Question: Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

“Living under a rock”, I’ve heard it many times regarding my knowledge regarding movies and tv shows; I never thought that I would apply this to myself within my passions. However, before the summer of 2019, there would be no better fit description. Back then, I was well on my way to pursuing my passions in competitive programming, becoming well experienced in the Canadian programming scene. I had solved over 500 problems and had recently made the Canadian Computing Olympiad. As such, I decided to venture out of the Canadian Scene and look onto the international community. There, the largest community revolving around Competitive Programming was found at a website called Codeforces. What I found there within my next 2 years of practicing, learning, and communicating, was not only a vibrant community that enabled my growth within Competitive Programming but also a vital source of information that showed me how much more there was to this invigorating field. On Codeforces, the main focus was contests. Every 4 to 5 days there would be a contest. Starting in the morning and lasting around 2 hrs, 10000 participants would try to solve as many of the 6 to 7 problems that were offered in the contest. After the 2 hours were up, the website would automatically calculate what performance everyone had, and then adjust an inner rating system depending on it. Then, an editorial, or witeup explaining the solutions to every problem would be released and everyone could refer to it and try to upsolve, solving the problems that they didn’t in the contest after the contest had ended. Moreover, the solutions that everyone had submitted would become public access, and thus anyone could refer to the solutions that the best people wrote up, seeing how they approached and solved the questions, potentially learning some ingenious methods. Lastly, there would be a comment section under the solutions, where everyone could discuss their solutions and ask about what was wrong with theirs. In every contest, without fail, there would always be one comment from a top contestant regarding an alternative solution to a problem or giving a beautiful explanation that views the problem in another way. Throughout this entire process, every resource that is needed for a contestant to test themselves, practice, and learn from their mistakes was provided. Ever since discovering Codeforces, I had participated in around 100 contests and solved 690 problems, a much greater opportunity than the 22 contests that were provided in Canada. What’s most interesting about these contests is that Codeforces has a different style of problems than those in Canada. Their questions typically required more thinking and less knowledge, and thus really tested and benefitted my problem-solving and application skills which had been neglected within Canada. Their problems were also short to code, and thus, fun to solve and lacking annoying implementation details. However, this does not mean that I did not learn more algorithms. Quite the contrary in fact, not only did the weekly novel problems introduce many new ideas and tricks to apply to competitive programming, from specific greedy algorithms to indigenous applications of speed of doubling, Codeforces also hosts one of the most expansive lists of tutorials for algorithms in the world. Since joining, I have saved over 282 blogs containing detailed explanations of algorithms as simple as binary search to advanced algorithms learned only in graduate-level courses like the blossom algorithm. Each blog gives it’s own take and perspective on the algorithm, meaning that even if you do know the algorithm, you will discover new applications and methods of looking at it that you had never considered before. And even if you were unable to find an algorithm, many others resources are linked and can be found on codeforces, with vital ones being cp-algorithms and oi-wiki, respective algorithms compilations from Russia and China. From these resources, I was able to grow at an exponential rate. If there was information that I didn’t know, all I had to do was read the blog, if there was a problem I couldn’t solve, I just needed to read it’s tutorial and ensure that I understood it and would be able to apply it anywhere and anytime else. In competitive programming, practice is how one improves, and Codeforces was the ultimate location for that. Back in Canada, I had the community to thrive in. Everyone was on codeforces and everyone was involved in friendly competition. In every contest, we competed to see who would do better, and after every contest, we talked for hours about the problems and how to solve them. Some of my deepest friendships were developed in this period, and this was the golden hour of my passion. In one year, I had advanced from a rating of 1500 to 2200, and the year after I had reached 2600. My knowledge had expanded from basic algorithms like Dijkstra all the way to obscure algorithms such as slope trick. Looking back, as I created a contest of my own for the codeforces community, what was most amazing about all of this, was that the entire effort, every single resource, was crowdfunded. Each of these weekly contests takes months and months of effort to create, and each blog takes hours to write, before even accounting for all the practice that is needed to understand the algorithm. There is almost no financial reward for these actions, yet hundreds of people volunteered their time and effort to create them and disseminate them to the public. This community is built on sharing and information being open source, without the generosity and time and everyone, this international community would not exist. As I now look into the future, I am excited for the vast expanse of algorithms that I have yet to learn. I have barely dented understanding all of the blogs that I have favourited, and yet, there are still so many more algorithms that I have barely even heard of. There is a joke in the Canadian community that the algorithms that are taught and common knowledge within China, only become known to the best coders in Canada years later. Even now, as I have grown out of the rock that is the Canadian Community, I can only recognize that I am still living under another rock. In university and beyond, there will be much more to learn, and so much more to explore, and that is what excites me.