

Seeing Life through an SEL Lens

By Miranda Gershoni, high school senior

My head pulsates with my quickening heartbeat. Numb, yet my hands shake as blood rushes to my fingertips. The overwhelming collapse felt by a body in denial.

“Can I at least see him?”

“You don’t want to.”

I could feel the weight on me. The weight of his smile and the empty seat left in his favorite math class the next day. The weight of the car that killed him. The grief heavy on my shoulders until my lungs were crushed by the weight, where I couldn’t breathe and I didn’t want to. I knew Jack for more than half of my life. He was the safest driver I knew, but was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As I remembered climbing cliffs to catch a glimpse of marvel skies and Christmas lights, anger and perplexity ached in my chest. I fell in love with my best friend. Flowers that once radiated with color seemed dull. The branches of my favorite trees looked pale and weak, without the life they once had. School was the hardest part. I walked in to thousands of eyes and silence. Sinking into my chair with my head in my hands, I felt betrayed by a world that killed children.

I remember sitting in the grass with friends during lunch, laughing. I stopped and looked around. Took a deep breath. Grateful. Doing laundry, playing ninjas with my little brother, singing prayer at Shabbat dinner. Mundane moments felt monumental. Smiling to myself I would think, *this is God*. Although I had never been religious, I expected to lose faith. I accepted that my life would always be tinged with a grey I couldn’t discard. Ironically, I couldn’t help but believe. Experiencing loss so young connected me to something larger. As painful as it was, my grief grounded me. I started praying. But God looked different to me. He wasn’t an omnipotent man in the sky; he was me. God was my teachers and my mom and the live oak in my front yard cracked by the hurricane. I thanked God for my next breath, for the lead in my pencil that allowed me to learn. Giving gratitude to all aspects of life, even death, gave me the perspective to understand a truth I could never embody before: life happens for me, not to me.

I realized that life is fleeting. So I took action. If I saw an injustice during passing period, I emailed the superintendent. I wrote a 30-page paper and a documentary about my city’s dark history with segregation, a topic that wasn’t even in the curriculum. I worked my way to a continent I’ve been fascinated with since childhood. I stopped holding back. A greater sense of urgency and purpose helped me create a life with more substance. I realized the impact a single person could make. I pushed myself to be a leader, to be heard even when uncomfortable. My unequivocal grit filled me with excitement. Death helped me discover the potent lens through which I am capable of seeing. The world opened up to me, and the limitations I placed on myself disappeared. I realized I could solve any problem; if I could get through this, what else was I capable of?

My transformation from feeling like a victim to life’s ills to feeling like the hero of my own story was propelled in large part by the Social and Emotional Learning programs I was fortunate to be a part of. In an SEL based course, MAPS (Methods for Academic and Personal Success), I learned essential skills like mindfulness and building healthy relationships. Being involved in SEL throughout high school gave me the crucial tools I needed to survive this painful time. Experiencing the power of SEL firsthand led me to advocate for a more holistic approach to education. I wrote legislation in Youth and Government to increase SEL in schools, and I was invited to speak on panels at education conferences across the country about my experience in SEL. This year, I was asked to help teach the freshman MAPS class during my off period, bolstering my own SEL skills and modeling the value of those skills for younger students. I still have the notecard that my teacher gave each student freshman year, and since then I’ve

read the last few lines of the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley before bed: It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.

Without the lessons I learned freshman year on perseverance and grit, on gratitude, and on coping mechanisms for stress, I would have given in to the temptation of crippling depression and even possibly suicide. Without the concrete academic routines I began practicing freshman year, like keeping a planner and going to tutorials regularly, I would have sank quickly. Fortunately, these powerful SEL skills got me through a time that seemed impossible to survive. I am proud to say that I will be graduating in the top 3% of my class this June with several awards in the areas I am most passionate about, including politics, government, and media arts. While I am unsure what school I will be attending, I know that I will succeed in any environment because of the critical social-emotional skills I developed throughout high school. When I made my “Mission Map” freshman year, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career involving politics and journalism because I’ve always loved working with people to solve problems and dive deep into issues to uncover hidden truths. Setting this intention freshman year has helped me narrow down my field of interest and inspired me to keep going with my passions no matter how challenging the journey is. Above all, the greatest wisdom I’ve gained from being involved in SEL is the idea that happiness does not come when you achieve success, but that you achieve success when you find happiness.

This essay is from a former School-Connect student from Mr. Matheny’s Freshman SEL class. She is currently attending a highly selective university on full scholarship.