

2021 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize]

## The True Science of Life

(Original)

Hetian Xu

(Age 16, U.S.A.)

*Amador Valley High School, Pleasanton, California*

“What is life?”

That’s the big question my biology teacher asked last year. At the time, we got a tidy list of textbook answers and I thought nothing more of it than just something to memorize for a test. But several months later, when the coronavirus pandemic descended upon us and the world was caught between life and death, that old list resurfaced in my mind, begging to be revised. Stuck at home, COVID challenged me to dig deeper beyond plain biology and find the meanings of life.

Life is full of milestones that change a person. For me, COVID’s the one.

The outside world went through a drastic change when the pandemic struck, but important elements of my pre-COVID life still kept me grounded. Stuck at home, my family gave me unwavering support with delicious meals and warm hugs. My teachers at school worked overtime to adapt to Zoom and still ensure an engaging learning experience. My friends kept me laughing with their hilarious texts and messages. As the pandemic drags on, I’ve now gained a new appreciation and gratitude for all these encouraging people in my life. *Biology dictates that life is about balancing internal conditions despite constant changes in the external environment, but in reality, life is about cherishing every unwavering constant balancing all the outside turmoil.*

COVID was still hard, especially for the new ninth graders at my high school. One such friend of mine confessed that she was really struggling - most of her classmates kept their cameras off and microphones muted on Zoom, so it was challenging to make new friends and stay motivated during lessons. As I talked with other students, I realized many of them

shared the same problems as my friend. I wanted to change that by starting a school club to support new students through a mentorship program between upperclassmen and underclassmen. *Biology dictates that life is about responding quickly to new stimulus in an environment, but in reality, life is seeing something wrong and doing something about it.*

Yes, I was just one single teenager, but I was not alone. Numerous friends and classmates eagerly joined my team, where we spent hours discussing potential project and workshop ideas. Many of my school's teachers, counselors, and administrators jumped in to lend a hand to get the club going. With all this support from the people around me, our club AVMentors was born – AV standing not only for our school name, but also the word “avail,” which means “to help,” our ultimate goal. One person may not make a big difference, but society is made up of many people for a reason. Together, we can make a difference and change the world, one step at a time. *Biology dictates that life is about being made up of many cells, but in reality, life is about realizing that there is strength and support in numbers.*

AVMentors made it our mission to help bridge the gap between middle school and high school, build stronger connections between students of all grade levels, and provide all students with strong study resources. Since our conception, we've held a variety of different events, focusing on fostering a sense of community between students online, improving mental health and self-care, and addressing recent anti-Asian hate crimes. Over the past year, we've reached and helped over two hundred students in my district. *Biology dictates that life is about metabolizing and using energy, but in reality, life is about invigorating you and others with the energy and motivation to try.*

As this year's generation of freshmen continues to grow, many have been inspired by their upperclassmen to become a mentor to next year's ninth graders. We are also reaching out to other schools in the United States to expand further and help more students. As seniors graduate and freshmen join us in a never-ending cycle, we have confidence that AVMentors will be kept strong by the passion and kindness among all the students. *Biology dictates that life is about passing on traits and DNA, but in reality, kindness is the DNA of life and life is learning to pay it forward.*