

Students weigh in on 'now' norm

By Lori Larsen

School has been back in now for almost two months and, while things may be a little different, the cycle of teaching and learning continues, perhaps with a deeper appreciation for that remarkable process.

September was a busy month for the staff and students at Our Lady of Mount Pleasant Catholic School, as it was no doubt for all schools as they settled back into classroom learning and figured out the semantics of how it was all going to work.

On Sept. 30, the school held its first virtual assembly, which students viewed in their classrooms on what is dubbed as OLMP Television.

The assembly included Orange Shirt Day and Seven Sacred Teaching Presentation, Student of the Month presentation, announcement of the Mask Creation Competition, the 2019-2020 School Year Awards Winners, and a Terry Fox Presentation.

With all the new protocols in place, school staff and students are having to devise innovative

Temporary closing

Katelynn began by expressing how, when on site schooling was temporarily cancelled, she was very upset. "I was worried it would be long term. I wasn't expecting to come back in the fall, so going home, I found it hard to adjust." She said the most difficult part was being motivated to learn at home, as home was normally the place to relax after a long day at school. "As the months went on, it was easier and it actually helped grades, because teachers were really forgiving and would help you out."

She added that the teachers did a fantastic job adjusting. "It was a lot of work for them to change their whole style."

Hannah agreed that having to learn from home took an adjustment for both students and the teachers. "It took the fun out of school, because a lot of it is being able to interact as a class and have a teacher there to have that back-and-forth-question period. That helps my learning—being able to hear others' opinions and share opinions. It was difficult not having that part of school any more."

was a little hard at first, learning from home and how to use our technology.

"I am a paper/pen kind of person, so it was really hard adjusting to that, but the teachers did a really amazing job with helping students and doing one-on-one calls with them trying to figure everything out."

All four students agreed and gave a shout out to all the teachers, specifically Mr. Ellert, who faced the challenges head on during his first year of teaching.

Erin said that when she first heard the news about the temporary closing of schools due to COVID-19, she couldn't believe it. "I was like, wow, this is actually happening. Now it was real that we were actually home. It was kind of a hard adjustment, doing all your work at home, because you are in your home environment."

"I lost my routine. Normally, I eat breakfast, get dressed and go to school and I lost that routine. It was difficult to keep myself motivated." She also said that while it was disappointing that she was unable to see her friends,



Lori Larsen, Camrose Booster

Our Lady of Mount Pleasant Catholic School Grade 11 students, left to right, Erin Kontek, Hannah Hasselbohm, Katelynn Baska and Gabriel Guillemette (friend cohort) are all smiles under the masks.

ways to ensure learning is still occurring.

The temporary closing of schools in late March of this year, due to COVID-19, was more than just a bump in the road. It meant a significant change of direction and rethinking for both teachers and students alike.

Four OLMP grade 11 leadership students and friend cohorts, Katelynn Baska, Hannah Hasselbohm, Erin Kontek and Gabriel Guillemette, weighed in on the impact homeschooling had and the return to classrooms this fall, and provided a take on what this year has taught them.

Hannah said that in the beginning, it was quite stressful, specifically the unknown, but said the teachers were wonderful at making sure the students were getting what they needed and progressing under the difficult circumstances.

Gabriel said that in the beginning, there was so much unknown. As the world began shutting down and the word of possibly temporarily closing schools got out, it was very disconcerting. "I think that it was kind of scary hearing on the news that we were going to have to go home. The unknown of it all was awful at the beginning. It

she was able to develop a degree of independence and problem-solving that she may not have otherwise. "I could ask the teachers, but I didn't have my friends (right there) to bounce things off. That also made me realize how important it is to have communication with others."

Returning this fall

Like many people around the world, Katelynn, Hannah, Gabriel and Erin waited with bated breath to hear whether or not students would be allowed to return to the classroom this fall for the 2020/21 school year.

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OLMP students talk about 'now' norm

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"I was so happy, because at first I didn't think we were going to come back," remarked Katelynn. Then when students were allowed to return, she said there was still a bit of trepidation. "At first, honestly, I was fearful, because it was so different. I wondered if I was going to be isolated at my own desk with no friend interaction. But that is not the case. We are allowed to sit with our friends. We still get to socialize, but in a safe manner."

Katelynn was also riddled with concern over her own personal health. "I have an autoimmune problem, so I was a little nervous, but I think it is even a better environment for that."

Erin was especially happy to come back and see all her friends. "I realized how much I missed talking to my friends every day. It was nice to get back to school and be in a classroom. It is easier to learn for me in that environment."

Gabriel admits when first returning to school, it was a little difficult getting used to having to sanitize all the time and staying in their desks. "I like talking, and I talk a lot so that was hard for me."

"Also, I got sick during the first few weeks. I had to go get tested which, by the way, is not that bad. Social media makes it 10 times worse, but really, it takes them two seconds and it does not hurt."

After getting tested, despite negative results, Gabriel had to remain home until her symptoms were gone, which meant missing even more school. "It was a little hard to catch up on the first day back, but my teachers did an excellent job getting the help I needed and staying with me during their lunch breaks and my lunch breaks. Now I am all caught up, and it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be."

Hannah was glad to see the protocols the school has in place for anyone, specifically students, who may be feeling unwell. "Students are not afraid to miss things. No one would want to stay home out of fear of missing something. That is one of the benefits of hav-

ing so much put online last year, all the videos that were recorded then can be used now when a student has to stay home."

Hannah's greatest concern with returning to school was the possibility of friendships changing over the extended period away. "The dynamic may not be the same with some people not talking and seeing each other for a few months." However, she said it all went well, and everyone was very happy to see each other again.

Masking up

One of the number one hot topics on many minds is the new face covering protocols implemented to help slow the spread of COVID-19, and high school students were certainly not immune to the debate.

Erin noted, "When I heard we were going to have to wear a mask, like I suspected we would, I was like 'it is going to kind of suck.' But after the first week, I found it is not that bad. It doesn't impact my learning, it just took a bit of an adjustment. It is not something that is affecting you as much as you might think."

Gabriel said that if wearing a mask is going to protect the people around you, then just do it. "You will get used to it, and it saves people's health and lives."

Hannah added that the school has been very good about providing "mask breaks" to help alleviate some of the discomfort that may come with wearing a face covering for a long period of time. "When you are sitting alone and not near anyone, you are allowed to take it off and have a break from it. It can be annoying, so I appreciate that they give us times to take little breaks."

She added that Leadership students have taken it upon themselves to make the whole "mask wearing" fun for everyone, specifically with a Mask Competition. "I think that it is important. With us not being able to do sports or assemblies, it takes away from that school community, so finding other ways to bring everyone together is still important."

Katelynn brought the topic of mask wearing

close to home. "Both of my great-grandparents live in long-term care. If wearing this mask means not only protecting myself, but keeping them from harm, I will."

"It may not be the number one solution like the vaccine, but at least it will prevent it as best it can."

Youthful messages

In conclusion, these four amazing young people shared messages of hope and inspiration.

"I was really on the edge for my own health, but I made the decision to come back and this is a completely safe place. I don't feel unsafe at all," Katelynn said that if anything, the measures put in place to protect everyone at the school has leveled the playing field for her. Prior to COVID-19, she was always having to be extra careful with her health and sometimes felt a little disconnected. "My decision to return is clear. Everyone has to be careful and it is no longer embarrassing."

She also encouraged people to always wear a smile, even under the mask. "We need positivity. We are all in this together. Everyone in this school has to work together to keep everyone safe."

Gabriel wanted people to know that wearing face coverings is really not that bad. "It is going to protect other people like my great-grandmother, who I want to be able to go visit. If we wearing a mask is going to keep her safe, then I will do it. The sooner we follow those rules, the faster we will beat this thing."

Hannah reminds people to remain compassionate. "Even though there feels like there is a disconnect with the social distancing and masks, we all just need to stay together."

And finally, Erin's message was to stay resilient. "Keep some hope and even if you are falling behind a little bit, try to keep going."

"Everybody is in the same boat, and I think the world has a little extra compassion right now."

One thing is for certain, these four inspiring students already have a good grip on serving up a heap of compassion, not to mention wisdom.