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## **Coronavirus crippled N.J. teen's chance to succeed in school. But strangers came to her rescue.**

Updated Oct 01, 5:25 PM; Posted Oct 01, 4:03 PM

[Riley Yates | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

This has been a year of trials for 16-year-old Evelyn Maza, followed by one heart-warming surprise.

When schools closed down in March, the Newark sophomore was left on the wrong side of the digital divide, her only connection to the internet an unreliable hotspot from her cellphone. Even as she struggled to stay up-to-date with her remote coursework, there were other hardships: Her mother's beauty salon shuttered and her father, a construction worker, saw his work disappear, forcing the family to cut back even on the amount of food they ate to make ends meet.

And it only got worse from there. Both of Maza's parents contracted [coronavirus](#) in April, forcing her to take care of her 12-year-old sister for weeks as they recovered and tried to keep their children from getting exposed. Then in June, the Catholic school Maza attended — Cristo Rey Newark High School — closed permanently amid the economic fallout, forcing her to find a new home for her junior year.

After all the burdens that have been placed on Maza's young shoulders, she would be forgiven if she lost faith. But then people like 17-year-old Benjamin Hong come along, strangers helping strangers in their time of need.

Hong, an East Brunswick High School senior, leads a student-run volunteer organization that raised money this summer for Maza and three other disadvantaged students in the Newark area.

The group decided to do what it could after reading about the four students' plight in a March article on [NJ.com](#) on how remote learning was failing students in poverty. Hong's group, the Raritan Valley branch of the Alliance of Youth Leaders in the United States, pulled together more than \$2,000 for the students, who each received a new laptop, plus computer bags, calculators and \$75 gift cards to Barnes & Noble for school supplies. The donations were delivered Sept. 12 to Maza and the others, who got to meet some of the teens who worked on their behalf two counties away.

Maza's family, which had fallen behind on its bills, also received \$500 in Target gift cards to ease their financial burden.



A group of Raritan Valley student volunteers raised money this summer to purchase laptops for four Newark students who were left behind in the digital divide. On Sept. 12, the two sets of teens met when the laptops were delivered. From left, Raritan Valley AYLUS members Amy Xu, Benjamin Hong and Tarun Sivakumar. Standing next to them are Kevin Soza, 16, of Science Park High School; Evelyn Maza, 16, of St. Vincent Academy; Cheryl Crentsil, 16, of St. Vincent; and Cielo Marrero, 17, of North Star Academy. (RARITAN VALLEY AYLUS PHOTO)

“I was really surprised, to know that I didn’t have to worry about starting school, that I’m going to have a computer of my own,” said Maza, who now attends St. Vincent Academy in Newark, where classes opened online. “It just gave me a lot of relief and a lot of calmness.”

It is inspiring to see teenagers giving a hand to other teenagers in their time of need, said Sergio Seijas of NJ LEEP, a nonprofit that assists low-income students in the Newark area to graduate and go to college. NJ LEEP works with the four students and helped coordinate the donations.

“I just thought it was beautiful,” Seijas said. “The students were overwhelmed. One student didn’t even think this was real. ‘For real, this is happening?’ Yes!”

The four students are among [thousands across](#) New Jersey struggling to bridge a technological chasm as instruction shifted to online learning amid the pandemic, though many families without means lack computers or reliable internet access.

It was the headline on NJ.com that caught the eye of Hong: “As schools in N.J go virtual, these kids are getting left behind,” it read. The article was written in the early days of the outbreak and included the stories of Maza and the other three students.

Kevin Soza, a 15-year-old sophomore in Newark at the time, described how he and his two younger brothers had taken shifts on their apartment’s lone computer. Cielo Marrero, a 16-year-old junior in Newark, said her mother spent four hours on the phone to try to secure two months of free internet service at their home. Cheryl Crentsil, 15, of Irvington said she called six internet companies and spent hours and hours on hold before she was able to sign up for a connection.

“I was really shocked by this and wanted to see what I could do to help,” Hong said.

In June, Hong founded Raritan Valley AYLUS with two others from East Brunswick High, 16-year-old Tarun Sivakumar and 15-year-old Amy Xu. Together, they hatched a plan to raise money by teaching online English classes to students overseas, including in China and other parts of Asia.

The two-month effort involved more 20 student volunteers who tutored more than 200 online lessons. Hong also donated \$600 from his summer job as a YMCA swim instructor.

It wasn’t easy — the language lessons were often at odd hours because of the time difference half a globe away, and the students tried not to refuse any, even on the 4th of July as fireworks boomed.

“We realized this was something we could help out with,” Sivakumar said. “We were able to make it happen.”

Even with the money in hand, finding the laptops was a challenge as demand skyrocketed with school’s resumption, leaving many stores without them. The group scoured online listings before finally securing the computers from a Best Buy in Jersey City about an hour from them.



Benjamin Hong, 17, helped raise money this summer to purchase laptops for four disadvantaged students in Newark. On Sept. 5, he picked up the Chromebooks from a



Best Buy in Jersey City that finally had them in stock. (RARITAN VALLEY AYLUS PHOTO)

Marrero, who is now 17 and a senior at North Star Academy charter school in Newark, said she shares almost everything with her three school-age siblings. But her laptop is something that is now hers alone, said Marrero, who hopes to attend Rutgers University after she graduates.

“There are people out there who really make me have hope in humanity,” Marrero said. “I’m really grateful. Me and my family are really grateful.”

The admiration is mutual. Xu, the East Brunswick junior who helped raise money, said that during the drop off, she and Marrero got to talking. Xu was impressed by how hard Marrero worked to support her family, even as she prepared for college applications ahead.

“I’m just grateful to be a part of her journey,” Xu said, “because she was a part of mine.”

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