

Offering support, to the letter

Freeport pupils write to hospital staff, patients

BY RACHEL WEISS
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When fifth-grader Quran Blount isn't attending his virtual classes or doing homework, "I just ride my bike and I play outside with my friends, but we play games that don't require too much touching, like passing the football," he said.

The severity of the coronavirus outbreak and the need to social distance isn't lost on Quran or his fellow classmates. He and many other students of The De La Salle School in Freeport have been writing letters and sending them to Mount Sinai South Nassau hospital in Oceanside.

The De La Salle School is a Catholic middle school, serving boys in grades 5 through 8 who may come from economically disadvantaged circumstances. Principal Jeanmarie Becker said her students have been sending letters to the hospital

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for four weeks now, with 64 letters written so far.

Many students wrote letters to patients battling COVID-19, but some also wanted to acknowledge the front-line heroes.

"They wrote many letters to nurses as well, the health care professionals in the hospital, so I think they were trying to reach as many people to give them support and to let them know they were thinking of them and to make them smile on a day maybe that they weren't smiling," Becker said.

Julian Ramirez, who is in fifth grade, says he hopes the letters also encourage hospital patients. "We can help them and they can be inspired to fight their sickness and the



Nasir Wilkerson, left, and his brother Noah are among those helping out. ■ Video: [newsday.com/freeport](https://www.newsday.com/freeport)



Principal Jeanmarie Becker

virus," he said.

Seventh-grader Anthony Ulloa said he knew there were many Hispanic patients in the hospital whose families couldn't visit them, so he decided to write his letter in Spanish. Becker provided an English translation for the hospital, as well. Anthony said he wanted "to show there is somebody thinking of them."

His letter starts with: "Dear Patient, I know that in these difficult times we are going through, we sometimes believe that there is no good thing in

this world. Today I am writing to you that in this difficult time, there are good things in the world."

Brothers Noah and Nasir Wilkerson, who are in fifth and seventh grade, respectively, wrote their letters together at home.

"I just really wanted people to feel better and to know that they're not alone in the hospital and we're right there next to them, even though we're not there in person," Noah said.

Nasir added, "I wrote [about] how when they get out of the hospital, they'll have family and friends waiting for them and how they have to keep fighting their battle so they can be happy when they recover."

Noah really wasn't expecting the virus to spread this much. "I want things to just go back to normal because it's not really how I imagined," he said.

Several students said they've been praying for the victims of COVID-19, and hope there is a

vaccine around the corner. Eighth-grader Jeffrey Lemus wrote in his letter: "I pray that doctors and scientists can find a cure."

In the meantime, Jeffrey said, families should still support each other from a distance and not hesitate to reach out to each other for help.

"We can start doing virtual chats with family members and stay in contact with family so you can both comfort each other if one of you is feeling scared or anxious," he said.

Becker said her students will continue writing letters for the hospital, which are being printed out and given to patients and posted on bulletin boards for hospital staff.

There's another way to help this cause besides sending well-wishes, Anthony said.

"I can help my community by staying home because I don't want the virus to spread," he said. "We're all heroes by just staying home."

Virus-related arrests aren't racially motivated, NYPD says

BY ANTHONY M. DESTEFANO
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Pushing back at accusations that cops making social distancing arrests targeted minorities, the NYPD on Tuesday said the "COVID-19 related" arrests were in response to complaints of crimes where officers had to take action.

From March 16 and through May 10, officials said, the NYPD made 125 arrests with at least a tangential connection to the coronavirus, mostly in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The NYPD said 66.4% of those arrested were black

and 24% Hispanic, a total of just over 90%.

"These are not social distancing arrests. Many were responses to calls for service where there was a clear victim and police took necessary action," NYPD officials said in the statement. "The crimes are characterized as COVID-19 related to the circumstances of occurrence, remarks made by the arrestee at the time of the alleged crime or afterward, or statements made by a victim."

The arrests were for hate crimes, domestic violence, weapons possession and alter-

cations after someone jumped a line while waiting to enter a supermarket, according to the statement. In addition, officials said, felony warrants were among the underlying offenses and in one case, a bank robber presented a note to a teller saying he had COVID-19.

An NYPD official said the underlying crimes sometimes involved suspects fleeing police and later claiming they had the coronavirus. The department didn't have a detailed breakdown available Tuesday on the specific offenses involved.

An official with the Legal Aid Society said the NYPD's explanation failed to answer calls from some elected officials and activists for the department to be more transparent about how it polices social distancing. Legal Aid represents defendants who can't afford to hire an attorney.

"The NYPD definition of 'COVID-related' in this data set is meaningless," Legal Aid official Corey Stoughton said in a statement Tuesday. "Most importantly, it shed no light on the critical question of how the NYPD can explain and begin to address its pat-

tern of racially discriminatory enforcement of social distancing requirements and the startling examples of police misconduct revealed in recent days."

Stoughton was referring to social media videos showing NYPD officers fighting with suspects in incidents characterized as COVID-related.

Additional police data released last week showed that more than 51% of the 374 social distancing summonses issued from March 16 through May 5 went to black men and women, and nearly 30% of those cited were Hispanic.