SQUAD (noun); An informal group of individuals with a common identity and a sense of solidarity.
WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

This book is a compilation of profiles written by Elizabeth Fox’s senior journalism 2015 elective class.

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See more about the photographer of this picture, Alex Williams, on page 14.
KATHRYN DECHERT

By Vanessa Brown

She sits alongside her fellow student council officers in a pastel top and leggings, at the end of a long conference table in the student center. Students chat, curious as to what topics will be discussed in tonight’s meeting.

This is another Wednesday night student council meeting, before a busy Thursday for OPRF senior Kathryn Dechert.

Dechert is an AP student, an AP SILC, a tutor for students who need the extra help, a babysitter, manager of the girl’s track team, a volunteer at Sarah’s Inn, and the service project leader for student council. To stay organized, Dechert has a planner she uses to write down any upcoming school assignments along with the assignment due dates. Aside from her school planner, she has many reminders on her iPhone to help her stay organized with her activities outside of school, such as tutoring and babysitting.

As a student, Dechert likes to take classes that will benefit her outside of school. Last semester, Dechert was enrolled in child development. As someone who babysits on a regular basis, this further informed her about the concepts and basic understanding of child development.

Dechert also enjoys SILCing. SILC stands for Student Instructional Leadership Corps. Dechert is a SILC for AP psych and AP English language. Dechert helps students in the classroom learn more about the subject if they need any help, similar to tutoring.

Ever since she has attended school she has looked for opportunities to help the school’s students, teachers, and coaches.

Every day after school, Dechert goes down to the field house to meet the girl’s track team. As a manager of the girl’s track team, Dechert takes attendance every day and travels with the team to the different meets on weekends.

Not only does Dechert travel with the girls track team to their meets on the weekends, she also volunteers at Sarah’s Inn.

“I help organize donations from 1-2 hours, and also stuff thank you donation letters into envelopes,” said Dechert.

In spring 2014, Dechert was voted as Student Council’s service project leader. As service project leader, Dechert is responsible for coordinating many of the events for Charity month.

“I’m in charge of contacting people for the events,” she explained. “For Mr.OPRF I was responsible for contacting all of the guys and made sure everything was set up for it. Potbelly’s is usually consistent about giving us a certain percent of the profit for Pack the Potbelly’s. Pack the Potbelly’s is an event where students can come to Potbelly’s order food, listen to music, and all the money raised goes to charity. I also research organizations that we can reach out to, to see if they will donate money for charity month.”

All money raised during charity month is donated toward an organization whose primary focus is to help others in need.

“We donated money to the Magic Foundation that is an Oak Park- based charity that helps kids with growth deficiencies. We chose this charity because it’s locally based and directly helps kids.”

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Each time charity month rolls around, members of student council hope to raise as much money as possible with the help of OPRF students.

“We just wanted to raise as much money as possible,” Dechert says. “With all of our events combined, we raised just under $1,000 for the Magic Foundation. Previously, we’ve made between $800-$1200. We’re always right around $1,000.”

Charity month is all about helping the lives of others, and one of the things Dechert cherishes most is helping others in any way she can.

“I am interested in volunteer work and being able to help the community, and I’ve realized that student can really make a difference.”

Abigail Stagner, a member of student council for three years, believes charity month is a way to bring students together.

“I think charity month is really great. It really brings the kids together, and the officers are really committed to making it as fun as possible.”

A fellow officer of the club, who works with Dechert, Wyatt Ashby, has been involved in student council since her freshman year.

“I wanted to find leadership opportunities, and all of the officers just work together.”

Working with other students to help connect the school with the community is one reason Dechert was interested in joining.

“I wanted to be involved in the small meetings that connected the students to the school. I wanted to have more of a say and organize events.”

Dechert said she believes that student council gives students an opportunity to voice their opinions and inspire others to help the community.

“I feel like we’re really doing something to make a difference.”
RACHEL POSPISIL

By Griffin Cusick

As Orpheus tiptoes through the underworld, he doubts the honesty of Hades. He wonders to himself, had it been a trick? His eyes drop.

The threshold between the underworld and the upper world stands feet from him. As he crosses to his home world he turns to see his love. He sees her long, radiating hair. He sees her bright blue eyes and beauty glowing.

She disappears.

He falls to his knees and tears fall down his face like the blood that had flowed out of her body.

As the curtains close and lights turn off, the room is silent. Nobody says a word, until, abruptly, a roar of applause fills the room. Rachel Pospisil sits far behind the audience with the puzzle of sound equipment in front of her, though her grin can be seen by the actors on stage.

“It was just…. perfect,” Rachel exclaims as she looks deep into the distance, reminiscing on her greatest moment in theater. Her blank stare transformed into a grand smile, showing her pearly white teeth.

Rachel Pospisil grew up a busy kid, never having free time between soccer and dance class. She started singing as young as she could say, ‘Mamma’. She was a natural, hitting all of the high notes. By the time she was in the third grade, her mother recognized such talent and decided to sign her up to audition for the classic, “Dr. Doolittle”. Nine-year-old Rachel killed the audition and landed the part of the monkey.

Her first experience was “Love at first sight,” she exclaimed. “I felt like I was free when I was on stage.” After that she decided to add theater to the bundle of activities she was heavily involved in.

Once she graduated from grade school, she noticed that one by one, her extracurriculars were fading into the mist, all except theater and singing. Any time she was not in school, she was acting or singing. Whether it was with the newest school play, over the summer with the acting camp Bravo, or outside of school with Chicago’s famous Second City, she always was looking for new challenges.

When Rachel got to Oak Park River Forest High School, she did even more. Expanding her repertoire, Rachel began directing plays. Within the last year she has directed five music videos and plans to direct in college after her year abroad in Prague.

While directing Rachel in the play “I Hate Hamlet”, Madison Tunney said Rachel “had the best work ethic I have ever seen. Always going above and beyond, not only for the play, but for those around her. No words can fully describe Rachel as a person,” Madison said, “All I can think of is ‘incredible’.”

When tiptoeing through the threshold separating adolescence and adulthood, Rachel pauses and looks back. She turns to see the beauty of her past work and cannot express the appreciation she has toward all of the opportunities she gained through high school. And unlike Euridyces, she is happy she took a glance back.
ALEXIS KOSIK

By Alize Edwards

It was a beautiful summer day. The sun was shining, flowers were blooming and she was in the best mood she could ever be in. Her parents decided to take her to the zoo today. As a young child everything interests you. Every sight, sound, smell and touch. It all seems new when you’re little. Going to the zoo always brings such excitement, looking at the animals and learning new things. What Alexis Kosik enjoyed most about the zoo was going to the exhibit that had all the little tools you could use to pretend you were an animal doctor. It was right then and there, at 4 years old, that she knew what she wanted to do in life. She wanted to work with animals and people.

Alexis is one of those few people who genuinely care. “She has a huge heart and always tries to help others,” says Teen services librarian Rachel Bild. Alexis started volunteering at the library in 2008. During her time there she tutored elementary kids. She was also part of the Rising Readers programs. The program helps low-performing Oak Park students in third, fourth and fifth grade to close the achievement gap. The Oak Park Public Library, through Bild, offered space and teen volunteers from surrounding communities to help with the program.

Alexis was one of those teen volunteers who worked with Bild; they have worked together since 2013. Bild’s first impression of Alexis was very earnest. “She always made it on time” she says. After really getting to know Alexis, Bild said Alexis “was someone I could turn to.” Besides working in the Rising Readers program with Rachel, Alexis also did what the library calls drop-in duties, which include self-reading and packing books. Alexis was also helpful in making displays for the library. “She is very good with graphic design,” Bild said. A typical day would be her coming in, she never forgot to sign in, then she would do whatever needed to happen. “She was always ready for anything,” Bild says. Alexis took her work at the library very seriously; she had a joy for really helping people. Bild says her attitude was always very good there. “If she sees someone struggling she always tries to help. Her work is focused on individuals. Whoever is in front of her is the person she wants to help,” said Bild.

Alexis also did volunteer work for the Brookfield Zoo, where she wants to one day have a career. She started in 2012. While she may not yet be able to work closely with the animals Alexis was able to work closely with people by teaching at some of the exhibits in Brookfield Zoo. She has such a strong love and passion for working at the zoo. “She has the highest volunteer hours,” says Luis Mendez. Alexis charted at a total of 427 hours of volunteer work. Mendez is one of Alexis’s supervisors at the zoo. He has only known her for six months. But in those few months, he says “Alexis is definitely someone who has made an impression on me.” Mendez notes how very friendly and well-rounded Alexis is. While volunteering at the zoo she definitely tries to contribute to any workshop. The zoo is her favorite place to volunteer. It’s never boring to her.

“I felt excited while waiting to teach people”, Alexis said. One day at the zoo, teaching people the animals in the living coast. She was standing by the big tank with the fish; she was waiting around for people to come talk to her. “Then this one girl came who was very fascinated with the leopard shark,” Alexis recalled. She was asking about the anatomy. Alexis was happy she could find a way to help her out. Whenever she is at the zoo, Alexis considers it a good experience, not just for the people but for her too. When Alexis is teaching a guest she always has to remember answers she might not know off the top of her head, and that encourages her to want to know more. That leads up to her looking at her fact binder to learn and tell other people about it and to teach herself as well.

Alexis has also done work with the Animal Care League, Tau Gamma and Best Buddies program. “I volunteer because I love it; it feels so good to help people, animals and the environment”. “I give back not to impress others, nor to get service hours for a college application, I do it because, in my heart I know I am doing my part to make the world a better place”. “I volunteer because it makes me feel good inside”.

Alexis at work
Scarlet streamers and metallic gold tinsel garlands drape the doorways and windows of the North Cafeteria. The last remaining rays of daylight pass into the mostly empty space. Disc Jockeys are getting music set up. Topher Zheng, dressed in a maroon dress shirt and necktie, paces around the room excitedly, waiting for guests’ arrival. Tonight is Best Buddies Prom, something Topher’s been talking about all week. As Best Buddies members of OPRF, as well as some from Riverside-Brookfield High School, file into the cafeteria, they head straight for the food table for pizza, pop, and cookies. Soon afterward, music starts playing, and people slowly trickle onto the dance floor. Topher Zheng is not the average high school senior. His positivity is so contagious, and his unique style makes him stand out. Topher “…has a very progressive sense of fashion. On a bright and sunny day, [he] will rock the sunglasses over his regular glass-es,” notes Jack Kotte, a good friend of Topher.

His magnetic personality attracts a variety of friends, and his confident attitude draws in lots of respect from his peers. “Topher is one of the most outgoing and friendly people I’ve ever met. I think people might initially be taken back by this, and perhaps even pass judgments. But once you [get to] know him, or have even been introduced to him, he immediately is your friend. And by friend, I mean someone who genuinely cares about you,” says Jack Devitt, one of Topher’s closest pals.

Jack Bauhs, another member of Topher’s friend group, says, “We all love spending time with him, whether it’s individually or all together as a group.”

After a few songs, the dance floor is flooded with students. Topher is hesitant at first, but soon joins in, dancing to Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off”, followed by Miley Cyrus’ “Party in the USA”. Topher has always seen life as a celebration. He “is such an optimistic person. He spreads that to all the people he comes in contact with,” says Teresa Conrick, one of Topher’s teachers. “He is like a bright light in a sometimes dark day. ... It can be contagious when you are near him.”

Cindy Milojevic, director of student activities at OPRF, sees Topher every weekday morning, as he is part of the morning announcements team. Milojevic agrees with Conrick: “He exudes personal cheer in [the] hallways and throughout. [He] puts a smile on everybody’s face.”

Topher’s optimism has attracted many friends. In fact, when asked who he considers to be his closest friends, he said there are too many to count. Jack Bauhs says “…he likes to call... 16 of us his ‘family’ friends.” Those are just his closest friends. He be-friends nearly everyone he meets. “He’s so well-connected throughout the school,” Devitt adds.

Topher describes himself as “popular”. As Milojevic puts it, Topher is “one-of-a-kind, [the] most friendly person at school, loving, caring, [and] lots of fun; he has the uncanny ability to know almost everybody’s name.”

After grooving to Beyoncé’s “All the Single Ladies”, Topher tries to round everyone up for a picture at the photo booth. “I need everyone!” he shouts over the booming bass. “Everyone needs to be in the picture!” This is a prime example of Topher’s enthusiasm combined with his all-inclusive attitude. “He accepts everyone into his life, which is such a great part of his personality,” Conrick says.

“He truly brings the best out of [people],” Bauhs adds affectionately.

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At the dance, Topher moves from one friend to another fairly rapidly. Each one welcomes him with a smile, then chuckles disappointedly with shrugging shoulders as he moves on after only a few instants of interaction and a high-five.

Topher may be popular, but his is a special type of popularity. As Conrick explains, “Popular for Topher does not mean going out every night with all the different groups, but that he is well-liked by both students and staff. Walking down the hallway with him, everyone knows Topher and says Hello. He is Mr. Oak Park.”

Aside from his popularity, Topher’s enthusiasm also feeds into his school spirit. He is involved with many school organizations. He is a natural leader, not only as an officer in two extracurricular clubs (he is the buddy director of Best Buddies and the announcement outreach coordinator for the Chinese Cultural Society), but also at all-school events. He works closely with Milojevic, who observes his school spirit at “every spirit assembly, holding doors open, dancing, [and] helping to get the crowd excited.” Devitt agrees: Topher “… has more school spirit than anyone. He is truly the mayor of OPRF.”

His positive energy may seem endless, but even Topher gets worn out. After the dance ends, he sits in one of the chairs across from the welcome center with one earbud in, waiting for his ride home. His slouchy posture and tilted head reveal his exhaustion. But Topher never is wiped out for long.

Topher has big dreams for his future, including attending Triton College for two or three years to get an associate’s degree in computers and technology, and to someday become a computer technician or a data center technician.

And Topher has a very special skill set that will bring him far in life. “He is very well organized and is able to work well with other people. His organization skills and well as his people skills are top notch and are what is gonna help him the most for his future.” Bauhs explains. “…the best thing Topher has is his personality … whether it be a work environment or social environment,” he continues, “… it will be wonderful.”
MATT HARLOVIC

By Seth Feare

The makeshift recording studio brightened up with music as Matt Harlovic approached the mic. “I popped open a vein to paint my blues, violet…” Matt breaks into the first song on the album he’s recording. His head moving to the beat as his lips hit the beats in between, he says, “I just let the words flow out.”

What does he love about poetry and rap? “What’s not to love about it? To me it’s the physical expression of one’s emotions on paper.”

Matt has wanted to be a poet since fifth grade. “I remember when I was first learning poetry; I loved it. I wasn’t good back in fifth grade, but that didn’t stop me at striving to get better.” Matt says he strives to bring positivity into his rap and poems. He wants to be a good example for everyone.

His album’s name is “Good Vibes” and it’s all about sending good emotions through the power of poetry and rap to his listeners. Richard Harlovic, Matt’s dad, is very enthusiastic about Matt’s poems and songs. “I always tell my friends about my son. I’m very proud and I even enjoy some of his music, especially the one about strawberry pancakes.” Richard is a very supportive dad and said Matt has natural talent with poetry.

Matt is also a straight A student at Roosevelt University. “Basic is brain sick, so strive for greatness” is a mantra Matt uses to maintain his work ethic for school.

“Matt has never been just an average kid. when his friends were out playing, he was working on his grade averages,” his dad said.

Despite his attention to school work, Matt always has time to spit some rhymes on Roosevelt’s school radio.

“Yeah, I sent them three of my songs and they said they would love to have me come in after I got a whole album done and share a little of my work.” Needless to say, he was very excited.

Back at the studio, Matt continues his rap. “I popped open a vein to paint my blues, violet. And threw a pair of cans on to block out the silence.”

Matt steps back with a wide smile, almost as if he is imagining a crowd of people shouting his name.
CHELSEA DIXON

By Marlena Wadley

Chelsea Dixon is performing her solo in Louder than a Bomb, Chicago’s biggest poetry slam. Her body is shaking, tears welled in her eyes, as she struggles to belt out the words of her childhood.

She leaves the crowd in awe with her most memorable line, “He shoves that is gun to my face, saying “Don’t You Move.”

To some, Chelsea Dixon will be remembered by her piercing scowl. To others, she will be remembered for her warm smile and poems that will leave you showered in goosebumps. Chelsea joined the Spoken Word club her freshman year, and has continued on her journey up to her senior year. “It was my birthday and Mr. Kahn looked at me and says, “You’re Taji’s sister. Are you as smart as him? Are you a better writer than him?” and I say to him, “I will be.” Chelsea always wrote poetry but didn’t know there was a club at her high school. She began writing after she read a poem called “My Name is Misty”, a poem about child abuse, which reminded her of her home situation.

“Chelsea had a great intensity that made me think if we can unlock what’s inside, what would come out would be incredible” said Spoken Word founder, Kahn.

Most of Chelsea’s poems were about her rough childhood and upbringing. While admitting her upbringing was tough she said that “I don’t really want to talk about my childhood. It’s something I rather not share.”

In early March she was awarded the gold medal in the National Scholastic competition and has been published in a book because of her inspiring words.

“Spoken Word saved me,” said Chelsea. In the past, she would frequently have altercations with teachers and students. “There was this one time that I flipped over my desk because I did not like my French teacher at the time.”

Spoken Word helped her boost her grades as well. “Since Spoken word, Chelsea has opened herself up, opened herself to the world,” Kahn said.

“She has gained confidence, passion, and has realized an incredible talent she has.”

Poetry became her second nature. “Poetry is a way to cope,” Chelsea explained. “It’s cliched but it’s therapy. It is second nature. You walk because you have to, eat because you have to, you write because you have to. It’s like missing a meal.”

Forty thousand people stand in the Arie Crown Theater. Claps sing in the air. Tears hit the plush seats underneath the crowd’s legs. Chelsea is joined on stage by the rest of her team with open arms. She is surrounded by love and support.

“I want to teach people what I know, talking to people about what I know and what I have learned,” she said. “I want to change someone’s life like Lind (Jay Lind, Spoken Word Coach), Kahn (Spoken Word Coach), and Gilmer (Spoken Word Coach). They have changed my life.”

As poetry has changed her life, those around her say she has changed the lives of her coaches, peers, and teammates. Write on.
By Ashley Thacker

Lorenzo and his two brothers sit shoulder to shoulder, almost indistinguishable from each other within four walls of a destroyed building.

Three boys born in California, praying to find warmth and comfort. Adjusting to an outside environment. No running water, no heat just three running noses. Being forced to find a new place to live, a new family to adjust to. This is the story of Lorenzo Gabriel Connolly. An adopted child from California, hoping to find a way for someone to accept and bring he and his two older brothers.

Being adopted into a new family after getting used to a different one was hard. He was used to having a mother and father, until he was adopted by a dad and papa. Moving from opposite-sex parents to having same-sex parents initially confused Lorenzo, but today, he is happy and well adjusted.

“I’ve only talked to my birth mother once since me and my brothers were taken from her,” he said. Lorenzo mentioned how he knew his blood relatives for such a short period of time. He and his brothers Estevan and Xavier were born in Martinez, Calif. He was only 4 when he was separated from his mother.

“My mother didn’t give me up, me and my brothers were taken from her we were homeless and found in an abandoned building.”

Lorenzo and one of his two dads.

It was not until Lorenzo was placed into school when everything went downhill; people asked him questions about his parents all the time, often insinuating it was weird to have two dads.

“I think having two dads is a good experience to open my eyes,” he said, to how people can be different.

“Personally I could care less that my parents are same sex, I actually kind of appreciate the fact they’re different as it helped kill my ignorance in my head and lead me to become a better person.”

Lorenzo’s best friend Dylan Thorn said, “I think it’s cool how he has two dads because it shows the diversity of how other different type of people raise their kids. Lorenzo and his brother turned out all right having two fathers, I think the idea is pretty cool if you ask me.”
By Courtney Temen

When you hear the name Jason Klaczynski, you probably won’t recognize it.
Say that name to a Pokémon lover, however, and he will have a lot to say.
Jack Brandt describes Klaczynski as an “Elder God of the community”. Klaczynski, age 29, is a Pokémon Trading Card Game (TCG) player. Klaczynski explained that “many kids collected cards, but only a few learned how to play and attended events.

Today the card game has had more than 60 expansion sets, and continues strong.” He has won three World Championships and many other tournaments. Klaczynski is the only player who has won more than one Pokémon TCG World Championship. There are Pokémon Video Game Champions (VGC) who have won more than one worlds event but no TCG players have. The world championships for TCG is an annual event held in different places once a year and have been going on since 2004.

Klaczynski “began playing in 1998 making this [his] 16th year playing the Pokémon Trading Card Game.” He went to his first tournament by himself and made a lot of friends who he still talks to. “Many of my childhood friends I met playing the game [Pokémon TCG] still travel to events together with me!” Klaczynski said while knocking out his opponent’s Pokémon—no, not a real creature, just the card. After just two years of playing the card game, Klaczynski won the Tropical Mega Battle in Hawaii in 2000. Six years later he would go onto winning his first of three world championships.

Aug. 18 at the Hilton Anaheim Hotel in Anaheim Calif., players from all over the world gathered together to see who would become this year’s World Champion. With eight long rounds before they took the top 32 players for single round elimination. Klaczynski went 6-2 getting him a spot in the top 32 at 12th place. He won the next four best of three matches, making it to finals. Klaczynski ended up there with a friend, Jimmy Ballard. As Klaczynski reminisced about this match he said, “Jimmy and I had practiced several times in the months leading up to the championship, especially with the cards we would end up using at the World Championship. We both found it kind of funny that out of all the players in the world that it ended up being both of us at the finals. We had a long Game 1. I ended up winning the game, and in Game 2 we both had great opening hands. He played a powerful set of cards on the first turn that looked tough for me, but my hand was just as good, and I countered with a card to limit his options.

On his turn, he had an answer ready for my counter but one turn later, I would play a combination of cards that we both knew from our practice matches would effectively win the game.”

Ballard was playing a deck called Eeveelutions and Klaczynski was playing a deck called Mewtrick. “I played a card called Battle Frontier, which shut down a key strategy of his [Ballard’s] deck. Though he had cards to disable my Battle Frontier, I used an attack called Disconnect, which prevents him from getting rid of Battle Frontier.

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With this one card in play, his strategy inevitably crumbles.” Ballard looked up, smiled, and shook Klaczynski’s hand conceding the World Championship. Klaczynski, who was stunned at the time, said “it took me a minute to realize I had just won the World Championship. All my friends cheered for me.” By this point Klaczynski had beat the guy he was playing a practice match against, shook his hand and smiled a genuine smile. “[Winning Worlds] was really exciting for me, having played Pokémon for so long. Winning a championship like that, though, only motivates you to want to win again. And I was fortunate and lucky enough to win twice more.”

The next time Klaczynski would win a bigger tournament was Worlds in 2008. Klaczynski would play in smaller tournaments throughout the year leading up to Worlds. He has in fact won at least one tournament from each premier event, (from smallest to largest- League Challenge/Battle Road, Cities, States, Regionals, Nationals, Worlds) except for a nationals.

Pokémon Nationals is by far the largest tournament in the premier events. The US Pokémon Nationals often has over 800 players in the masters (age 15 and up) division. The closest Klaczynski has gotten to winning a National Championship was in 2004 when he got top-eight, and top 32 in 2012.

Klaczynski constantly practices and plays online as well as attending small tournaments throughout the year. “I simply play a lot of Pokémon, and discuss strategies with fellow friends, all of whom are great players.” He even created a Facebook group where more than 6,000 Pokémon players come together to discuss Pokémon TCG in all different ways. Kyle Theaker, as well as three others, co-admin the Facebook group with Klaczynski.

Theaker started playing Pokémon TCG competitively in 2004 but stopped around 2006. Theaker started playing again in 2012. The first time Theaker remembers hearing about Klaczynski was in 2004, “I started getting into the TCG competitively and then I got really into [Klaczynski’s] articles on pojo.com.” Pojo is a website that Klaczynski would write articles for from 2000 until 2010. His articles helped players like Theaker because he “learned a lot just from netdecking and testing his [deck] lists.” Some Pokemon players know Klaczynski as “Ness” because that is what he used as his article writing name. Klaczynski’s articles are still online for players to learn about old format decks.

“Winning a [World Championship a] fourth time in today’s age, where everyone has gotten so good would require a tremendous amount of both luck and skill, but I’ll no doubt practice as much as possible to give myself the best chance at it!”
A nun of the Holy Cross Covent wishing to serve by teaching and a young man destined to be a priest since high school day leave their religious lives to be together during the reform of the Catholic church.

Wait. This isn’t just a love story. It’s a story of Ann and Richard Heidkamp. Two separate people leading two separate lives brought together through their passion to serve people. Their son, Bernard Heidkamp, proof of a life-changing decision to leave their old lives, retells the stories of his parents and its effect on him growing up.

The short answer is, “It was just never a big deal or anything crazy,” he said. “I knew my mom was a nun and that my dad was a priest and that was it.”

An English teacher of 15 years at OPRF, Heidkamp isn’t as religious as you may think. In fact, religion wasn’t really the influence he got over the years from hearing bits and pieces of his parents’ stories. They definitely took religion very seriously. I mean we always went to Sunday school but they were always really relaxed about it.

“I never felt pressured and my dad and mom were always very open minded about different ways of thinking.”

He begins with his mother, Ann. She knew she wanted to be a nun by the time she was in college. Now 84, her decision during the early 1950’s was not an uncommon one. Growing up in a very Catholic Italian family, going into the convent was seen as a respected decision for a young girl.

“I don’t want to put words into her mouth but I think it was a way for her to lead a meaningful life,” Heidkamp said.

Education was always an important part of Ann’s life. “My mom was very committed to education and she was always going to be a teacher and at a lot of these Catholic schools it was the nuns who taught, so it was part of the expectation,” he said.

On the other hand, Heidkamp’s father, Richard, didn’t have much of a choice. In his family, the two best options were going to the military or becoming a priest; they were going to serve in some way. So priesthood it was. Richard and his twin brother Don started as early as possible. They were sent to Quigley High School and then off to Mundelien College to train to be a priest.

While he may not have had much of a choice, becoming a priest wasn’t something Richard resented. It became an outlet for him to fight for social justice. “Here’s where I ask the magical question: ‘So, how did your parents meet?’ Heidkamp preps me by letting a sly smile slip across his face. “The details get a little hazy here.”

What he knows for sure is his parents met at St. Bernard’s Parish on the Southside while his dad was a priest and his mom was a nun. The Catholic church was reforming at the time; lots of people were leaving. A few years after the reform, CBS filmed “Once a Priest” on his father’s 1959 graduation class of priests because so many were leaving.

Richard and his brother Don were asked to participate but they declined. “They both left independent for their own reasons. They said they weren’t really satisfied with the direction of their lives and the organization they were in.”

“But,” he pauses for a brief moment… “My brother and I were always really suspicious of that.”

The reform was happening during the 1960s. His parents left in 1968 and married in 1969.

“A lot of things were changing in the 1960s and I think a lot of the values that influenced them to pursue their lives were changing and I think they felt like they could change too.”

Heidkamp was born in Largrane and lived there until he was 3. His parents then moved to Park Ridge, where Bernie and his brother Mike were raised and in the same house his parents live in now.

In every way, he had a normal childhood. He was not burdened or pressurized with religion. “In some sense my parents were serious about it but in other ways they were very relaxed; it was really interesting.” He isn’t religious now, but “I definitely respect and love my Catholic heritage. Religion has done wonderful things for my parents and they’ve done wonderful things through it. Religion was always a positive thing in their lives and it made them better people. And it always was a positive thing in my life too.”

When I imply his parents didn’t really have an influence on him because he isn’t religious, he quickly stops me in my tracks. “No no no, so many things about their history has influenced my life. Most importantly being that for them religion was really an avenue for social justice work. They saw religion as a way to change the world and I certainly believe in those things greatly.” So, don’t get it confused. You don’t have to be a nun or priest to be of service to people.”
“Don’t go playing in traffic.” Advice given by almost all parents, but Alex Williams does it anyway.

Almost every weekend, he snaps candid pics of cars racing down the highway. Photos are something most people take for special events, or even just for fun. For Williams, a dedicated photographer from OPRF, they're much more than that. “Photographs to me are what keeps people’s remembrance of things, ya know, like with pics of stuff people can always go back and be like, “Aye I remember when so-n-so happened.””

Alex takes pictures of pretty much everything under the sun. From flowers, to people, and his favorite skyscrapers. Just recently he’s begun to fuse photos together to create one “amazing masterpiece,” as Alex likes to call it. He recently posted a picture on Instagram that fused a view of the lake with a picture of his neighbor Omari, but the special thing about it is that he made it look like Omari was falling off of the ledge into the city. It’s hard to explain so I’ll just show you the photo instead.

Every single picture he takes is carefully focused and then snapped. He repeats this process about 10 times and then moves on to the next shot. After that he goes into computer and picks out the best pictures out of 10, then sends it to his peers for a review.

Growing up, Alex was raised exclusively in Oak Park with his mom and dad. He was going to Irving Elementary School when he first found his love for art. His best friend of 12 years, Rian Isom, recalls the moment. “We was at recess when he brought one of those disposable cameras and was taking hella pictures of stuff. It was like random stuff though like grass and mirrors and pencils. He was weird as hell.” Rian says the thing that was weird was that he was only taking pictures of things that were everyday items, that would get overlooked on a daily basis.

Alex remembered that moment with excitement. “Hell yeah, that was a while ago, how’d he even remember that?”

As Alex grew older he got into the sport of skateboarding along with a group of his friends. He was also the main guy then to take pictures and videos of the action.

Whether he was taking a video or picture it would always be with precision and carefulness. It’s something he says he values greatly.
Room 345 is dressed in posters like Nas’s “Illmatic” album, heavy-weight champion boxer Muhammad Ali, and a photograph of Harriet Tubman. In the corner, Devon Alexander sits at his desk, legs perched on top of it, his eyes and glasses cemented into a book. From the looks of him he seems to be a student himself, only carrying the height of 5 foot 3, but his personality shouts louder than the students of Oak Park River Forest High School during passing periods.

Alexander, popularly known as Mr. A, is always a buzz around the school. He is going on his tenth year here. “I don’t really want to work at a school with few to no students of color” he says. “I envy the seniors who leave, they get to start over.”

One of his close friends and fellow teacher at the school, Jay Lind, who is white, exclaims how lucky he feels to work with Alexander. “He challenges everything in the system, although thinking nothing he is going to say will change anything.” Being one of the very few African-American teachers in the building, he has a lot to say about racism and the school’s diversity. “School doesn’t do sh*t but make us the problem. Using us to be like ‘see we not like the rest of these white people we let y’all be here.’”

Growing up in Culver, Ind., Alexander lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, and during high school, which was a private military academy, he was one of three black males who attended. “In school, my white friends didn’t have any friends of color, white kids weren’t comfortable with other black kids...just me,” he says.

He disgustedly describes his high school’s welcoming video a “delusion of color blind ideology.” Alexander was one of the boys who starred in the video. He did not feel like a star. The three boys do not speak through the entire video, and Alexander felt more like a trophy than a student.

He says his upbringing and early school environment had a major impact on how he viewed white people and the effects they had on people of color. He did not live in one of the most caring households either while growing up. He describes his upbringing and parents as “parental abandonment and neglect, very self absorbed, and I felt emotionally abandoned.” With eight siblings he is now no longer close to, “I don’t need the drama in my life at a certain point,” he says forcefully.

Despite any issues he has had, the school has become Alexander’s second home. He donates his time not only to the students, but also the teachers. For his students he is the organizer and leader of two clubs, Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) and Boys Club for Young Boys of Color, in which he continues to educate students about becoming more aware of being a minority in multiple environments. In the group MSAN, which is a national organization, they travel around the country throughout the year to eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps that persist in their school.

For teachers, he has hosted several seminars in which he educates faculty on racial discontinuity and its affects on students and staff of color. One of his students, Charles Donaldson, who is a part of MSAN says, “Mr. A is so cool, he really made me feel like I was important.”

He has written multiple documents, and in one of them coining the term “racial dysconsciousness” especially for the adults of the school. He concludes that 70 percent of people are steeped in racial disconsciousness., meaning they are perpetuating the idea of a color blind society.
Before thoughts of becoming a teacher scribbled through his mind, he wanted to become a minister. He describes the school environment as “spiritual warfare”, further explaining how “the devil uses the sin of racism and white supremacy to break individual humans and to break individual relationships, hence white supremacy and racism is about a spiritual war at its core though it manifested in the physical world.” Passion bubbles in his eyes as he says “First acknowledge there is a problem on both side of the color line, then investigate their racial consciousness and shift it.” He feels that this is the only way his community can change how they are racially. He ends his solution by saying “then they got to live it despite of how hard it is day by day.”

Alexander concludes that “countering the racial disconsciousness we have to talk, by society, by teachers, by parents, by the community.” He still carries hope in the community and the world which is why Alexander continues to educate and promote change.

“The more I got to know him,” Lind says, “the more I respected and understood his thoughts on race and education... sometimes he makes me feel like a chump.”

Without speaking, Mr. A can have that effect on a person, whether it is about sketching your name on a pedestal, or making you feel like the breaking ball that shatters it.
There was something intriguing about ensemble that kept Koelling from leaving. “It’s insanely different (from regular classes). It’s a lot more focused on sketch writing and shaping the show as an ensemble. I guess it allows us to basically just goof around a lot ‘cause everyone has the basics of improv, we just get to play.”

At the end of each 12-week session, Ensemble has four shows in the De Maat Theater, a small but quaint room where everything is painted black, except the red curtains at the end of the stage. The months of preparation is finally presented to the audience.
ROSS CONSTABLE

By Celeste Moncrieff

Watching Hitchcock on his basement couch, Ross Constable analyzes the music or lack thereof, the complex images, and visions. These movies speak to Constable as they inspire him for the next time he picks up the camera. The former OPRF student now goes to college at the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts as many people like to call it. He was accepted into a prestigious film program at the school, and is now finishing his freshman year. He describes it as “incredibly hipster,” and is now working on a narrative film that is close to completion.

Although he is thriving in The Golden State, he will always be connected to OPRF. Constable is very well known here and people not only love his work, but many people consider him to be a friend. An old acquaintance, Katherine Hahn, described him as “Very shy and quiet.” He is more of an observer than a speaker, as Constable likes to put it. Emma Manola chimed in that he also had a very “cool” attitude.

One of his most recognized pieces is a documentary called “Summer of ’74.” The documentary was a little more than five minutes long and showcased life in one of Chicago’s Westside neighborhoods. After Manola watched it she was amazed. “It was fascinating that they let Ross into their culture and that they allowed him to film them.”

Whilst talking about the film Constable talked a lot about how friendly the people really were, and it is all about the vibes you give off. He said, “Camera comes secondary, it is all about talking to people.”
KATHERINE HAHN

By Lindsey Shelstad

During summer 2013, Katherine Hahn had a life-changing experience. She would eventually meet many little girls and boys who made the best in her come out. Hahn and her best friend Megan Jones went to Honduras to visit an orphanage and bring gifts to the kids through a missionary group called All God’s Children. “The experience made me more of an appreciative, loving, and eager-to-help kind of person than before,” Hahn said.

“My best friend had been going to Honduras for many years and always told me about what an amazing experience it was. I wanted to be able to experience it myself instead of just hearing about it through stories she told me,” Hahn said. Jones said, “I really wanted her to be able to experience how amazing it is and I was so nervous she wouldn’t have a good time since she didn’t speak much Spanish, but she seemed to love it and picked up on the language really quickly.”

Over the time of the trip, Hahn would visit four different orphanages: The Hogar, which is the orphanage for girls ages 1-18; The Farm, housing boys ages 1-18; Buen Pastor, an orphanage for young mothers and their babies, and Misericordia, housing individuals with developmental disabilities. Hahn wasn’t sure of how her experience would be, but this is how it started: “When I got there the first night, we visited The Hogar. I felt nervous and excited on the van ride there. When we got there I felt very overwhelmed. The second I stepped off the van I was immediately surrounded by young girls jumping on me and giving me hugs and speaking to me rapidly in Spanish. But it was the good and exciting kind of overwhelming, not the stressed kind.”

Not only was Hahn overwhelmed, she immediately felt much love by all these people. Hahn said “They loved showing us their talents and school work; you could tell they really needed praise from role models because they didn’t get a lot of it.”

While she was visiting each orphanage, Hahn also fed people who lived in a garbage dump, and donated clothing, medicine, and other supplies to the impoverished country.

“The most transformative part of the trip was visiting those living in the landfill,” Hahn said. “Going to Honduras, I knew what to expect so there was not much of a culture shock for me, but the landfill fully exposed me to how impoverished Honduras really is.”

“It was shocking seeing women, men, and even children working in the garbage dump with no time for education, rest, or leisure. The people were sorting through trash to find things to sell and wore all their belongings on their back, despite the heat, in fear of the items getting stolen,” Hahn said.

“These people were severely underfed and lived amongst cattle and trash in terrible conditions, the smell being the least of their worries. We distributed food, and afterwards stayed and talked to the people living there.”

Hahn talked a lot about a little girl who really became one of her best friends in Honduras “There was a little girl named Rosemary, (she was 4 years old) who I hung out with most of the time. She would always find me and jump around and hug me; I could really see how loving she was.”

Katherine was very happy but sad when the trip was over; she was excited that she helped bring joy into many people’s lives. She didn’t expect leaving would be so hard, “Leaving was terrible. Just like the first night at the Hogar, on the last night I was swarmed by little girls climbing on me and hugging me. But this time I knew them and had grown to love them, and they were begging me not to leave. I couldn’t help but cry because leaving meant leaving the people living there with their suffering,” said Hahn.
When she was on the plane ride home, she thought a lot about how unfair it was that she had the opportunity to leave and go home and they had no choice but to stay in the poor, impoverished conditions. “It’s a hard fact to come to terms with and I still think about that a lot,” Hahn said.

Hahn’s friend Maegan Kline said that when Hahn came home from the trip, “She seemed to care about everything in a much more sympathetic way and never complained about what she did or didn’t have.” Hahn said, “I feel very passionate about helping people and making a lasting difference in their lives.”

Jones notices her passion too. “I know she has a passion for disabled kids so it was especially cool to see her interact with some of the special needs children there.”

Hahn continues to work with disabled kids and kids who are less fortunate. She has a strong passion for it and plans to continue spending time volunteering. “It’s hard to describe the wonderful feeling you get when you help people out. Once you do it yourself, you’ll understand. I’m glad I volunteer because it’s such a great feeling” Hahn said.
Watching Desmond Baker record in the studio is a thrilling experience. It’s thrilling because, he puts his all and his heart into his raps. He is very fluent and has great rhythm.

Recording with him on a song is quite amazing as well. You feed off of his energy which makes you do good as well. “I put my all into my music because it is my number one passion,” he said. “I wouldn’t rather be doing anything else in the world. This is my life.”

Desmond is recording music and writing all of the time. He competes in MC competitions downtown every couple of months. He also does battle rap competitions downtown. He’s in this rap/hip hop group in the school called “Hip Hop Wing.”

Desmond is very consistent with his music. He never loses track or shows a lack of interest. “I try to stay really consistent with my music,” Desmond said. “As I said before, music is my life. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. It’s my craft and my passion.”

Desmond has been writing lyrics and rapping since his freshman year in high school. “I wrote almost every single day when I started rapping. I had to take a break though, because it was getting to a point where it was like it had to be mandatory for me to write.”

But his break didn’t last long. “I couldn’t go that long without writing. It was like a drug. I took about two weeks off of writing. I had to get my mind set and back on track with my school work. After those two weeks, my mind was refreshed and ready to go, but I didn’t write that much often as I used to.”

Desmond hopes to get signed and make it big in his music career. “I want to be the best. I want to be the next Tupac, the next Biggie, or Jay-z. They are each considered the greatest to ever do it and I want to surpass them. I don’t want to be just as good, I want to be better.” They are considered the best because they have an enormous fan base and have sold millions and millions of albums world wide. They are also considered as Icons to the world.

Desmond has a lot of heart for music. He just doesn’t focus on rap or hip-hop; he listens to guitar bands and a little of jazz. “I love all types of music; I will listen to any type. I play the guitar and it helps me out with my music.” Desmond has a great talent for the guitar. He plays it in his spare time and is very passionate about it.

“I play the bass and the electric guitar. I’ve been playing the guitar for 4 years almost now. It has helped me greatly. It has helped me because it helps me better my rhythm when it comes to me recording my music in the studio. It allows me to stay on beat and makes sure my flow is on point.”

Sammy Faulk, a friend of Desmond, says his first impression when he heard one of Desmond’s songs “was good. I loved his flow and you could hear the feeling of his voice. It was as if you could imagine what he was rapping. It was fun to listen too and the different tones of voices that he used made you stay interested throughout the song.

“Desmond is very talented,” Sammy continued. “He is surely good enough to get signed. I look at and listen to a lot of these rappers and people who aren’t really that good to get signed. He is better than more of a handful of them without a doubt in my mind. He can become very successful with his music. He just has to stay consistent.”
The smell of freshly cut grass envelopes David Beacom as he secures the bed of his Ford F-250 pickup truck.

One lawn to go.

David started working that night before the dew had a chance to cover his well-manicured lawns. Now, as the sun starts to swallow the night, Beacom unpacks his trailer one last time. Dewy nothingness turns into a familiar odor, quiet turns to cacophony and then back to quiet, work to do turns to work done.

Time to go to school.

Born and raised in River Forest, things didn’t always come easily to David Beacom. He was a “big, slow, jolly kid” who cared more about “Skittles than sports.” But that changed for Beacom around age 10 when St. Lukes’ basketball coach, Fran Roche, began working with the big guy on his game. After a couple years of hard work, Beacom led his St. Lukes team to a league championship, after being a consistent bottom dweller for years.

After we finish digressing about basketball, David remembers a bit more of his early years. He “lived outside” in grade school and didn’t mind pulling weeds or trimming hedges. Of course, his favorite job was always mowing the lawn. “I wanted to do landscaping my whole life. The first time I saw a Kelty (Landscaping) truck, I knew I wanted that. The trucks, the trailers, the mowers, I love that stuff.”

Beacom’s dream was not passive either. In fourth grade, he and his friend Patrick Flanagan walked door to door for hours until they got just one customer. They mowed his house every Saturday until he told a few people about the work ethic of the young boys. Then they got a few more customers and a couple more until they ran into one big problem: “transportation. We had to f***ing walk everywhere.”

Then they got a crucial bit of help that probably saved the business. “Thank god, Patrick’s dad started driving us around town on busy days.” They continued to make some money, but it was never easy. Patrick Flanagan left the company around the time Beacom turned 16. At this point he felt like leaving the company. “There’ve been times where I thought it was Beacom Landscaping’s last day... actually, that used to happen three or four times a week.”

When asked how he got through it Beacom had some pretty strong praise for Juan Trejo, a Mexican immigrant who built his own lawn care company many years ago. “Juan taught me everything he knows, or at least everything I know he knows.” Trejo declined an interview, but another mentor of Beacom’s, Tom Engoren, had high praise for the young landscaper.

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AARON GYLLENHAAL

By Erin Carney

It was a hot, muggy day in August when 5-year-old Aaron Gyllenhaal and his dad were out taking one of their frequent train-watching trips. Aaron was sitting on the ground below the tracks, sketching out the details of the train as the sun beat down on his back. He heard the faint chirping of birds he didn't recognize and turned to see where it was coming from. Not far down the street was a cell phone tower that rose far above every other building in the area. Aaron saw what looked like an entire flock of small, light green birds lining the rods of the large structure. He was amazed; the contrast between the brightly colored creatures and the gloomy, monotone trainyard was incredible. Aaron called his dad over and pointed up at the tower. Fascinated by their vibrancy, he begged his father for one. On his seventh birthday, Aaron ripped off the wrapping paper of a huge box-shaped present to find a wire cage with not one, but four tiny green parakeets inside. Aaron was ecstatic; he couldn’t wait to learn everything there was to know about the four new additions to his family.

Aaron Gyllenhaal is now a senior at OPRF, and his interests have grown a lot since he got his first parakeets. Soon after he began reading about his bright green pets, Aaron and his father decided to put feeders in their backyard to attract other types of birds. They began to watch the birds in their backyard religiously, even deciding to branch out and go bird-watching in other areas around Chicago.

“We looked up places in Illinois to go bird watching and found listserv called IBET, (Illinois Birders Exchanging Thoughts), which is a collection of all the recent sightings of the bird around the area,” Gyllenhaal says. Aaron and his father started going to the different places reported on and, soon enough, they found a group of more experienced birdwatchers who helped them with identifying calls and finding the best places to see each species. “I learned so much from them,” he says, “and now I’m pretty much self-sufficient when it comes to bird-watching.”

In 2013, the record for the highest number of bird species identified in Cook County by a single person was 274. That year, Aaron decided he wanted to break it. “I had mentioned it a few times to my parents and other bird-watchers and I had gotten a really positive response, so I decided to go for it,” he says. “When I first started in January of that year, I was determined to beat the record. I knew that a lot of people had tried in the past but were never able to find more than 274 species, and that made me want to break the record more than ever.”

That year, Aaron spent all his free time outside looking for new species and cataloging each new one. He started a blog about his birding experiences and posted frequently on it. Once he started linking his blog on the IBET listserv, he attracted the attention of bird-watchers all over Illinois.

“People knew about my big year,” he says. “They started asking me about my progress and some people even started to contact me when they saw birds that weren’t on my list yet. It felt like everybody was rooting for me.”

By the time the autumn rolled around, Aaron was getting close to his goal. He spent every day after school with his camera and binoculars in various spots around Cook County, watching and waiting for each new species. One evening in October, Aaron and his dad were getting ready to pack up their things and call it a day. The sun had begun to set and, even though he only needed one more bird to beat the record, they were getting hungry for dinner. They had just started walking back to the car when Aaron saw something fly over his head.

“It was a Surf Scoter, which is a type of duck. It flew right over me and it was my 275th bird,” Aaron says. “That’s when I broke the record. I’ll never forget the feeling I had when I finally saw my 275th bird. I felt like I won. I don’t think I’d be where I am today without my parents, who are incredibly supportive of anything that I’ve ever wanted to do. I knew how many people were rooting for me and I didn’t want to let them down. It really helps to have positive support around you. It can make all the difference.”

Aaron plans to attend Illinois State University this fall. His brother Ethan Gyllenhaal reminisces on their birding experience together over the past nine years.
Bird watching has become a bonding experience for the Gyllenhaal family, who have been serious birders since they started breeding domestic parakeets in their Oak Park home. Aaron and Ethan’s father, Eric Gyllenhaal, is thrilled that his sons have taken interest in watching birds.

“I’ve always been intrigued by natural science,” he says. He describes bird watching as his personal sanctuary and encourages his sons to pursue their own passions, including birding. “I’ve probably spent more time in the car driving Aaron and Ethan around all over the city than I have at work,” he jokes.

Since age 8, Aaron has cataloged over 800 bird species in Costa Rica and North America.

“Birding is usually mostly sight and sound, but as you keep learning how to focus on everything around you, you start to really be able to appreciate the smells and textures that come along with each specific environment,” Aaron says. He also says that even though he’s identified nearly a thousand birds before he’s even left high school, he certainly isn’t going to be stopping any time soon.

Beacom continued from page 22

“David’s been through a lot in the few years that I’ve helped him out.” Beacom stores his equipment at Engoren’s Maywood warehouse. “I knew (Beacom) from coaching him in youth baseball, but ever since we’ve re-connected through business I’ve realized how successful he has the chance to be.” $10,000 worth of equipment was stolen from Beacom at Engoren’s storage space. “We were both devastated, but David was much more constructive about it. He immediately started looking for ways around the gigantic problem that we had.” Beacom picked himself and his company up very quickly. They continued snow removal operations that week and Beacom was completely ready for Spring this year.

Nick Saleh, one of his longest tenured workers said of Beacom, “I would never have expected Dave could run a business before I started working for him. He does a great job orchestrating everything and still works his a** off.”

Beacom has completed an amazing feat to get through high school while running a fully developed business. He will attend landscaping classes at Triton College next year in addition to continuing and hopefully expanding the business.
“There was not a single cloud in the sky on Aug 16, 2014. It was without a doubt a very hot summer day. I was sweating bullets.”

Hasnaa Naila, better known as Naya by her closest friends, left her country for the first time that exact day. When I first met her I had planned a very “systematic” interview. It turned out to be a very spontaneous conversation and to my surprise we have more in common that we thought we would ever have. I’m from another country too, and I was terrified at first so I wanted to hear what her attitude toward this great challenge was.

How could she recall all the details from that one day when she found out she was coming to the United States? With a sincere smile on her face and a sparkle in her eyes she said, “How could I forget? My dream was about to come true.”

“This was finally it, my life was going to take a different path,” she continued.

“Since the very first second I stepped into the airport, my heart began beating really really fast. I remember closing my eyes on the airplane when I saw the city for the first time, the skyscrapers slightly touching the clouds, the sunset reflecting on the buildings, the color of the sky turned into a pink, lilac, orange blend. I literally thought I was dreaming. I was like, can somebody pinch me?”

She stopped for a brief period of time, looked at the ceiling and started laughing. It was the most genuine giggle I have ever heard. “I kept repeating to myself, this is it, Naya. There’s no turning back.”

Was she scared for this great challenge? “Scared of what? Leaving my country? C’mon Andrea, I’ve been living there for 16 years, I needed a break, don’t you think?” She started laughing again.

I started bombarding her with other questions like, “What about your family? What about your friends? Your school? Your life there?” I couldn’t believe she wasn’t worried about any of those things. She gave me a look like trying to say to me, “Calm down, it’s not a big deal.” But for me it was. She told me “I know it must be hard for a lot of people... “.

“For me it is,” I said.

She smiled. “But I know I made the right choice, and it was an opportunity I couldn’t let it pass by. You see, I have always wanted to see the world, and why not now that I’m still young and full of energy?”

Edoardo Catale, another student from the exchange program here in OPRFHS, shared with me his experience with Naya. “Naya, Naya, Naya”, with his beautiful Milanese accent he repeated her name nodding his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh I just love her. She is the sweetest person I know.” Just so we are clear he said it in a “I really appreciate her as a friend” way, not in a “I want to be her boyfriend” way.

“Isn’t she? Now tell me more about her. What do like about her? Do you go out as friend? If you could describe her with one word, what would it be?”

“I can’t. A single word is not enough haha. Naya is one of those persons that can be more than one thing. She is kind, respectful, sweet, considerate and believe it or not very very goofy, she is always making fun of my accent.”

Naya, made a lot of sacrifices in order to be where she is now. She repeated junior year of high school, knowing that all the classes she took here in OPRF would not be transfer to her transcripts once she gets back to Indonesia. She is the true example of determination and sacrifice.

“You know Andrea, life is about challenges and I see those challenges as opportunities to grow as an individual, learn and make a difference.” That is my great friend, Hasnaa Naila.
JANE KUNTZ

By Hasnaa Naila

A bunch of energetic male teenagers threw their hands to the air. Thirty out-of-tune, yet electrifying students’ voices chanted the song “Go Argentina!” One of them, standing on top of a table, cheeks burning vigorously waved the Argentinian flag.

Looking physically different from the rest of her classmates was a blonde girl with fair skin, sitting in the front row of the class room. In her head, she was busy figuring out “What is going on?!”. With the lively atmosphere in the class, she is amazed and confused; her jaw drops before she flashes a smile and attempted to sing along with them.

Jane Kuntz was 16 when she sat in this class room full of people she had never met. But that's not the surprising part—she decided to leave her comfort zone by going to another country for a month-long exchange program whose language she has never spoken before.

“I just want to travel the world,” Kuntz said, smiling. “It all started when some exchange organizations came to OPRF and I was really interested. I came back from the presentation and was like, “Mom, Dad, I have to do this!”

Kuntz told how her parents met and how it influenced her interest in the exchange. “It was in 1976, 200 years after the declaration of Independence was signed. My parents were both hosting an exchange student. AFS, the organization I went on exchange to, decided to postpone their hosting students’ departure until after 4th of July. There was a big picnic hosted by AFS, and my host parents both went. They met each other there and, they became high school sweethearts! I think it’s really cute because I can relate to their experience as a fellow AFS-er.”

Kuntz then decided to go to Argentina the summer after sophomore year, to a city called Paraná. There, she attended the local high school and lived with a host family for five weeks. Kuntz said it was hard to be in a new, strange environment and adapt to the local culture as she has never spoken Spanish before.

“I had a culture shock when I came to Argentina. For example, the people there always stay up late until midnight, even on week days! Pravia- it’s like a pre-party- is commonly found every weekend and it goes from 11 at night until 7 in the morning,” Kuntz said.

Kuntz has made exchange programs a regular part of her education. She then went to Italy on her junior year. There was easier for her since she has been studying Italian for six years. She remembered it as more of a realization of what she has learned about Italian culture before she came.

Her best friend, Jake Levin, a sophomore at OPRF, said Kuntz has always been interested in Italy and its culture. “After she got back from Italy, she told me about how much fun she had and places she saw. She really enjoyed getting to know the location better and the cultural norms there.”

Living in a totally different community, she also had to deal with problems she encountered on her exchange. For example, due to the language barrier, she had to figure out the right word to say without seemingly insulting the person she was talking to. “I actually found it hard to pinpoint certain moments outside of my comfort zone because in reality, the whole time I was outside of it. I was this very American girl absorbed by my own culture and I lived with wonderful host families for two months,” Kuntz explained.

Also being a diver and swimmer, Kuntz had to leave her workout routine. She then noticed how anxious she was when she didn't work out during her exchange year. This, to her, was one of the things she never thought about before leaving her comfort zone. “I only worked out twice during my exchange in Argentina. I got so antsy,” she said, shaking her head.

She found out, however, that her three years’ experience in the OPRF diving team actually contributed to help her deal with her problems. “In diving, I learned to let go of mistakes you made that won’t create big problems in the long run, and when you’re on exchange you can’t get upset over the little mistakes you make. Also in diving, you have to trust yourself a lot which goes into life and foreign exchange, too.”

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Her synchronized swimming team mate, Andrea Hayden, agreed with Kuntz. “Jane Kuntz is one of the most intense people that I know,” Hayden said. “She has been really pushed to her limit on both diving and synchronized swimming, and I think that sort of helped her during her exchange. I was actually surprised that she was just fine when she got back, especially for Argentina because she didn’t speak the language! She became more fearless, mature and sophisticated after she went back,” Hayden grinned, recalling her impression of Kuntz.

At the end of the day, Kuntz claimed she didn’t regret anything of her exchange year. “I learned so much and I will never regret my decision to go to a place where I knew I would sink before I could swim.”
JORDIN HALE

By Eugene White

The sound of a whistle dances above the physical education class. Ping-Ponging off the moist walls, the frequency subsides after a few moments, but lingers. It leaves a lasting impression in the ears of the students. One of those students is Jordin Hale or “JoJo”, as her peers like to call her. After a game of water polo, Ms. Graham, the teacher, asks Hale to stay after class to have a short chat. As a first semester freshman, Hale nervously approaches Graham, hoping there isn’t bad news. Hale holds a long gaze into the eyes of Graham as she receives the surprisingly complimentary advice. Graham noticed that Hale had a relatively strong arm and suggested that she try out for the water polo team in the spring.

Fall came and went, winter following close behind. Spring blossomed and it had not gone unnoticed. Not many things had remained constant since the early weeks of that conversation between Graham and Hale. Water polo tryouts were imminent and Hale had most certainly blown off Graham’s advice, right? No. Not to the slightest extent. Running track for most of her life, she began to resent it in every way. Determined to play at least one sport, she made it her duty to try out for water polo.

On the first day of tryouts, “people treated her like she didn’t deserve to be there” said Hale. Although being discouraged, JoJo remained focused and “tried to just shake it off”. That was until the coaches ordered the girls to swim. This was the point at which everything started to fall apart. Hale couldn’t swim. She lacked the most fundamental piece of the game and was left to her own devices in the cold, dark pool as others swam around her like thirsty sharks. One of the goalies saw her struggling to swim and told her “If you try out as a shallow end goalie, you can stand on the bottom.” Luckily, OPRF’s pool had a shallow end, which would serve as the birthplace of success for Hale.

Hale had miraculously made the team, a major success in her eyes. After the celebratory mood had subsided after a few days of tryouts. Next year, she will be off to Iona College on a scholarship for water polo and will compete in the Olympic Development Program and the National Team Selection camp in California. Hale is one of two participants who will represent the Midwest Zone in California as part of the Team Selection Camp. Having been ranked the No. 9 player in the country, the Huskies have found their senior leader in JoJo. Hale takes pride in being the team captain and believes “it’s an honor to be a captain after having spent years trying to prove myself.” Her career as an OPRF water polo player has taught her some important life lessons such as growing as an individual and working through adversity.

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Things looked bleak for the Huskies at the beginning of the season due to the loss of senior, Katie Appell who scored more than 100 goals last season. Many critics began to sleep on OPRF because they “knew it would give us setbacks,” said Jocelyn Weisman, senior water polo player.

Weisman also noted she and others were “scared, but it brought us together as a team.” In need of a leader, Hale stepped up and filled the shoes of the phenomes that once played for OPRF.

Facing adversity at great levels, the Huskies prevailed when it has mattered most. With a 24-2 record this season, the Huskies are poised to make a deep run in the playoffs. The road to success has not been easy by any means, but the Huskies have advantages that can’t be coached. The Huskies’ head coach Elizabeth Perez asserts that “We have more than just natural talents on our team – we have hard work, compatibility and a team that loves each other in and out of the pool, which is vital to success.”

Much of this positive energy has come from Hale, explains Casson, as she has “helped instill a more serious game; she knows how to have fun but knows when it’s time to work… it’s just what we need.”

Water Polo at OPRF is becoming a tradition of excellence due to the work ethic and determination of the team, led by Hale. Coach Perez also noted her “determination is definitely symbolic of our team as a whole. The girls know that with a great goalie behind them, they can be that much better overall as a team and we have set our goals higher this year from the beginning.”

Some things in sports set good players from great players, and being great isn’t for everyone. Everyone wants to be great, but only a select few will have the willpower and determination to execute those powers. Hale fits right into this category, being “internally motivated and a role model and mentor to the younger players” as described by Perez.

As prom and graduation are looming over Hale, her relationships with her coaches and teammates will soon become part of history. Coach Perez explained how “JoJo is more of a daughter to me” due to their “mutual love for water polo and [their] respect of each other’s knowledge and advice”. JoJo’s determination and perseverance, along with the presence of Coach Perez, are the only things that have remained constant for Hale during her water polo career at OPRF. This dynamic duo creates the opportunities for the emergence of a successful program, including an unbeatable team bond and an exquisite work ethic. As the Huskies begin their postseason, they are determined to earn their ultimate goal: a state title. With strong leaders such as Hale, the Huskies will be in the fight for every second of play, opening the opportunity to engrave their legacy into history.
Some may say if one doesn’t get sufficient grades, he doesn’t have a good head on his shoulders. This stereotype can be broken in many cases, but especially in the case of Lynn Gilbertsen’s.

“When I reached high school, I thought my social life was more important and I maintained a 2.5 GPA,” she recalled recently. Irony then played a role in her career choice: she became a high school English teacher.

Graduating from UIC with a major in English and minor in woman’s gender studies, Gilbertsen, now an OPRF English teacher, began her career in the Chicago public school system.

It was there, at Roberto Clemente High School, where Gilbertsen encountered a life-changing experience. Clemente, a school of 1,800, houses students from urban neighborhoods such as Humboldt Park, K-Town, and Austin. “There are awesome kids, and then there are also not-so-awesome kids, just like at all schools,” Gilbertsen said. “People tend to think of Chicago schools for the negativity, but there are truly a lot of awesome kids.”

During her time at Clemente, Gilbertsen began to spend time with students after school. “There is lots of need for support, lives are full of violence. I started a lot of after school programs.”

Gilbertsen would bring in lunch and food for her kids. She made many connections with students. She then left CPS in 2009, and began teaching at Maine East.

While at Maine East, Gilbertsen received a call from one her previous co-workers at Clemente, informing her a previous student of hers was no longer living at home and wondering if Lynn had any ideas. Gilbertsen had worked with a few women’s shelters before she began teaching in high schools. She picked up the phone and called everywhere she thought could take this student. Sadly, the student was under 18, so all shelters were unable to take her.

Gilbertsen came home flustered over the situation. She began telling her husband what was going on. “My husband looked at me and said ‘Then she can live with us.’”

The next day, Gilbertsen and her husband traveled back to Clemente high school, where they signed a document of legal custodianship, for her old student and now new adopted daughter, Yanira. The couple then picked up all of Yanira’s belongings at a friend’s house, where she was currently living and took her to Ikea, to pick out whatever she wanted.

When asked about the setting and feeling of the documental signing, Gilbertsen said, “A million thoughts were running through (our) heads. Love was flying out, relief, and a lot of the unknown. My husband and I knew we wanted to do it for the long haul.” To sign custodianship papers, previous parents of the child must be present, and the new set of parents as well, along with a witness. Tension between the two set of parents was not too bad, Gilbertsen said. “There was definitely sadness, (but) I really believe her parents wanted her to get what she needed.”

Gilbertsen’s mother cried with happiness when she was informed of what Gilbertsen had done. She always tells Gilbertsen how proud she is of she and her husband. “It feels like great stuff that you write books about,” Gilbertsen says.

Gilbertsen has been through many phases with Yanira. “There was a lot of figuring out our roles,” she said. “We didn’t have a blueprint of how this would work then, and we don’t have one now.”

They have all had their “parent/child moments”, when Gilbertsen and her husband are annoyed with her, or vice versa. However, “She will always be a part of our life,” Gilbertsen says.

Gilbertsen helped Yanira get her academic career back on track and salvage the grades they could. That first summer, Yanira got a job at a Pizza Hut; she would go on to receive a college scholarship from the Pizza Hut company.

Yanira is now a senior at a four-year private college. She has lived with Gilbertsen for six years and comes home every break she has.