

Bend High senior makes documentary about teen life during the pandemic

BY DAVID JASPER • The Bulletin

Bend High School senior Scout Gesuale isn't sure what she'll want to study next year in college. "I have no idea. I am interested in a lot of things," she said. Already accepted at the University of Oregon, Gesuale, 18, is waiting to hear from the out-of-state schools to which she's applied: the University of British Columbia and Brown and Tulane universities.

Film could end up on her shortlist of majors, but for now, filmmaking is a self-taught hobby. Over the past five weeks, Gesuale interviewed classmates, shot footage and edited it together to create a short documentary about surviving high school during a pandemic that has altered the usual way of doing things. Its title: "Alone Together."

"I thought it'd be interesting to see what students have to say about their experience over the last year — how they felt about going back to school, how they coped with mental health and just the things that kept them happy, kept them going and inspired during this time," she said.

What she learned in the process of making the film is that people's experiences and opinions varied. For example, on the topic of returning to school, some of the 15 students in the film were "over the moon" about going back to actual classrooms, while others were terrified about the health risks.

"I was really looking forward to going back. I have quite a bit of family on the east coast, and they have been back for a while and managed to keep everything really safe," said Riley Ahmuty, a 16-year-old sophomore whom Gesuale interviewed for the film. "I felt pretty good about that. Once teachers started getting vaccinated, I definitely felt sure about it being good to go back. ... For everybody's mental state, it was really important to get that in-person connection with teachers and classmates again."

Gesuale had mixed feelings about going back herself.

"I was doing fine online, and I'd finally gotten into this routine, and then they just



Submitted photo

Budding filmmaker Scout Gesuale works on editing "Alone Together," a short documentary about local high schoolers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

threw another wrench in the plan," she said. "I wasn't sure what kind of protocols there were, how safe things would be. It's different now — a month ago is when I started this."

Gesuale said she began conceiving of the project after completing her college applications in January.

"I had a lot of free time, and so I was looking for something different to do," she said. "I had been feeling really distanced from my peers, if that makes any sense, just because it's hard to keep up with people right now, as most people know. When I heard we were going back to school, I thought this could be a really neat opportunity to get an idea of what students are actually thinking."

"Alone Together" follows through on that premise, from its opening banner: "The following documentary is about students and for students."

"When we heard that we were going

back to school, I thought, oh, this could be a really neat opportunity to get an idea of what students are actually thinking, because I feel like it's kind of been a mixed narrative," she said. "There's been all kinds of speculation about students' mental health and academic performance and how the pandemic has affected this and that, but it seems to me that nobody ever asks the students how they're feeling or what would work best for them."

Ella Peterson, a 17-year-old Bend High junior that Gesuale interviewed for the film, agrees that the teen perspective has gotten short shrift.

"I think it's really important. For a long time, especially in the beginning and middle of the epidemic, it seemed like they were just focusing on the adult world," Peterson said. "But the student perspective is very important, because it's a big part of our lives that

More Information

"Alone Together"

- Part one, "Alone Together" youtu.be/aTiAX567wY0
- Part two, "Online Learning" youtu.be/ZckQvmbv_A8
- Part three, "Back to School" youtu.be/Da2k4wJqMPs
- Part four, "Mental Health" youtu.be/-3M65ymo7BU

we're missing."

Gesuale said she conducted at-school and Zoom interviews with sophomores, juniors and fellow seniors. Most are Bend High students, save for one from Summit High School.

The film has a four-part structure: a context-establishing introduction, followed by a look at online schooling, the return to school and, finally, people's mental states. (Rather than a continual long-form film, each of its four sections is a stand-alone video.)

"I think that one is going to be the most important, I hope. I would say that the people that talked to me were incredibly open and honest, and I really appreciated that, because that can be a hard thing to do," she said. "It was hard for a lot of kids. A lot of people had at some point or another a really challenging time regarding their mental health. Maybe their schoolwork as well, but they were able to find new outlets, like swimming or running or painting. People just really looked outside of what they were doing normally to find something."

Gesuale has posted the four parts of "Alone Together," which has a 30-minute running time in total, on Youtube.

"I feel like I was able to reach out to enough people that I think I got a pretty well-rounded view of what it was like to be a high-schooler right now," she said.

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