



An Opportunity to Give Back—Via Zoom!

Demi Weitz

Los Angeles, California

Demi Weitz's seventeenth birthday was unlike any other. It was the first day of spring break for her high school, Campbell Hall School in Studio City. She'd been looking forward to celebrating with her friends by hiking the nearby trails and having a picnic. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S., and her hometown of Los Angeles, like almost everywhere else in the world, was in lockdown. So for Demi, a normal birthday party was just out of the question.

The night before her birthday, Demi's friends surprised her with socially-distanced picnic. Then, for the actual day, her father had an idea. As a partner at WME, a major talent agency, Richard Weitz represents well-known musicians who'd been affected by the pandemic. Of necessity, everyone had stopped going to live concerts, or listening to jazz at their favorite clubs: cancelled concerts and engagements meant lost income for them.

Demi's father had just gotten a text from a friend, a piano player in Chicago, asking him if there was any way they could lift people's spirits. An idea was born – with a virtual birthday party for Demi at their kitchen table, with 40 friends and family connected via Zoom. “My dad invited his friend Debbie Gibson,” says Demi. “And someone else invited John Mayer who sang my favorite song, *Don't Stop Believing*.” Then together, these two recording artists harmonized singing Happy Birthday to Demi, and everyone joined in. “It was the coolest day of my life,” Demi says. “I was like, 'What has just happened?!'”

While she being serenaded by Debbie Gibson and John Mayer, a thought occurred to Demi. This was such a great way to gather people, to create a sense of community, and to let them enjoy music without leaving the safety of their homes. Why not organize Zoom concerts, invite people, and ask them to donate money for a good cause? Thus was born Quarantunes. “I realized that with Zoom, we have this amazing platform,” Demi says. “It's a really great way to connect people!”

Growing up in L.A. as the daughter of a successful agent, Demi is well aware of her privilege. She is careful not to come across as spoiled, to drop names, or to feed off of someone else's work. “I'm the opposite of a flashy person,” she says. “I try to understand my privilege and my good fortune.”

In order to make her idea happen, Demi had to learn a whole new skill set, so she got busy. She started by setting up a GoFundMe page. Then she wrote a short description about the first organization she chose to benefit. Every Christmas, her family had supported their local community's free clinic: they would bring holiday cheer by "adopting a family," buying gifts for the children and food for the whole family. Sometimes they helped out with rent and medical expenses too. Over the years, they'd adopted the same family, so Demi had been able to see for herself the kinds of challenges they faced.

As she planned for the first Quarantunes concert, Demi set a goal of raising \$10,000, then her father encouraged her to up the ante to \$30,000. Demi was thrilled when they surpassed their goal, raising \$33,000. She knew what a difference it would make to the clinic. “This was an opportunity to start something that is my own—and to give back,” Demi says. “I'm using this, and the things that I've been given, to make a change.”

In high school, Demi had been an activist - joining her friends in protesting gun violence, and working for women's rights. In the fall of 2019, she made posters for the Global Climate Action Strike with some of her environmentalist

friends. “They have inspired all of us to do the little things we can,” she says. “Like switching from using single-use plastic water bottles to reusable water bottles.”

Living in Beverly Hills, Demi could see that under all the sparkle of celebrity life was a serious crisis: 60,000 people were living on the streets in the “City of Angels.” She could also see that low-income people were the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Global warming is blamed for the five-fold increase in areas burnt in California over the last five decades: and in 2019 the housing crisis in Los Angeles was exacerbated when 7,860 wildfires burned more than 250,000 acres of land.

Then came the pandemic, and everyone was scrambling to provide shelter for those 60,000 people. Clinics were in desperate need of support to provide services and PPEs for all the homeless. “It’s a really bleak time,” Demi says. “People are losing their jobs; they can’t even put a meal on the table for their families.”

This was an injustice that Demi was unwilling to accept. So, for the third Quarantunes concert, she researched her options, and decided to partner with the United Way Greater Los Angeles, the largest agency working with the homeless. Someone offered to match all donations up to \$50,000. And on April 4, 2020, for two hours, while musicians entertained 200 of her friends via Zoom, Demi worked her magic. She received enough donations to meet the challenge, and the amount she brought in was doubled. “We ended up raising \$100,000 in just 30 hours,” she says. “It was amazing!”

Demi was really happy that with the funds they had raised, hundreds of homeless people were given safe shelter in motel rooms, and Wellness Kits with hand sanitizer, gloves, and face masks. Encouraged with their success, Demi and her father decided to organize additional fundraising concerts. And after organizing just 10 Zoom benefit concerts, she has raised over \$3,000,000. And as of April 2021, they’ve raised \$20 million and counting!

Her success is no surprise, considering the high-profile acts she gets to play: John Legend, Rod Stewart, Sting, and James Bay, among others, have performed for Quarantunes events. “You can see these artists in their homes, and me and my dad in our kitchen—it’s a very welcoming and inviting space,” Demi says. I feel like everyone’s on the same playing field. It’s like, we’re inviting you into our home; and these artists are inviting you into theirs.”

Meanwhile, on some level, Demi’s days are like those of any other teenager in quarantine. Her education is her #1 priority. To keep up with her schoolwork, she is home schooling by Zooming with her teachers and classmates. “Then, in between English and Math class, I go to my dad’s room, and jump in on a call,” she says.

Behind the scenes, Demi is becoming a businesswoman. “My father’s life is music,” she says. So, he’s in charge of inviting his musician friends to participate. Demi and her father work together to set goals, and respond to donors’ requests. Each week she researches potential beneficiaries and prepares interview questions for the representatives of the organization, searching for the right match. “I’m learning so many aspects of the business” she says. And while she was once fearful of public speaking, she now has lots of practice honing her speaking skills, as she shares her passion for each organization’s work with her dad’s friends.

“Usually I’ll interview someone that runs an organization - and we’ve had some frontline workers on the Zoom call. It has been really great to connect to people, to have the chance to shed light on crucial issues and raise awareness this way.”

Increasingly, celebrities from the musical world have been joined by civic leaders like Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti. Getting to hear from those in charge of fighting the pandemic has been both educational and shocking, Demi says. “Every call has been so inspiring,” Demi says. “You are hearing from people from all different walks of life, with different experiences.”

Quarantunes’s support for local charities has now grown to include national organizations, like the United Way’s relief efforts in six other cities. Beyond raising money for the homeless, for clinics and food banks, Demi likes to educate people who join their events. “All of their stories were very inspiring,” Demi says. “It’s real and authentic – that’s the most beautiful part.”

Given her father's national network of generous friends, Quarantunes has been able to help in pandemic hot spots like New City's public hospitals. They've also supported hospitals across the country and the L.A. Food Bank. As the number of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. surpassed 100,000, it seems unlikely that things will go back to normal anytime soon, Demi says. "The pandemic has literally changed the world as we know it," she says. "These issues, and the people that are suffering now: it's not like it will go away in a second."

The quarantine has impacted everyone's lives on all levels. So, when the Hollywood Bowl was closed for the first time in its 98-year history, people were understandably upset. Every year this iconic outdoor venue is for many people a favorite summer activity. Breathing fresh air under the overarching trees and enjoying expansive views of the city, it offers people a welcome respite from their busy lives and noisy highway traffic. Listening to their favorite musicians, it was heavenly. And it is every musicians' dream to one day play there.

So, when it was abruptly closed, Demi and her dad came up with a "wild and crazy" idea. They made lots of phone calls and got permission to use it as the venue for their 10th Quarantunes concert. They extended the limit to 1,000 invitation-only guests—and kept it a secret. The concert was cohosted by music legend and rainmaker, Clive Davis, who spoke of the power of music to unite, and shared personal stories about each guest. The guests included Kenny Loggins (who sang "Footloose") and Gloria Gaynor (who sang "I Will Survive"), as well as Barry Manilow, Santana, and Rob Thomas. Orchestra leader John Williams opened the evening with the overture to *Star Wars*, with the trumpet section performing on the Hollywood Bowl stage – all with social distancing, of course. And Kevin Bacon did zoom dancing.

Demi is very proud of the beneficiaries they had chosen for this event: Share Our Strength's Billy Shore spoke about No Kid Hungry, proclaiming "This is a problem we can solve." Members of the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles members played a short piece. And Billy Elish talked about her mother's vegan meal-delivery charity Support + Feed. One appreciative person on the Zoom call said, "You are changing the narrative – from fear, anxiety, and isolation, to connection and community."

For Demi what started as an unusual birthday celebration has become a life-changing experience. Organizing the Quarantunes events has been both rewarding and personally transforming. She had originally planned to become a film director, joining her dad in the entertainment industry. Thanks to Quarantunes, the 17-year-old has found her true passion for helping others. And now that she has discovered just what she is capable of, she wants to use her position in the world to make a positive change. "When you strip everything else away, the whole purpose of this is just to help," she says. "And that is something that I always remember and will never forget, because that is the intention behind all of it."

A dream you dream alone is only a dream.

A dream you dream together is a reality.

John Lennon

Call to Action: Find ways to care for those less fortunate. Create a GoFundMe campaign to support local social services in your community. Learn more about Demi's project at <https://quarantunes.unitedwayla.org>.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com