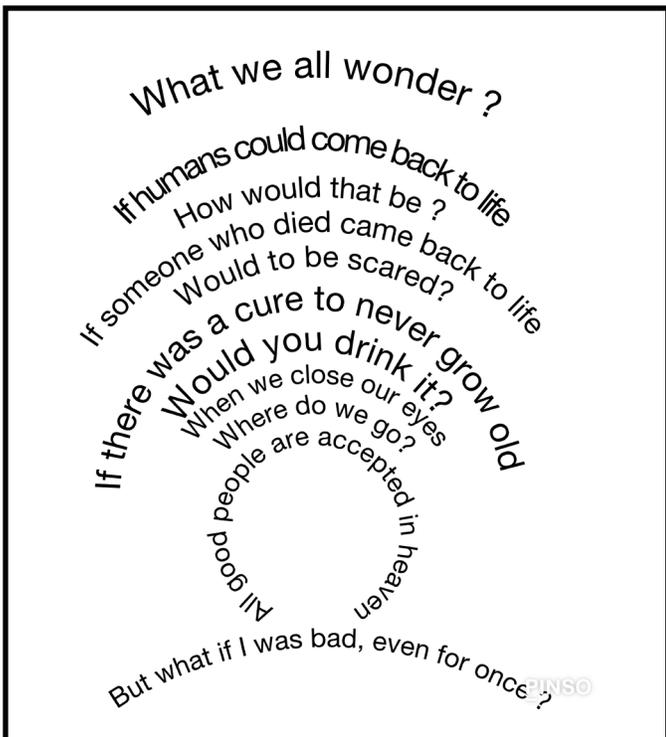
Can't compare you to anything your the  
 brightest in the room  
 You are more alive, steadfast and funny.  
 Calm sun heats the sunny peaches of  
 June,  
 And summertime has had its time.

Now I must lay and cry with a quiet heart.  
 Remember my loved words while we're  
 apart.

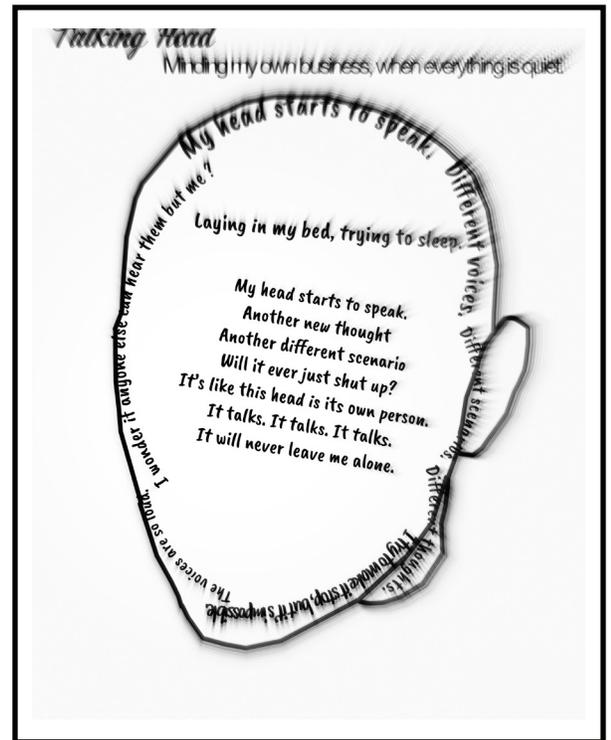
KRIS, COHORT 13



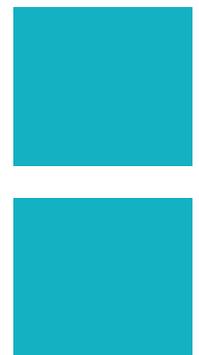
Write a poem  
 about a time  
 when you  
 overcame a  
 challenge.



Free Verse Poet

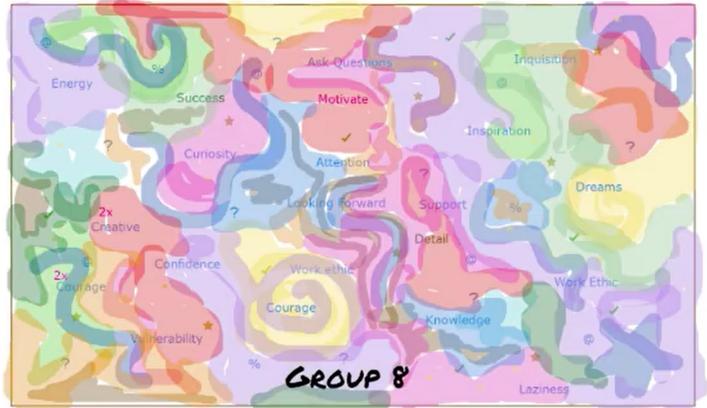


Free Verse Poet



Highlights from The Made in NY Animation Project. To see animations created as part of NeON Summer NYC, click [here](#).

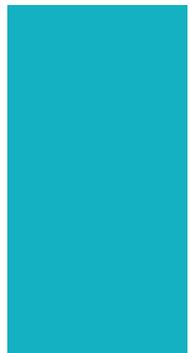
Cohort 8



Cohort 11



# The Made in NY Animation Project: NeON Summer NYC Edition



Cohort 13



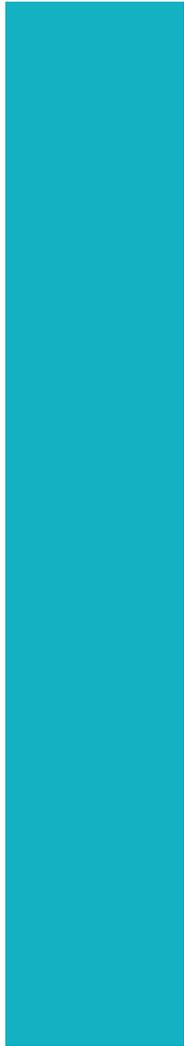
Cohort 26



Cohort 35



Cohort 5





**Write a story about a fictional character who is facing the unknown. Show the impact it has on them and what they do about it.**



Jakilah, Cohort 31

Dear diary,

It's Sarah, I'm currently 16 and it's Saturday 1:19 AM. I'm currently dating a 18 year old boy and everyone seems to have a problem with me. My family thinks he's a bad influence for me but honestly he helps me with a lot. My family don't know about but I learned not to stress over others opinions. So I continue to be with him and live my life but the problem is I'm pregnant and I'm scared.

We have talked about if situations like this happen and what to do but it is easier said than done. Taking care of a baby requires things we don't have like a job, house and a village ...but I'll tell him in due time.

It's now Tuesday, 1:12 PM. I just told my baby daddy/boyfriend what the hell is going on and honestly his reaction scared the hell out of me. He just looked at me and said well I'm taking a walk. I don't know if I should cry or slap him but instead I just continue to act like I'm not bothered by his reaction.

It's Wednesday now and he's back home. We decided not to keep the kid. I guess it's for the best.

To future Sarah, never love again.

**TANJLA, COHORT 2**

# Hurt and the Healer

I went through a time where I experienced hatred towards the world, and one day I decided to write a letter to my younger self and even though it took only five minutes, it took a lifetime of hurt and a walk through pain. I've been a malicious child once I hit fourth grade and I kept getting into trouble at home and in school. I remember I had these beatings from my parents that I can never forget, and I know after each beating the less I cared and the more I got into trouble. My parents hoped that I'd learned my lesson the first couple times when I either stole, lied or got disrespectful.

I've kept asking myself why? The question that my parents thought was never far away. But, in reality healing never came from the explained. Always I said to Jesus to please don't let my troubled heart go in vain because He's all I had, all that remained. So there I was, what was left of me; this is when glory met my suffering.

I'm alive that's how I felt after, even though a part of me has died. He took my heart and He breathed it back to life. I ran into His arms opened wide; when the hurt and the healer collide.

But there would be times when I would feel tempted to go back to my evil ways. The pain was just so deep that I could hardly move. I just had to keep my eyes fixated on Jesus. I asked Him to take hold of me and pull me through, so there I was all that was left of me after that invisible battle I went through. Glory kept meeting my suffering and everyday I said Amen... I thanked the Lord because without Him where would we all be, where would we all stand. It's that moment when humanity is overcome by majesty and mercy takes its rightful place. I was glad that I survived my troubled experience because of Him and through Him I'm alive.

I would love everyone to know that Jesus is always in disguise. He can live through any of us to see how others are or who we are. God only knows where to find you, God only knows how to break through, God only knows the real you. There is a kind of love that God only knows.

"Just cast your cares on Him."

Jesus come and break my fear, wake my heart and take my tears and find His glory even here. This is when The Hurt and The Healer collide.

**ERIC, COHORT 41**

# Being Okay with the Unknown

The sudden unpleasant sound of my alarm startled me from my sleep. Still half-asleep, I groped for the annoying item on my bedside table, having a faint sense of accomplishment fill me after successfully turning it off. I groggily sat up in my queen-sized bed, and as with any other person, took a few seconds to let my eyes adjust to my blue LED light filling room. Then, I stood up. And promptly sat back down. And just like every other day, I took a few minutes to stare at the cream wall opposite my bed and contemplated calling in sick. Decision made, I stood up, turned off my artificial lighting, and staggered to the bathroom guided by the natural light of 6:47 a.m.

Today will be a good day, I concluded as I scanned my outfit in the mirror. Despite my haste, I couldn't deny that the last minute outfit of red with hints of brown created the perfect contrast to compliment my dark skin beautifully. After tossing a pair of flats into the already numerous contents of my bag and grabbing a granola bar, I left my apartment with confidence in my step.

True to my word, the day was still going great and I got to work safely and on time. The latter of which was a rarity for me. The first half of the day seemed to pass by in a blur and suddenly I was gathering my things to go to lunch. I was on my way to Sasha, my lunch buddy's seat when I was accosted by one of the security officers in my building. Not quite sure how to avoid him without being rude, I stood to the side to let him pass and only barely managed to hide the shock on my face when he stopped right in front of me. Um, personal space? Outwardly, I smiled politely and said, "Josh, please move." He refused to and instead, motioned to my desk. I noticed a package that had not been there before and tried to sidestep him. Only for him to move as well. Frustrated, I forgot all socially acceptable mannerisms and shoved past him, rolling my eyes. I grabbed the package from the desk and ripped at its packing paper greedily before remembering I was at the office and so slowing to a more decent pace. A letter fell out, leaving a bulky envelope in what little was left of the wrapping paper.

"What is it?" Emerald asked as she slid her chair over. I knew she was curious. Everyone at the office that knew I had a

package was. And it'd be simply hypocritical to blame them as I'd be too in their shoes. However, there was this unspoken rule about the privacy of an individual that was there to prevent people from asking such questions. "I don't know," I replied. Because I truly didn't. Glancing at the clock to make sure I'd have enough time left over for my actual lunch, I placed the envelope in my bag and skimmed through the letter. The words only registering in my brain when I was done and halfway to the elevator. I had a house? In LA? Lunch immediately forgotten, I turned around and went back to my desk as I began mentally planning my relocation plan.

I was exhausted and excited when I was done with my plans. I knew I was moving too fast, but I was too anxious to leave my current surroundings. I was so sure and so deeply invested in the success of my plans that I did not consider any variables that might upset my carefully laid plans. I set off with great excitement with not much of an idea of what awaited me.

On arriving at my supposed house in LA, I was shocked to find it already occupied by individuals who did not seem willing to give it up. My plan was to get to LA, move in, and start school the next day. As a result of this new and surprising situation, all my plans fell through. I instantly had to decide what to do, I couldn't stay in the house because of its current occupants, I hadn't booked any hotels because I was supposed to stay in the house, I couldn't find any hotels close by because the house wasn't in such an area, I did not have my car, I wasn't in possession of any physical money. I began panicking.

I was always told to have backup plans and I usually did but ironically, the one time I didn't was the one time I needed it. Panicking wasn't the best thing I could have done, but it was what I did. When I was done going crazy, I decided to test how good the graces of my house occupants were and I requested a room. They let me stay and even took me to school the next day. I learnt to always have a backup and prepare for things that seemingly may not happen but are possible.

# How Has Covid-19 Affected Those Around Us?

## Kevin, Cohort 40

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the new normal that I observe around my community is a heightened sense of personal space and new boundaries. The majority of people are mindful to use masks and to social distance whenever possible, hypervigilance is observed when people shame others who disregard the use of masks or those who refuse to respect the space of others. There has also been a change in the way society has seen how dangerous a virus can be, how far and widespread the pandemic has hit us across the nation and across the globe.

Recently within the past few months, the movement Black Lives Matter has been the center of attention to many news outlets with many protests and marches dedicated to remembering those who have been unjustly murdered by the police. With many citizens criticizing the movement, especially during a time where the pandemic is still moving across the nation. With so many warm bodies so close to each other during actions and protests, many worry that the infection would have been exacerbated by these large gatherings. I do believe that even with Covid-19 spreading during this time, the movement of Black Lives Matter did succeed in gathering and focusing the attention to the deaths and the abuse of citizens suffering at the hands of the police. Possibly, if Covid-19 would have been contained before it surged across the population, the movement would have been far more expansive than the turnout we have seen in the past few months.

Finally, returning back to the situation we are all facing, Covid-19 has a possibility to reappear and cause another lockdown that everyone will have to face in order to prevent a mass of infections of the virus. In order to prepare for this possibility, I will have adequate food and water/beverages stored to last a couple of months at the very least. I will also work in an industry that is necessary to remain open so that I can continue living according to my need. The only other way to prepare for the is to be actively informed and armed with information to keep ourselves safe.

## Christopher, Cohort 28

Pandemics end up causing increases in medicine and the healthcare industry which there would be high demands for different products or even out of stock for certain products. When a pandemic outbreak happens hospitals are being overpopulated, at the beginning of any pandemic researchers are trying their best to find a cure. The Spanish Flu was very similar to this pandemic, it was reported that doctors were too busy trying to fight the disease to treat and record the overflow of patients. Drug stores businesses increased during the Spanish Flu while other businesses were failing. Hospitals were so overcrowded that other buildings had to be converted into hospitals.

Although the healthcare industry was booming it suffered shortages of employees just like other industries whether the business was good or bad, when the physicians themselves contracted the flu some hospitals were staffed with medical school students just like this pandemic Covid-19. Over the past months it was reported June 6, 2020 more than 600 health workers from different departments have died with the headline "Nearly 600 and Counting US Health Workers Have Died of Covid-19."

Government's role during a pandemic is informing the public. The Department of Health is a government led department responsible for preparedness and response. DOH also known as the Health Department is supposed to inform and help the public, but in some communities even the Health Department was shut down due to lack of workers from people that contracted the disease.

With that being said while living through this pandemic a lot of deaths occurred from lack of information, commutation and also cooperation I also notice that even while families began to quarantine the statistics as far as death still continue to raise in certain community naming a few East New York (Brooklyn), Corona (Queens), Highbridge (Bronx), Washington Heights (Manhattan), Arden Heights (Staten Island) these statistics clearly can prove there is a great need for better healthcare in these communities. A few ways this pandemic affected me is not being able to go to certain places because of the closure of businesses another way this pandemic greatly affected me is the reasoning of having to wear a mask anywhere and everywhere we go. I think this pandemic took a big toll on our nation in its entirety this can be shown with the evidence I provided.

# Changing the System

THOUGHTS ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

NEON SUMMER NYC | JULY - AUGUST 2020

The failure of the education system is the first topic my group talked about when I came. This is something I feel like needs to be spoken about more because a reformation needs to be made. My group and I feel as though the education system leaves out a lot of major important history of some minority groups. What brought this conversation, was that a lot of my fellow group members and I had not had a clue as to who John Lewis was. I personally had never known his name until after he died which is shameful as I had learned he was a Black civil rights activist. I feel like we shouldn't have to research on our own time things

that school should be teaching us. We go to school for 6-7 hours 5 days a week and some straight A students, such as myself don't know a lot of our history. Another thing is, school should teach us basic life fundamentals. There are people who graduate high school that don't know how to simply pay taxes. The education system also is very stressful for a student. Colleges look at AP classes, so students want to take them. AP classes are not easy and it negatively affects many peoples' mental health. I believe a change to the education system will make schools a better learning environment.

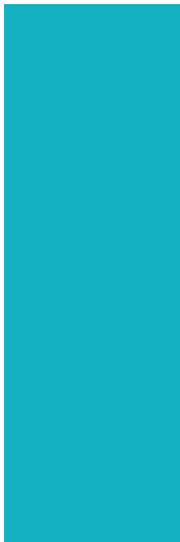
**EBEHITALE, COHORT 13**



Oladoyin, Cohort 9



Jasmine, Cohort 9



## Jayden, Cohort 20

Happiness is a feeling that I feel we will ultimately never feel or understand until we pass away and enter the kingdom of God. My perspective of the word "happy" that people use on earth, is temporary excitement. Happiness to me should be an everlasting emotion. A lot of things can make us excited temporarily. For example, things like eating food, seeing a favorite cousin, going out with friends, having a girlfriend, etc. All of these things could make you temporarily happy in the moment you first find out about them. Then, you just go on with the rest of your day as you normally would. Doing something you've wanted to do since a kid, like maybe you wanted to be a hotel owner. You may enjoy being an entrepreneur, but you also take the bad and stressful things that come with the job. Such as paperwork, slacking employees, salary pay, etc. So your so-called "happiness" starts to form a dent, to the point where you feel your job is just a regular job and you can't wait to retire. Some things that make me personally "happy" are when I play cards with my family or I'm playing basketball. As well as when I hang out with my friends or getting a good score on a test.

## Anonymous, Cohort 24

In today's session we first introduced ourselves, the pronouns we prefer and our favorite desserts as new people came into it. Afterwards I baked chocolate chip cookies in front of the whole class, by showing myself make it and even showed them the recipe I used. I love all the support they gave while I was baking and I enjoyed eating some cookies myself. :D

Anonymous, Cohort 24



## Jacqueline, Cohort 21

A time when someone was really listening to me was when I was talking to my best friend about my breakup. When I noticed she was really engaged in the conversation and really was listening to me, I felt safe and wanted. It felt good to know that I wasn't talking to myself and it made me happy.

Sometimes I can get distracted when listening to someone. There are times I have a short attention span which isn't useful when someone is ranting to me. Somethings I try are looking them in the eye or repeating what they say to myself in my head. This helps me concentrate on the topic.

## Victoria, Cohort 21

One time when I fell into depression, my mom had come to my house and had a talk with me, and in return she allowed me to speak or vent and she just sat there actively listening to what I had to say. My mom and I usually crash heads, but having her there just listening made me feel a sense of comfort and support that I could confide in her, and that when I'm at those low points or need advice I can come to her.

One thing that can get in the way of active listening may be outside noises, or if you may disagree with them your attention span will shorten. However, some strategies that you can try are to just remember to always be as respectful as you can and acknowledge that if you are speaking you would want them to listen.

# Active Listening

# Stress & Boundaries

**Write a poem  
about a time  
when you  
overcame a  
challenge.**

## Kevin, Cohort 21

When you're stressed out it feels like the world is coming over you, you also could get mad. What happens to your body is you could fidget. Know what happened to you emotionally. You could feel mad, sad or down.

A healthy way to deal with stress at work is have a snack, take a break or listen to music, at school, take a walk, drink water or use the restroom.

One thing you could do before school/work is eat breakfast so you don't get stressed out or hang out with a couple friends before entering work/school.

What my friends do to help me not get stressed out is they don't get on my nerves and when I am stressed out they try to make me happy.

## Jamie, Cohort 21

I'm on a baseball team and a filming production group. The boundaries of each group is respect each other, never take a joke too seriously, tell the person if you don't like what they said, never fight each other for any reason at all, and allow an outsider to control your actions within the group. These boundaries are really the same because my friends and group associations are like my family so I use my family boundaries with them.

I communicate my boundaries with others by always telling them what I don't like in a friendship, this allows the person or people to know when to stop doing something or what not to do with me and what I allow them to do with me.

When someone crosses the boundaries I give them, I normally tell them "can you stop I already told you I don't like that," and when that person or people continue to cross that boundaries I don't be friends with them anymore because it's a respect thing.

## Shanel, Cohort 21

I am on a dance team, NeON Summer, and I have a SMALL group of friends, it's not much different because in all groups I feel like I can be myself, everybody jokes, and it's all cool.

I communicate my boundaries after somebody tries to do something I don't like I'll move or put distance between us, if they don't get it then I'll say no "ion like that" and walk away.

When my boundaries are crossed after you know what they are, you know what I'm not willing to do but try it anyway I casually stop messing with you. If you cannot understand then you don't have to do whatever you would like I just will not be in the picture.

# Thank you

Ryan, Cohort 5



Dear Ms.Ortiz

I'm very thankful for your help with me and my family for giving us many programs and helping my mother and I against my father. Without you we would be in the hands of my abusive father and still be poor as we know it. Not only that but you also help us on food during the pandemic for my family. I really wish I can pay you back after all of this and hope you're doing fine during this pandemic. I can really say "You change my life."

Love,

**Anonymous**

COHORT 41

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you for taking care of me and continuing to support and love me throughout the mistakes I've made and this plague that has occurred. I appreciate everything you guys do for me. Thank you for still letting me go out with my friends too.

Sincerely,

**Sam**

COHORT 37



## Dear Mom and Dad,

This is Tahlya and I want to thank you for the opportunities you've provided for me and your constant support. I remember when I was in 5th grade and we had career day where students dressed up as if we were working at our dream job. You got me a blazer and a green button down shirt because at the time I wanted to become a motivational speaker. I thought that job was so cool, but of course it changed. Then I briefly wanted to become a carpenter. When I told you guys you, dad in specific was really excited about that and began to tell me about different types of tools you use for your job, and when you would work on small projects for mom you'd let me watch. But mom, you just let me go with it because you knew I was artistic and thought it could be something I would enjoy. But really I just wanted to be a carpenter because I liked wood. Then in 6th grade I realized that I wanted to study psychology but also do something related to art on the side. You both were supportive of it even though you knew I changed interests a lot.

And now, I'm about to go to college and I'm finally getting the opportunity to study psychology, something I wanted to explore for over 7 years but never had the

opportunity to. I'm so grateful for all the opportunities you've given me and that you continue to give me, especially as I move to this next stage of life and go to college. There are some parents that aren't supportive of their child's dreams and that force them into a box, but you have never done that to me. You've always allowed me to think for myself, express myself how I want, and learn for myself. Some children aren't granted such great parents that allow them room to grow like you two have done for me, so I'm eternally grateful and someday hope to give back to you, and thank you for being amazing parents that took the time to encourage me to become who I want to be rather than forcing a dream on me.

With love,

**Tahlya**

COHORT 33

**Write a letter of gratitude to someone who has helped you during the pandemic. Be sure to include specific actions they took and how those actions impacted your thoughts and emotions.**

Oladoyin, Cohort 9





# A Place of Positivity

In post-program focus groups, participants told the story of their NeON Summer NYC experience. Overall, it was a story of growth and resilience among young New Yorkers facing extraordinarily challenging circumstances. In the words of one young man, the program served as a "a place of positivity" during difficult times.

## **How to Find a Summer Program—One that Pays**

A primary motivation for applying for NeON Summer NYC was the money the young people could earn for participation. Particularly during the economic downturn, financial need among the youths and their families was a heavy burden. Many youths made specific references to the need for money for basic family needs or for school fees and tuition. "What drew me into applying was probably the money because I wanted to have something to save up just in case my family might need it." Or as another young man stated, "What motivated me was that we would learn stuff, and we would relate to our lives. And, the group - the group was kind of open. Like, you could talk about anything, you know. But like, what really motivated was that I was making money."

Participants who were entering college needed to earn money so they could purchase textbooks or pay college fees. "Like I was trying to look for anything, like any opportunity where I was able to make some money for me to, you know, purchase my college textbooks in the fall, which classes begin next week" or "I was just trying to figure out how to make money for college because I'd recently graduated, and I ended up applying for the program." The

need for money was clearly intensified by the pandemic and limited opportunities available for young people to earn money. Many reported they had lost jobs or were seeking employment without success. So, when a friend encouraged her to apply for the program, the conversation went like this, "Girl, you need to get involved in this program. They're paying people." Because I was thinking that I would get a job, but because of the pandemic, I obviously couldn't, so I heard 'money.'"

The participants found out about NeON Summer NYC in any number of ways: family, friends, friends of friends, boyfriends' mothers, guidance counselors, probation officers, and social media, especially through postings on Instagram and Facebook. Others found out about the program in completely unexpected ways. For example, one young man reported, "For me, it was a funny story because I was doing a presentation to kids in my community. So, I was looking for paid summer positions to educate them about. And then this opportunity came up, and it was so funny because I found myself eligible for it."

But although being paid for taking part in a summer program may have motivated young people to apply, they ultimately valued the experience in numerous other ways. They wanted the opportunity to learn; they wanted interaction with other people; and they wanted human connection during a period when trying to keep themselves and others safe, they were living in isolation.

The participants wanted to break out of their isolation and be in touch with people their own ages. The virtual learning environment made it possible to connect with members of their teams—young people like themselves, but often from very different backgrounds.

*I always like turning on my camera and my mic so that I have a little bit more of a, I guess, human interaction. I wanted to make it as normal as possible to have a regular communication as though I was face to face with them. And I think it helped. Like, I felt like I was actually connecting with them, as though they were right in front of me.*

*I think that these Zoom meetings really do work*

*because, to be honest, they really do bring people together, like random people together. That's hard to do. Like, it really is. It's hard to bring people from different ethnics, different backgrounds and everything, and just to have them have a whole conversation with no problem.*

Even though the sessions were delivered on line, participants found them truly interactive and inclusive of young people from around the City they might not have met under normal circumstances. This enabled them to form relationships with a wide range of New Yorkers and garner support and knowledge through what the programs had to offer.

#### **"The Program Really Felt Like 'We the People'"**

Many young people reported they enjoyed being together with different people from different places. They were able to share their work and what they wrote with others; they could talk about different subjects and hear points of view that were different from their own.

*What I liked about this program; we get to meet new people. And then, my group grew. I guess I could say, we had a tight bond. Like yesterday, we all didn't want to leave the Zoom call. Our supervisor was trying to kick us out, but we didn't want to. And, you know, it was a really nice experience even though we had to do some work and stuff like that. Like, we all got to know each other a little bit more and learn about other stuff. You see we were really are listening to each other. So, you know, that's what I really liked about it--to see our peers are listening to us.*

Participants felt self-expression was important. But for some that was more difficult than for others. Several described themselves as shy, "I'm a shy person, so I would just be quiet—but now I learned how to speak." Another young man who also described himself as shy did not say much in the beginning. But that changed when the facilitator insisted everyone had to unmute their mics. At that point, he felt he had to join in. Ultimately, this young person found the program a "place of positivity" in an environment where he

could express his creativity.

Weeks of Covid-enforced isolation primed the young people to engage in activities and to establish social connections with others. For several, having a routine schedule and structure "with everything going on and us being locked up inside our homes" helped address both. Simply having to get up in the morning at a certain hour provided structure. "Just being able to wake up because I haven't had time to have, like, a little schedule because everything's closed and quarantined. But this is a little habit that I had of waking up and joining everybody in the morning." Perhaps more importantly, NeON Summer NYC provided space for them to build relationships.

*The relationships that I formed—I built relationships with all my comrades in my group. We are a very, very close group. You know, we make each other laugh. We motivate each other. We push each other. We're a very talented, creative group, you know. Some of us like to cook, draw, sing, dance, you know.*

However, it was the skill of the facilitators that insured participants wanted to wake up to participate in the sessions. For some groups where facilitators were working in pairs, their strategies brought the group members together and helped transcend the distance inherent in the virtual spaces in which they worked.

#### **"Good Morning, NeON Amigos!"**

Universally, participants described their program facilitators as "amazing" and "awesome." They were well prepared and that paid off in their ability to engage the youth in writing, discussing stories, and engaging in creative activities. "I'm not going to lie. I feel like I had a very, very good facilitator. She made the experience a lot better. I don't know. She kept everybody engaged every day. Made sure we were paying attention and all that. I appreciated that." Their enthusiasm could be contagious.

*I would remember being like so tired. I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't even want—I wasn't even so enthusiastic about joining these calls, but then the minute I saw Lisa smile, and her face was like—*

*would light up, right? Would be so bright on the screen, it would totally change my mood. And so, I would be able to like, for the rest of my day, you know, carry that same attitude.*

They described different ways facilitators structured the groups, often with a ritual beginning that brought the members together. In one group, the facilitators began each session with the saying, "Good morning, NeON Amigos!" This resonated with the young people in the group until it became a metaphor for the connection they began to develop with each other.

*Lisa and Nailah would be like, you know, 'Good morning, NeON Amigos.' And I was like something—you know, we wanted to be connected. There had to be some sort of thread of culture, and everything had to be together, and so when I came up with that idea, we all voted on NeON Amigos, and we were always called NeON Amigos. So that was something that I liked.*

The facilitator's affect and energy motivated the participants to become involved with the exercises and activities constructed for each session. The young people were clear if they had not been excited about what they were doing, they would not have been interested or participated to the extent that they did. "They made the class so fun and interactive—it was great energy all around. It was great to have that energy because if somebody came on and wasn't excited about what they were doing; I definitely wouldn't have been as interested and participated."

With 75% of the young people Black and Latinx, their diversity of race and ethnicity was especially meaningful. Many participants mentioned the importance of having people of color as facilitators. One participant explained, "Nadia was a person of color, it always felt good to have someone who looked like, you know, me as well, and who shared similar traits." In addition to diverse facilitators, many sessions included guest speakers. Intended to highlight career choices, participants noted that many of these people were people of color. This enabled them to imagine themselves employed in these jobs; "like they work for big companies like HBO, Pixar." The same was true of gender. "I

was 'specially grateful for when it was women because a lot of times, we don't see women in the arts and you know, in these skills...it was very important to see women give their side of the story."

#### **"I Was About to Make a Plan for my Future"**

Even before NeON Summer NYC began, many participants were already thinking about jobs or careers they wanted to pursue; some who were older were already employed or in college preparing for specific occupations. Their professional aspirations included working in food service, forensic science, business, computer science, the arts, and many others. For example, one young woman was a student in art at Art and Design High School heading towards a career as a designer. Numerous participants referred to their artistic abilities and how the NeON Summer NYC Program not only taught them job skills or exposed them to different employment opportunities, but also provided opportunities for artistic expression. Even those with little interest in careers in the arts felt the artistic expression they experienced during NeON Summer NYC would improve their work lives.

*I'm more attracted to the business field, but I really do appreciate that, I guess it's kind of, like, a blind selection because I wouldn't have picked it if it wasn't. But I appreciate this experience. It pushes—it pushed me to draw more, be more creative, think about things in different ways, which I will always use some qualities. I'll take them along with me into a career.*

Whatever their individual career ambitions, participants learned a lot about appropriate professional behavior. The stories they encountered stimulated discussion about how to behave on the job. Above all, these stories highlighted the importance of separating their personal behavior from their professional lives. For example, one young man said he learned what kind of jokes were appropriate on the job and which ones were alright to tell his friends. They learned practical skills such as the importance of letting an employer know if they were going to be late and exactly what to say and what not to say in that situation. They discussed potentially volatile situations such as a customer

staring a worker up and down and a manager who was unwilling to support the worker. Using real life situations was powerful; these stories contributed to their understanding of professionalism and what they needed to do to be successful on the job.

Several participants reported they had lost their jobs because of the pandemic and were having difficulty finding other work; high unemployment rates persist. When NeON Summer NYC programming stressed the importance of building connections or preparing compelling résumés, the program offered well-established ways that the young people could enhance their chances not only of finding jobs, but ultimately advancing to better positions. One young man said he learned, "When you're applying for a job keep in your head what you're applying for, what you're putting on your résumé is relevant to the job that you're applying for." Similarly, the program emphasized the importance of networking and maintaining relationships even when you leave a job because, "When you leave that job or want to leave that job you can know people that know people." Some even referred to the relationships they were building through their NeON Summer NYC programs as networking opportunities. "I learned to connect with a lot of people who built connections to get to where they are now. Specifically, the friends that I met in my group, we're just kind of building up a connection of our own here."

Even a structured program had room for facilitators to attend to the specific career ambitions of participants. One young man envisioned establishing an online business, and besides learning how to make advertisements he could use to promote sales, his facilitator coached him on how to think beyond the idea to make it a reality.

*The productivity class, that's how I learned how to make the ads. And it's good because, she also taught us about business and entrepreneurs. So, I think that was really helpful since I've been trying on, starting my own business—online business, a store. And that kind of got me started. It got me started on the advertisement and the, you know, bringing the idea into life instead of just thinking it.*

Lessons in financial literacy hit home for some of the

youths who had experienced their own problems managing money or knew about situations where friends or family had become entangled in debt. These were lessons that the participants could relate to their own lives.

*They helped me to relate the story to, like, my own personal life. There was one where a guy—or I'm not sure if it was a guy or a girl, but a person had opened up a credit card and then, like, by a certain age they had accumulated a lot of debt or whatever, and then I think the assignment was to make a budget or something like that. And yeah, it just helped me to plan out certain things financially in my own life.*

#### **"During Covid the Only Place to Remain Safe Is Home"**

Because NeON Summer NYC took place during the pandemic, participants were keenly aware of how Covid-19 was affecting their own lives, their families, and their communities. This was no doubt intensified because NeON Summer NYC participants came from the parts of the City with the highest rates of infection. Focus group participants frequently wove references to the virus into responses to questions entirely unrelated to the virus. For example, many references to isolation and financial hardship colored their comments about conditions in their homes, disrupted school programs, cancelled recognition events, and demonstrations against racial injustice. Most described they were following the CDC guidelines to avoid infection themselves and protect those they loved. It was apparent most were closely following developing news about the pandemic and were aware of the consequences of becoming infected as new scientific evidence emerged. "I was hearing that there's a lot of neurological side effects that come with having the corona and things, and other types of stuff, a bunch of stuff." They understood that some people who had the virus did not show any symptoms but could infect other people. Even though by the end of NeON Summer NYC, infection rates were lower in New York than they were during April and March, they remained alert. Many were afraid.

*If I'm honest, I'm still scared about getting sick because a lot of people are still catching it, and*

*in some places, it's going up. In New York, I know it went down temporarily, but it's still kind of spreading. Not as much as before, but you know, I don't want it to be where like, one day, you know, they tell us, 'Oh, you don't need no more masks,' and then take our masks off, and then we get sick.*

Although most participants reported they adhered to mask-wearing and social distancing, they saw these behaviors were not universal. "Even my brother, he went outside one time without a mask, and I could not be next to him for like two weeks because I was so scared, that you know, God forbid, you catch something when you're out there, or maybe your friend has it." They worried that reopening schools would lead to "numbers going up again slowly."

However, for some participants the NeON Summer NYC stories that described the experiences of others helped them put their own situations in perspective. "I'm trying to stay optimistic about it. I got Covid. But other than that, I can say that I'm blessed that I didn't lose any family or close friends or anybody that I know lost anybody to Covid." Although another participant described having a difficult time, hearing the stories of others helped him evaluate his own situation differently.

*I realized that I'm really not having as tough a time as I think, and it could be a lot worse because I didn't really lose anybody to the pandemic. And I didn't really lose anything, like, valuable to me. Except for my job, but like that's not really big because I could get another one eventually. But it just opened my eyes and made me feel grateful.*

In several instances, participation in NeON Summer NYC and the opportunity for some introspection was another positive thing to come out of the pandemic. "Like I've been able to do this program. Because of this going on and I'm thinking about things. I'm closer to my family than I've ever been because I have to stay in the goddamn house with them all day."

Several participants linked the Covid-19 pandemic to changing conditions in their communities. Several were alarmed by the increase in gun violence that increased fears

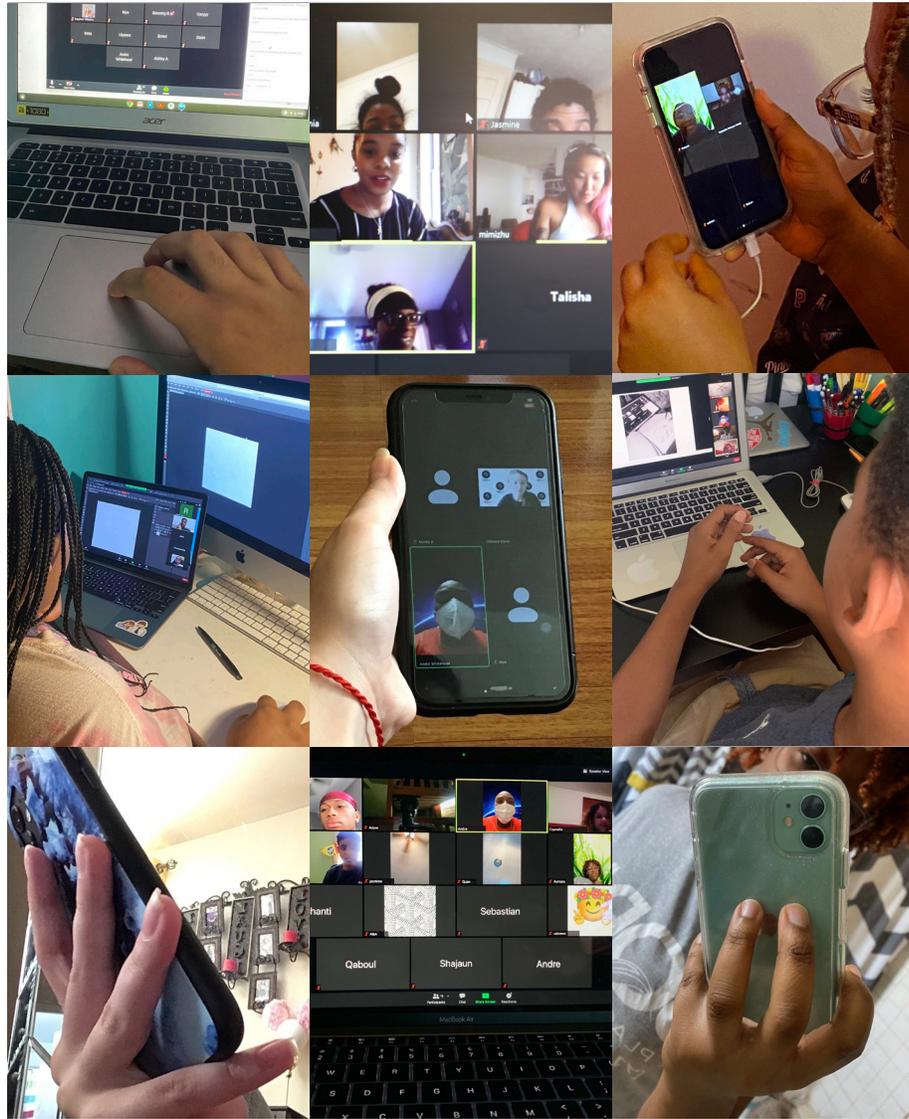
about their safety even more. "It's just very scary because during Covid, the only place to be at to remain safe is home, but now the question is, is our homes a place of safety with the gun violence going on?" Some participants related the loss of people to Covid with vivid descriptions of their experiences with the shootings.

*I've been scared because Covid-- it takes away peoples' lives. But also, the increase of gun violence that has been going on in the community. So like two things happening at once right now especially my community. I live right by the projects, you know, we've been getting like, a few days ago, someone was shot. Someone was—two people were shot. Some guy drives by our houses and has a gun, and he's shooting out everywhere like he has no brain.*

Racial injustice was also on the minds of the participants, some of whom saw a relationship between the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Because people had the time to speak with each other during this period, one young man asserted that police brutality came to the forefront of these conversations. "Things have been real scary and bad, but there's also been a lot of beauty that's come out of everything that's gone on. Like, you know, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, everything. That stuff has been going on forever, but we've been able to talk with each other now." The confluence of these events has been transformational for some of the young people in very personal ways.

*And then I was like, well, yeah, Covid, Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, like all that—all that kind of stuff and that drama. It's like anything that comes now is not surprising to me, but the best thing about everything is the awareness that it's brought to the table, the sympathy that I see from a lot of people. Just for me, I get so exhausted with social injustice, so I've just made it my mission to help the people who've faced injustice head-on and also helping myself. It's been a year of self-improvement. Although I'm hoping that the world can do the same as well. ■*

NEON SUMMER NYC | JULY - AUGUST 2020



Adam: Cohort 46, Ashley: Cohort 26, Asmara: Cohort 46, Jesus: Cohort 26, Rebekah: Cohort 26, Tristan: Cohort 46



# Program Partners

The Animation Project	My Social Network
Artist Up	NeON Arts
Artistic Noise	NeON Photography
Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute	NeON Stakeholder Groups
Community Justice Collaborative	New York Youth Justice Initiative
CUNY Graduate Center	Penning My Pieces
Drama Club	Projectivity
Free Verse	Queens District Attorney's Office
Holcombe Rucker Community League	Redz, Inc.
I'm Sew Dope	Renaissance Youth Center
Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning	Salahadeen Betts
Made in NY Animation Project	Starseed Technologies
Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment	Strategic Destiny
Musical Mentors Collaborative	The Lineage Project
	Thrive Collective
	Young New Yorkers
	Youth Communication

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*"A fallen leaf is nothing more than a  
summer's wave goodbye..."*

-UNKNOWN

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Tristan, Cohort 46