<u>Becoming Unstoppable Together</u>

My body trembles and suddenly my face is wet again with warm tears. I scream out of frustration. The world feels small, hopeless, and dark.  It is as if I've fallen into a deep hole and it's impossible to climb out.   All I want is for life to return to normal, but I fear I will never be able to escape the darkness of this pandemic.

My thoughts drift back to a bright, sunny day eight months earlier.  I am in the car on my way to my cousin's birthday party.  I am excited and happy, it's going to be a great day.  We pull into the parking lot and I hear the sound of laughter as I open the car door.  I race toward my cousin and give her a hug. Suddenly, the thought fades as the darkness returns.  Another tear rolls down my cheek.

I think back to the first few weeks of quarantine.  I still had hope that everything would be ok.  I remember missing my friends and teachers, and looking forward to the start of online learning.  I imagined all my friends talking on a cheer-filled Zoom, everyone laughing and having a good time.  I imagined myself Zooming from a sunny park bench, or even a beach!  I remember the excitement as I opened my computer and joyfully clicked the "Join Zoom" button on the first day of online school.  But when the window opened, it wasn't what I expected.  No one was talking, or laughing.  Silence filled the air.  Everyone just sat there staring at their screens. Many students had their cameras off.  Even our teacher seemed uncomfortable and not quite herself.   At that moment, I realized how much had changed.  I suddenly felt very

disconnected and alone.  Embarrassed to have anyone see the disappointment on my face, I turned off my camera and started to slip down a dark hole of despair.

The joy and excitement of school was gone, and in its place only frustration and disbelief. Time seemed to stand still.  Summer vacation came and went without the usual splashes of sun and laughter.  The days grew colder and darker as fall drew near.  I started to lose interest in the things that had always been most important to me.  I stopped writing in my journal.  I stopped singing.  I stopped volunteering.  I stopped caring for others.  The world felt small and lonely.  I was sad all the time.  I was spiraling towards the bottom of a hole, as if gravity was pulling my body and soul down and there was no way to stop until I reached the bottom.  I felt like giving up.  But the thought of quitting made me feel sick.  I can't just give up. Not yet, not now.

Suddenly, through the darkness, I heard my mother's calming voice. Months earlier she had told me, "When bad things happen in life, you can't let them stop you.  You have to focus on the good things and fight to keep them. You have to be unstoppable."  Those words had helped me keep things in perspective when the pandemic first hit.  But now, after months of quarantine, somehow I let that perspective slip away.  Thinking back to that conversation, I knew I needed to wipe the tears away and be strong.  I needed to do it for my friends and family, but most importantly, for myself.  I was ready to pull myself up to a better place.  I grabbed onto a ledge and stopped my fall.

Having reached the bottom, I felt God giving me strength, and I knew there was nowhere to go but up.  Suddenly, I felt the love of everyone who had always been there for me.  I felt the

love of my friends cheering me on and my family fighting harder than ever to pull me out of the misery I was in.  I reached up and felt their warm, comforting hands working together to lift me out of the darkness. I felt a sense of community.  I started to climb out of the hole that betrayed my happiness and stole eight months of my precious life.  I made the choice to be unstoppable, and to focus on what has always made me happy, being of service to others.  I started to GIVE again.

Suddenly, the world didn't seem small or lonely.  With Zoom, I could virtually reach out to people all over the world, including people I never dreamed of interacting with before the pandemic.  I opened my journal and began to write.  I soon started volunteering again.  I wrote letters of encouragement to children and senior citizens who were in quarantine.  I sang in virtual choirs with musicians from around the world to spread hope and joy through music.  I created a program of virtual games and chats to keep students in my theater conservatory connected.  I tried putting a smile on the face of every person I met, and I focused on all the good things in life and how lucky I am to have them.

For Halloween, I didn't go out with my friends; instead I stayed home and helped my mom host a Zoom event for kids with special needs.  We were able to bring joy to hundreds of children from around the world.  Watching their smiling faces shine from beneath their costumes, it quickly became obvious what had been missing from my life for all of those dark months.  What was missing was the joy of giving and making a difference for others.

The past eight months have been difficult, but despite these difficulties, this pandemic has given us the opportunity to come together as a community and help each other.  Being able to help others during this difficult time has not only brought me happiness, it has been a constant reminder that I am not alone.  It has shown me that people can connect and support each other from anywhere in the world, and that together we are unstoppable.