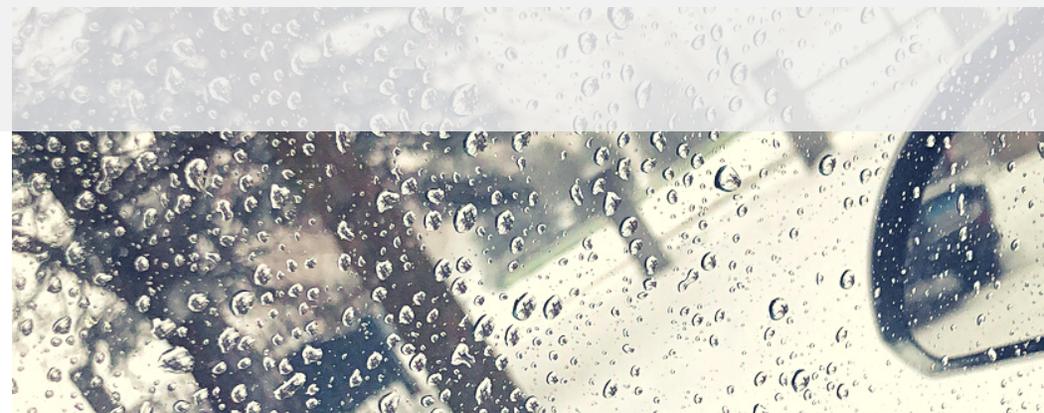




STORMS & BLOSSOMS

Foster Care System Alumni Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Aaliyah, 25

"Be hopeful. The storm will pass."

"I've had so many changes in my life since I was young. So, adapting to change is hard for me, but I feel like I've adjusted so much in my life as a kid and as an adult, more than I think a lotta people have.

But I'm just like, 'If this is the new norm, then it is the new norm.' I'm not sad about it. I'm just more, like, if this is gonna continue, I wanna make masks. I wanna promote a business. I'm thinking of it more on a positive side than on a negative side... So it's actually pushing me to be a better person." -Aaliyah

"In this moment, I live for today because tomorrow is not promised". -Aaliyah



COVID-19 stress immunity

"Regardless of everything that's going on, children still seem to keep that enthusiasm." -Aaliyah





**"Keeping the distance in unusual circumstances."
-Aaliyah**

"I waited in the car. I did not look at it as an inconvenience. I followed the grocery store's traffic flow arrows to take that extra step. I trained to style hair. The irony of training to be close to people while the world asks you to maintain distance."
-Aaliyah

"It became so annoying when I saw the arrows on the floor. I'm gonna have to go down the other aisle and wrap around again. But when you're shopping, you're not really paying attention to arrows. You're trying to look for your food."
-Aaliyah

"Their dad helps me watch the kids now so I can go back to school and work, but it hasn't always been that way. But, financially and everything else, everything's on my shoulders. Nobody else really helps me. That's one of the biggest things and stresses in my life." -Aaliyah

Asteria Sakari, 25

"COVID-19 brought my family together."

"COVID-19 made me realize that I am not only a mom. I am also a teacher, a nurse...all these different roles. I already knew, but COVID-19 brought them all out at the same time.

When I come home from work from an evening shift, they are trying to ask me questions, and I'm like, 'I'm tired. Just give me a few hours before I collect myself.' I used to rest when they were at school. But now I have to help them with school and it's very hard.

I have learned that I am resilient. We're all resilient. It's just about taking the time to really appreciate every moment because before COVID-19 it felt like time was just going fast, fast, fast, and now the time has slowed down."

-Asteria Sakari

"Trying to get some rest after the night shift while my kids try to get my attention." -Asteria Sakari



"Working and learning from home as a family."

"While I try to work from home, my kids want to play. My kid doesn't like online school. He finds it hard to get up in the mornings and jump on the iPad."
-Asteria Sakari





"During COVID-19, we were glued to our electronic devices. I needed help for my depression and anxiety. I didn't want to live like this. It was affecting my family, too.

We all needed a break. We love to go out on adventures. We've grown so much this last year. As a couple, we grew stronger in our communication. My children know we are in this together and we will get through the tough times." -Asteria Sakari

"Taking a moment of peace and relaxation."

-Asteria Sakari

"I drive around
for self-care. I
take my children
and they fall
asleep in the
car. Just a little
peaceful
moment to
myself."
-Asteria Sakari



John, 20

"It's awesome being a dad."

"Because of the COVID, we had to have our wedding in the backyard. We would've preferred it at the church and we did have a church reservation around April. And then it started getting closer, and they called it off. And then it just got crazier and crazier. And we were like, you know what, we'll just do it in our backyard, because why not? We wanna get married."

"[During COVID] I realized that I'm super impatient. I don't know what it is, but I get super stressed easy. It's awesome being a dad, but I also need time to do things for myself. And I kinda stopped doing a lotta stuff for myself. I used to go to the gym. I used to go out and do things with friends, do things for myself, and have more alone time."

-John

"The wedding was a lotta work, but it was worth it in the end." -John



"Same food.
Different experience." -John



"We looked forward to our weekly dinner outings. My wife and I would talk, laugh, relax. This has been replaced with drive-throughs. Same food. Different experience. Now we eat in front of our devices. We don't relax as we used to." -John

A photograph of a bedroom window with white blinds. The window is partially open, showing a view of a grassy area and trees outside. On the windowsill, there are three plastic water bottles. To the right of the window, there is a framed picture on the wall. In the foreground, a bed with a white blanket and a grey patterned blanket is visible.

"Sunshine on
the other
side." -John

"Before COVID hit, we used to take a bunch of trips everywhere. Now I can't even think about going anywhere without falling into depressive thoughts, like, this is closed and this is closed. There's not even a point in going. So taking [my son] to my bed in the morning and looking out the window and seeing him excited about this trampoline has helped a lot with that."

-John

"Masks everywhere." -John



"Never thought I would add 'kids masks' to the grocery list. I don't leave home without them."

-John

Breanna, 22

"I'm trying to get out of my comfort zone."

"My family likes to try different restaurants. We used to go three times a week to a different restaurant. During the pandemic, we would still go out to eat since my area has not been very affected by the pandemic. The adults know that there's a pandemic, but [my daughter] doesn't know anything; she's snacking on the crayon that they gave her. She has no idea what's going on.

Now we cook at home a lot more. I get recipes from my mom for a lot of our meals. She'll Facetime me, and we'll sit there, and she'll tell me how to make it. That's super fun, that I can cook at home. [After COVID-19 ends] I think I will start cooking at home more just because it's cheaper and it's healthier. We've all had a difference in our health since we started cooking at home instead of eating out." -Breanna

"COVID-19 doesn't stop her from having quality family time." -Breanna

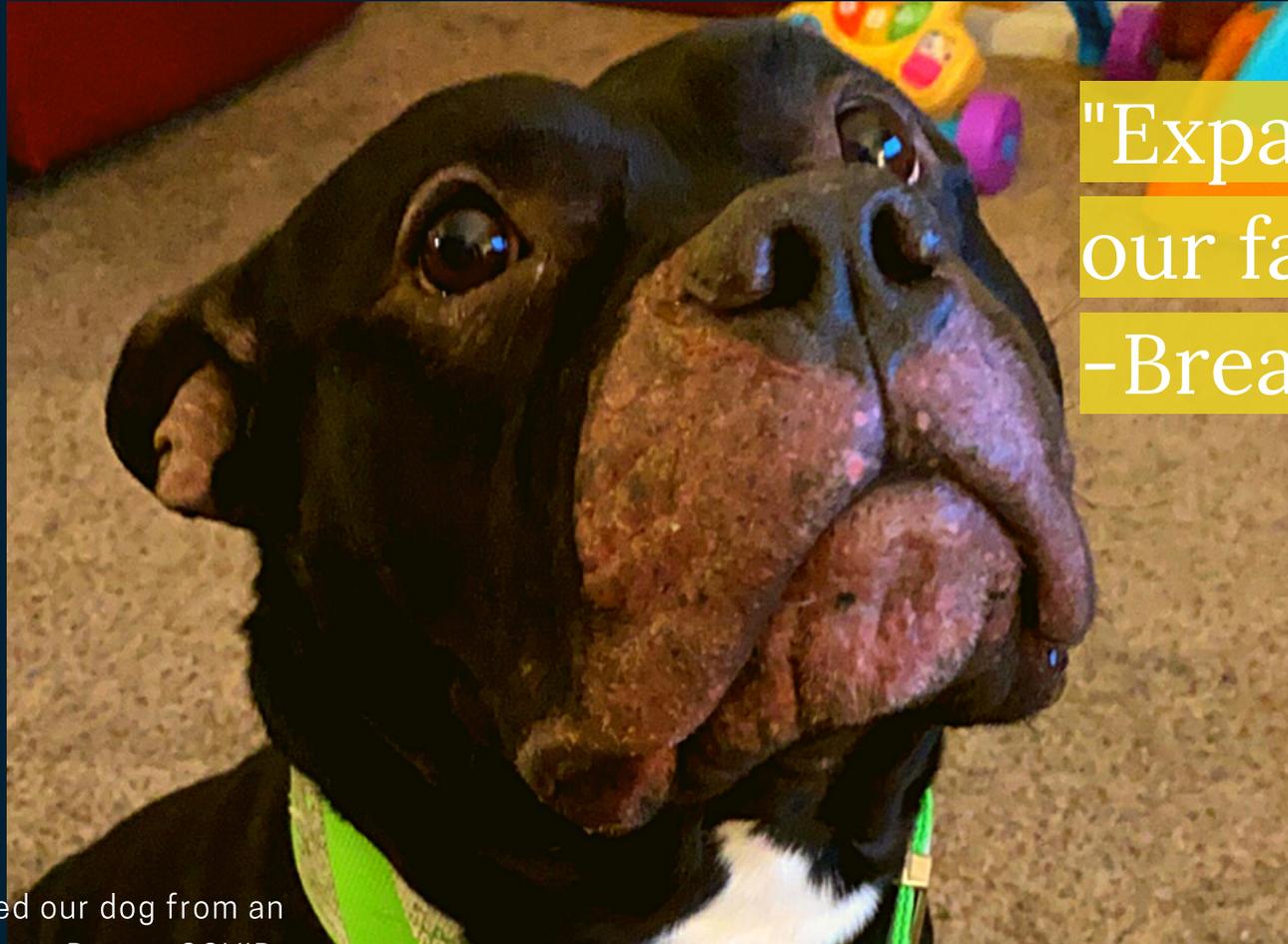


"Coming out of my comfort zone." -Breanna



"During this pandemic, I'm trying to try more things that I didn't like before. A few days ago, I went and got my nails done, and I stopped at McDonald's and got a shake, which I do not like. I never used to like McDonald's ever and I hate nails.

My boyfriend wanted these brownies, but I don't make brownies like this. I made them and he liked them.
The pandemic is helping me get out of my comfort zone and try new things." -Breanna



"Expanding
our family."
-Breanna

"We rescued our dog from an abusive home. Due to COVID-19, we had time to train him. He developed a strong bond with my newborn daughter."
-Breanna

"We spent so much time as a family together, and I'm able to actually raise my daughter instead of going to work and then being tired when I come home."

-Breanna

Alexx, 20

"During COVID-19, I have spent more time with my daughter."

"I don't work as much right now. Because of COVID not a lot of jobs are open to new people in my area. I only work three times a week, so I get to spend so much time with her.

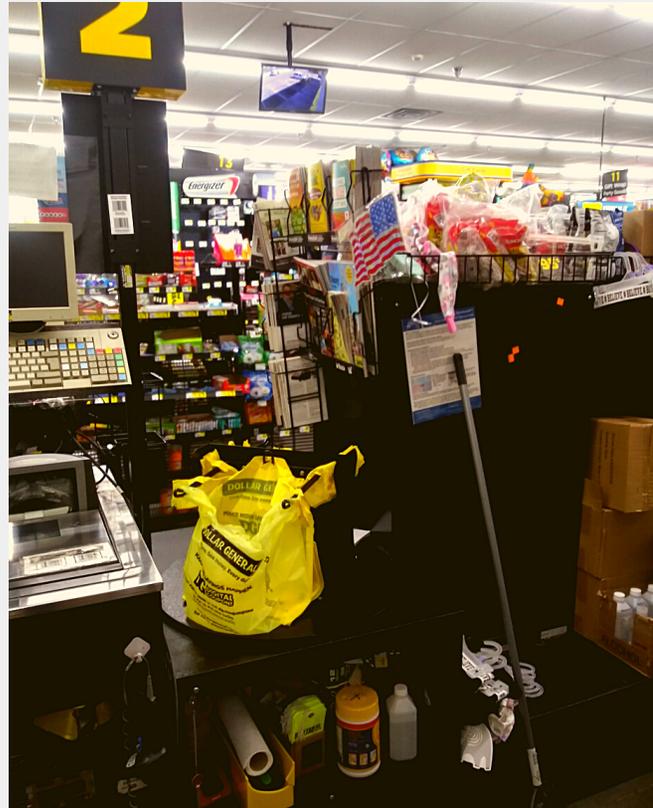
I don't really have furniture or nothing right now. We just moved in. She is sitting on a booster seat on the floor and there are balloons everywhere. I was playing peekaboo with her right here, and she was doing it back. It was adorable. I get to have fun with her."

-Alexx

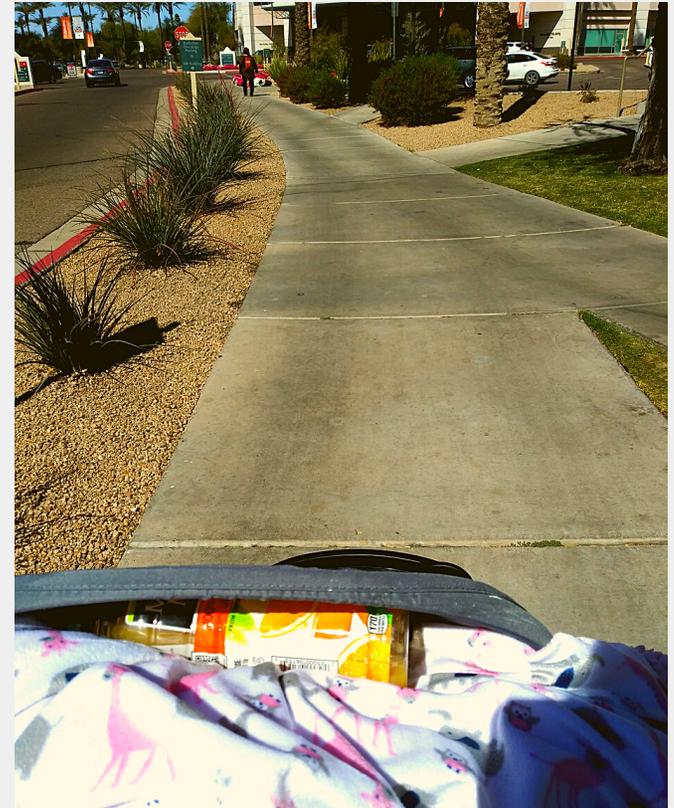
"My daughter is my everything. Once I gave birth, I knew life would flow better than before." -Alexx



"Alone with no support
in 2020." -Alexx



"It's good pay but I don't work
as much. Without daycare it's
hard to get a better job or a
second job right now." -Alexx



"My sister was always with
me for my daughter's
appointments. It's just lonely
since now I have to do it on
my own." -Alexx



"I just feel
proud of the
food I can
cook." -Alexx

"Growing up in group homes and spending time in hospitals, I never learned how to cook. I used to always eat out and spend money. To have your own place and actually make your own food feels much better." -Alexx

"I don't really have
much, but I have time
with my daughter."

-Alexx

Sam, 20

"Being an essential employee is not easy."

"Due to COVID there's only a certain amount of people allowed in the breakroom. So, you've been standing up for the last two or four hours, and the breakroom is full.

You have to stand on your break also.

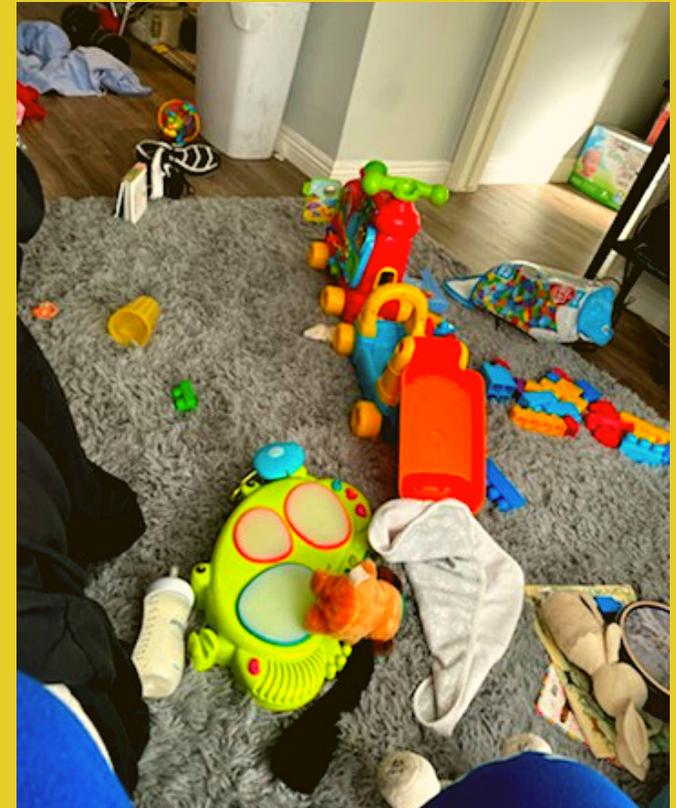
You can't really take a break unless you have a car or something. But by the time you walk to the parking lot and walk back your break is pretty much over... So I would say, this is the thing I hate the most [about] how COVID has affected my job." -Sam

"You've been standing up for the last two hours and the breakout room is full."

-Sam



"Laugh now.
Cry later." -Sam



"I live in a studio apartment, so things get cluttered really fast and just makes the apartment look terrible. It's frustrating 'cause I can't clean while my daughter's awake because she's just gonna continue to mess it up." -Sam



"Not even a break during break." -Sam

"Everyone's really scared, especially 'cause, in the past couple months, we've had [COVID] cases spike. So no one really talks. You come, get your hours done, and there's no socializing or being too close." -Sam

**"I stopped going to work
because COVID cases
were spiking at my job.
Like, someone was testing
positive every week."**

-Sam

Navaeh, 21

"It is time to try some new tastes."

"Before COVID, I was just glad to go to the bodega and get a sandwich or something to drink, and then the drink that I wanted matched my hair. That picture shows how much I changed my hair—it's just a different time of my life before COVID...before I had a baby.

Now, I look like a mom. Now, I'm cooking around the clock. I'm not photogenic like I used to be. So, I don't really take a lot of pictures. It's all about babies. So, I'm just like in the background, looking rusty, like, 'Who's this?'" -Navaeh

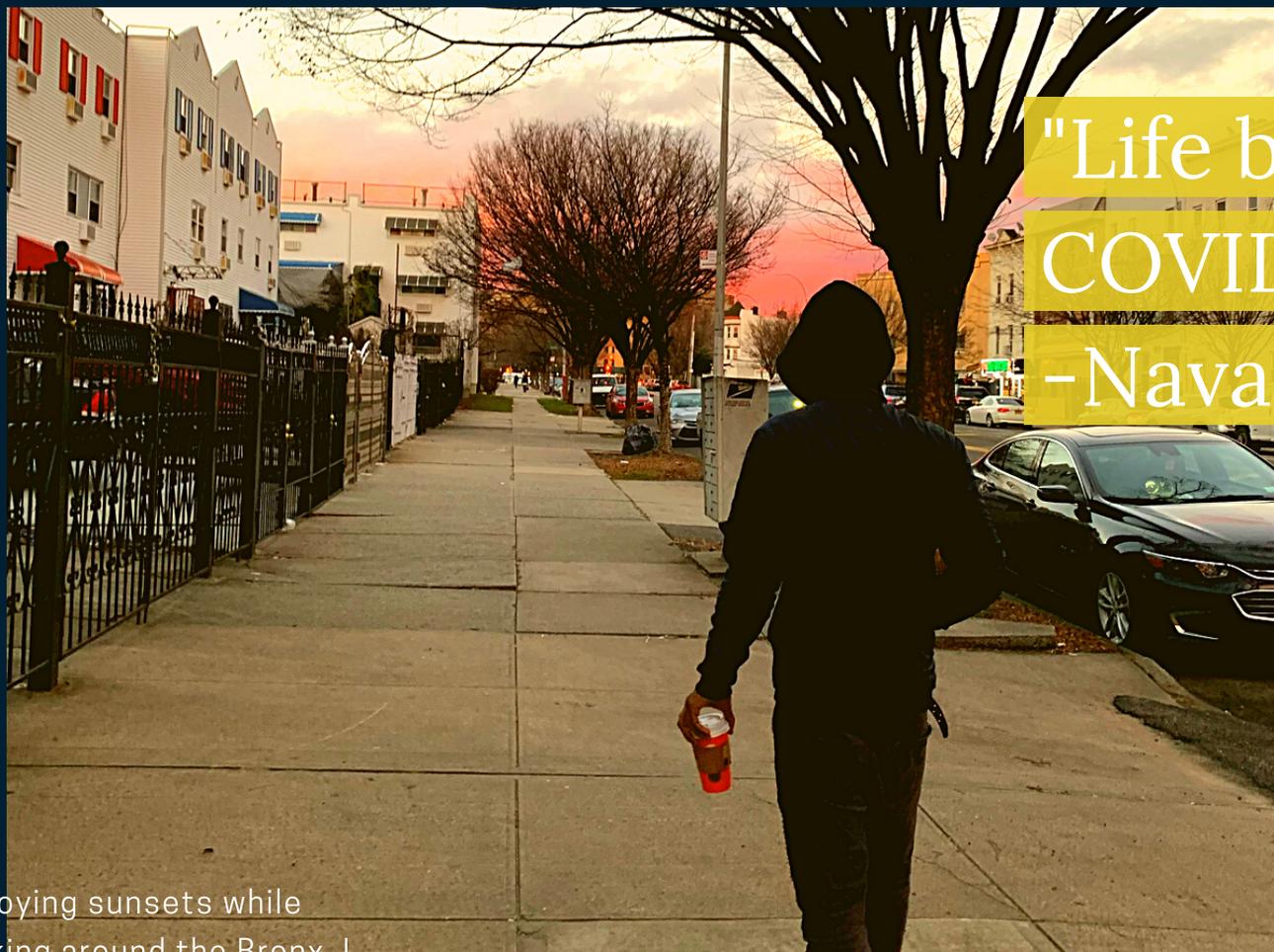
"Thinking about the good times before COVID-19." -Navaeh



The new reality

"Inside the house, my pan has become my best friend. I try to experiment more. Make something different to see how it's going to turn out. Outside, each house has a car, so probably that's the person who lives there 'cause everybody's home." -Navaeh





"Life before
COVID-19."
-Navaeh

"Enjoying sunsets while
walking around the Bronx. I
get to be outside with no
curfew." -Navaeh

**"I just love to cook.
It makes me feel occupied.
While you're stuck in the house,
why not learn how to cook
and fix up your diet, change it,
leave it, and do little things."**

-Navaeh

Athena, 22

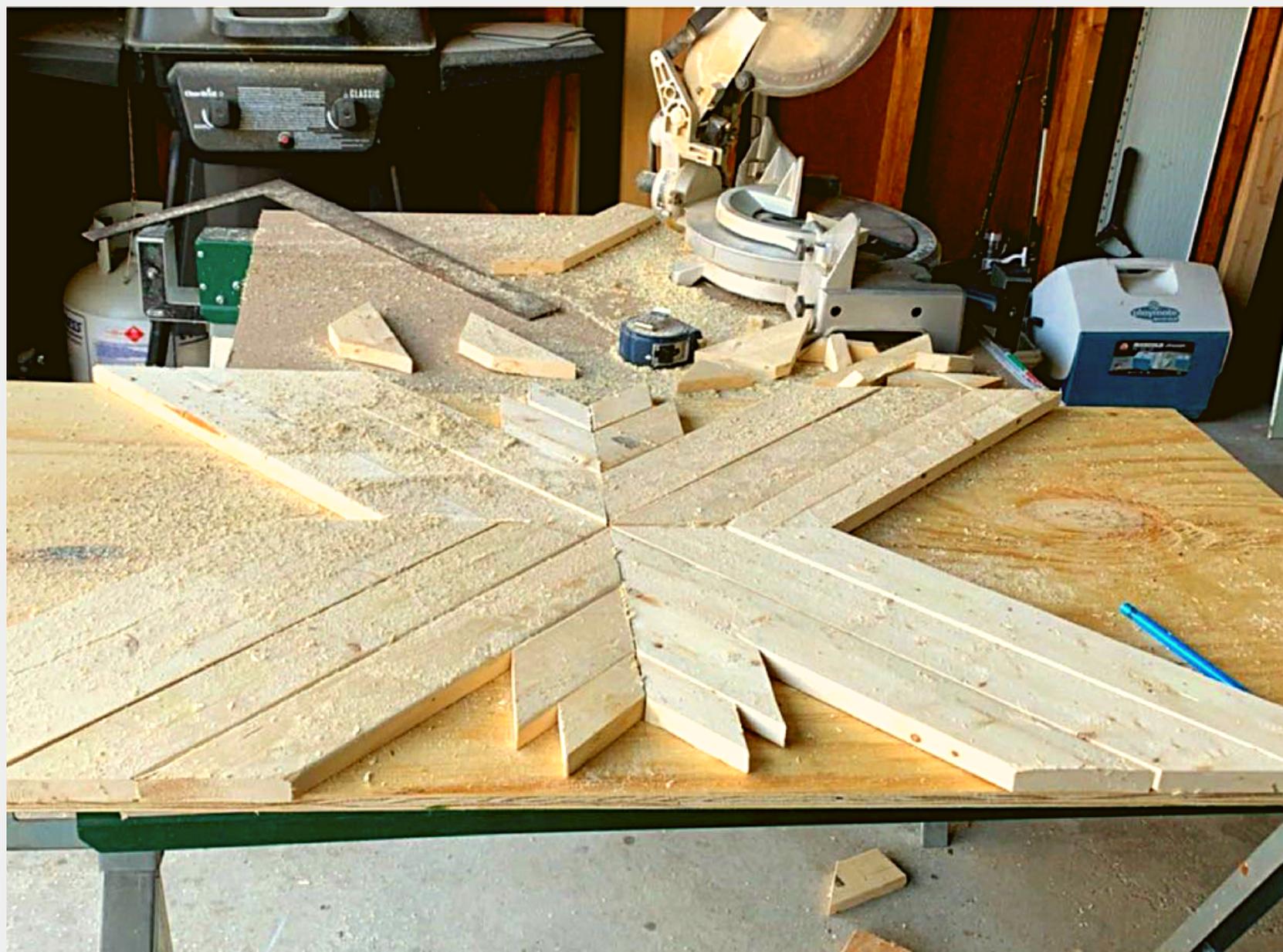
"Making sure she's healthy."

"My boyfriend works during the day, and I work at night, so we only get a couple of hours together before I have to go to work. We both had COVID, and we got those two weeks to hang out, spend time with each other, and it was great. We decorated the baby's room. It's kind of fun trying to learn how to put the crib together, get decorations. We went shopping at the Mall of America, they got hundreds of stores, but for almost every store, we had to wait in line. So it took up a long time to go through the mall and it took even longer to wait in line." -Athena



"Most of our time shopping was spent waiting in line because of the capacity restrictions." -Athena

"She was sleeping a lot, so I went out to the garage and learned how to use power tools to make a wood quilt. This is how I spent my time as a mom with a newborn."
-Athena





"During COVID-19 we started cooking more. Doing the dishes is the not-so-fun part of exploring my cooking skills. But I think I will continue cooking. I found out that I enjoy it.

During pregnancy, I went to a chiropractor and it helped a lot. My daughter also went to the chiropractor for the first time. Just, like, being healthy on the COVID side of things." -Athena

"Establishing healthy trends during COVID-19." -Athena

A person wearing a grey hoodie is seen from the back, working on a quilt. The quilt is laid out on a surface, possibly a table or a bed, and features various patterns and colors. The room is dimly lit, with a warm glow from a lamp. In the background, there is a framed picture of three hearts on the wall and a window with light-colored curtains. In the foreground, a white dresser with six drawers is visible, each with a black handle. On top of the dresser, there is a small blue container and a hammer. A wooden chair with a colorful quilt draped over it is partially visible in the lower left corner.

Extra time

"Setting up the nursery with
all the extra time I have."
-Athena

Latti, 23

"Seeing life go by through the other side of the window."

"I have my internship and I'm studying social work in college. So, I'm in a room calling clients, doing telehealth, and I have to wear a mask, now it's gonna be a face shield, and I sanitize everything. And it makes things harder because I'm just overloaded with work.

During COVID-19 we have to stay inside. It's like you're trapped. School is online. Doctors' appointments are online. Everything is online. You wanna go places. You go places, but it still doesn't feel the same. In your mind, you're like, 'Oh, I have to wear this mask. And I don't know if a person has COVID-19.'" -Latti



"Feeling cute, mask and all." -Latti

"Happiness in a box." -Latti



"We go food shopping at least two or three times a week. We're in the house the majority of the time, so we're eating everything."
-Latti



"I would cook or bake something, like, rice, chicken. But now, it's just a lotta work with him, work, and school. My son should be eating better than that, but what can I do?"
-Latti

"It felt good to get out of America."

-Latti

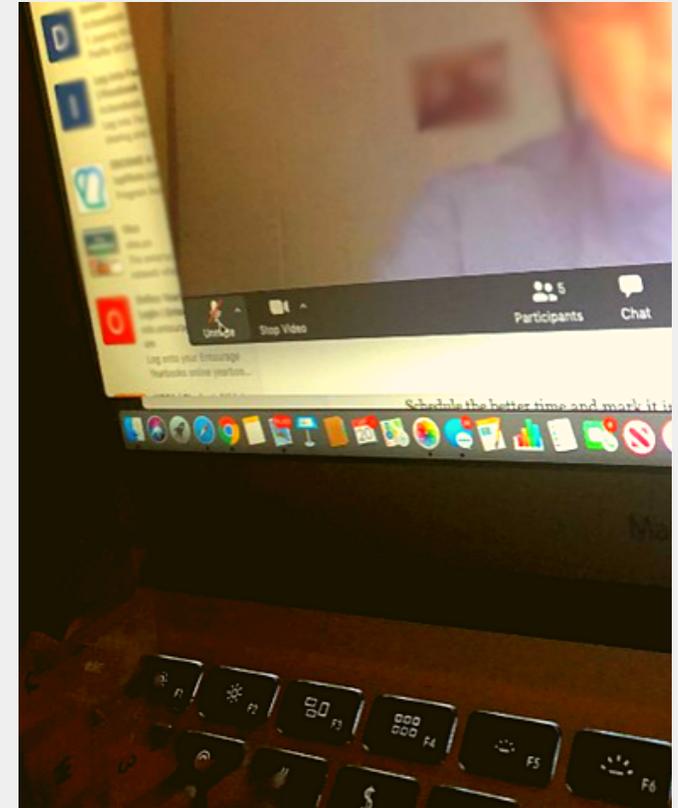
"We were actually gonna go to Jamaica in the summertime, but I kept putting it off. So, I just decided in December, I'm gonna book the ticket, cause [my son's father] hasn't seen [my son] in like a year and I wanted him to spend quality time with him 'cause he lives there." -Latti



"My son is always with me." -Latti



"I have to bring my son to work with me. A marker and paper are all he needs to be entertained".
-Latti



"He's always in class with me whenever we're home."
-Latti

"I'm kind of skeptical about the vaccine because it's like there's so much we don't know about it. I'm open to learning more about it, and I probably would take it. But I wanna know things about it." -Latti

"A lot of people close to my circle have already gotten the vaccine. So, I'm not afraid to get it. I feel for me right now getting it would be more protective for my children. If I'm gonna be coming in and out of the hospital, I don't wanna spread anything to them."

-Aaliyah

Our team conducted this PhotoVoice project from January to March 2021. Parenting foster youth and foster system alumni aged 18-26 met for three sessions to use photography to explore their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This photobook was designed as a keepsake for PhotoVoice group participants to be able to share their photographs, experiences, captions, and stories with one another as well as with researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Names used in the book are pseudonyms.

We express deep gratitude to each of our study participants, including Aaliyah, Alexx, Breanna, Navaeh, Sam, Alexander Sanchez, Natassia Gordon, Macey Laird, and Stefani Nazario, for sharing their stories and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information about this PhotoVoice research project, please contact Dr. Elizabeth Aparicio at aparicio@umd.edu and Dr. Svetlana Shpiegel at shpiegels@mail.montclair.edu.

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