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## **Search for Independence**

By Alivia Leeman

The end of summer before my junior year of high school, I came to the realization that I have never had a decent experience of my own. I went to a small private catholic school with the same few people since kindergarten. Included in that small group of people were some of my

closest friends that I have had over the years. I would do everything with my closest friends, including playing the same sports and applying for the same summer jobs. My life revolved too much around my friends. I did not have a single thing or experience that was all mine because I never did anything solo. That same day, I concluded that I needed to do something new and completely by myself.

Events began to move quickly from there. The next day, I told my parents about my problem and what I thought I could do about it, which was to switch from my small private school, that had an average class size of 20, to a public school with an average class size of about 250. It was the perfect solution, all my friends would be at my old school, and I would know next to no one at my new school. Only a few days later during that same week, my parents and I did the paperwork, and it was official. I switched schools. There is no going back now. Other than my family, I only told 2 other people. Word quickly got around at my old school. I was getting phone calls,

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messages, and unsupportive comments from classmates, teachers, coaches, and family friends about how I am making a mistake and that I will regret leaving the only school I ever knew right before the start of my junior year. I knew the only way to accomplish my goals is to put myself into a situation where I have no friends to hold my hand every step of the way. I didn't let anyone get to me because I knew that I had my reasons.

My first day of school was terrifying but at the end of the day it was not so bad. I only got lost about every day during my first week, but I managed. I joined the soccer team a few weeks before classes started so I had some friends that I made on the team who helped me with my transition. I liked it there. I quickly made other friends of my own, I was doing very well academically, and I noticed that I started to be more talkative. Unexpectedly, my junior year at my new school ended early when covid shut down schools. What great timing.

Although my public school experience was cut short due to the pandemic, I did learn quite a few life lessons in the short amount of time I spent there. A public-school environment is very different from a private school environment. In public school, I had to interact with a variety of different kinds of people than I was used to, which did teach me that I must stay on certain people's good sides or else I might be their next food fight or hair-pulling victim. Other than that, I did also learn how to have enough self confidence in myself to do things on my own. At my private school, the only "life

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skill” I learned, if you could even call it that, was the proper way to greet a nun or a priest.

What was upsetting to me is that I felt dissatisfied with the amount of independence that I had gained because of the lack of exposure I had. I then brainstormed ideas for other environments to put myself into to gain that exposure. I needed both money and experience which brought me to the conclusion that I needed to get a new job where my friends did not also work.

I got a job at a veterinary clinic working as a kennel technician. My job was just to take basic care of the dogs and cats that were dropped off while their owners were on vacation, as well as assist with groomings. I had to interact with a lot of difficult people. One day when I arrived at work for my 8 am shift, I was greeted with the unwanted presence of an ignorant, ill-mannered woman at the front door screaming at me because she was waiting there for over an hour and I

did not have her precious little ankle biters fed, walked, and ready to go when she got there. She refused to listen to me when I told her that we are not open until 9 and would not leave until she talked to my supervisor who wasn't even there yet.

When my supervisor finally got there, she repeated everything that I had already told the lady and she automatically calmed down, got her dogs and then left as if nothing had happened.

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I had so many experiences in the past few months that I never would have seen coming a year before. These experiences made me realize that I am capable of doing things on my own without the encouragement of my friends or my family doing those things for me. I also learned not to care about what other people think of me because I know that I can succeed and function on my own. Now, my current struggle is convincing myself to do something that I don't want to do. I know that I CAN do it, but I hate being in unfamiliar situations alone. I acknowledge the progress that I made, but I just now realize that I am still unsatisfied. I have to do something about it...