

The Oracle

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Nearly 100 vaccinated at high school COVID-19 clinic

by Savannah Schultis & Addison Kania

On Thursday, May 6, Shaler Area High School held a COVID-19 vaccine clinic for students ages 16 and older as well as staff members. Giant Eagle pharmacists administered the Pfizer vaccine to all eligible students who signed up. All in all, 97 students, or 8 percent of the high school population, received a vaccine.

“It was really good, I was so pleased,” Shaler Area High School Nurse Mrs. Leslie Scheuer said. “The pharmacists from Giant Eagle were rock stars. They had these well-oiled machines, so it went pretty quickly, but they were so nice with the students.”

After students received their vaccine, they had to sit for 15 minutes before they went back to class. Students with a history of allergies were required to stay for a half hour as a precaution. Juice and cookies were also available for everyone while they waited.

“Overall it was a better experience than I was expecting and I cannot wait to get my second vaccine,” junior Alexis Gregory said.

Those who received their first vaccine at the clinic will be getting their second one on Thursday, June 3.

“The experience was very positive. The people from Giant Eagle were tremendous. A couple of our students were upset and the nurses from Giant Eagle were excellent with the students,” Superintendent Dr.

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-- Dr. Sean Aiken

Sean Aiken said.

In addition to the high school clinic, the school district is investigating whether it would be able to do a clinic in June, most likely at the Middle School building. There are numerous barriers, such as sports, jobs, and transportation, that stand in the way of many getting vaccinated, but the district hopes that hosting a clinic would take away some of the obstacles that come with getting vaccinated. It is not known if that clinic would be for only students and staff or if it would also include community members.

“We talk first and foremost about meeting the needs of our students and staff, but if we can, we’d

be open to the idea of opening (a vaccination clinic) to the community and serve as a community hub,” Dr. Aiken said.

Just last week the Pfizer vaccine was approved for ages 12-15, but the possibility of another school clinic for the younger kids is probably unrealistic. Squeezing in two doses at some point during the rest of this school year is difficult, and it might not align with Giant Eagle’s schedule. Therefore, a clinic after school is out seems like the most promising option.

Looking into the 2021-22 school year, Scheuer doesn’t envision a COVID-19 vaccine being a requirement to return to school. The decision process with something like that takes 6-12 months, if not longer, as it goes back and forth between the committee and the community.

“Just in terms of getting back to normal life, vaccines are playing a big role, but I don’t see it being required for school yet,” Mrs. Scheuer said.

However, the importance of getting a covid vaccine is huge. Scheuer believes we’re going to see small mutations of the virus throughout our lifetimes, maybe not as severe as a pandemic, but things that affect public health. It’s critical that we’re protected against any mutated viruses that have a chance of getting a foothold again.

“I’m hoping a lot of the high school is vaccinated by the fall, that will just make things so much more normal for us,” Mrs. Scheuer said.

SAHS class plays big role in preserving Girty’s Woods

by Rebecca Beckas

The plot of land known as Girty’s Woods, running from Reserve, through Shaler, and then to Millvale, was purchased by the Allegheny Land Trust and thus saved from development. This was a long journey which started last year, but with the help of many community organizations, small businesses, and even Shaler Area students, the 155 acres will be protected from development and preserved as natural habitat.

Mrs. Abbey Nilson, teacher of the Sustainability class at the high school, was able to get her class involved in this project because of her commitment to preserving the environment. She and Mr. Chris Lisowski, a teacher at the middle school who is also devoted to sustainability, met with the non-profit organization Allegheny Land Trust, along with many community leaders in Millvale, every week last summer. They discussed what was happening with Girty’s Woods and how they could help save the land from development.

Sustainability was a new course this school year, so Nilson found this as a perfect opportunity to get her students involved with something so important within their own community.

One of the biggest challenges of this project was to raise awareness about how important this piece of land was. Though not known by a considerable amount of people, Girty’s Woods is a large plot of woodland that absorbs rainwater, and is a diverse habitat and home to many plants and animals. In order to raise this awareness, students participated in many initiatives, such as fundraisers, creating social media accounts, and even reaching out to the local news.

Seniors Cade Fedorek and Lauren Powell created an Instagram account, bringing attention to the cause through various posts highlighting initiatives, fundraisers, and the overall importance of being ecologically responsible.

“I used the Instagram to continue interacting with the community groups and build relationships for the community, so then after that you could see our posts being shared more often and it spread a lot faster,” Fedorek said.

Alongside them, sophomore Kylie Brooks and junior Maddy Kruth took on the role of connecting with local businesses and people to advocate about the fundraisers and cause in order for them to advertise.

Most notably, the two reached out to Heather Abraham through Instagram, who then invited them onto the news, boosting the GoFundMe and bringing more attention. There, they talked about their cause and how they were boosting it through social media. Mrs. Nilson described it as “amazing” as she watched the GoFundMe totals jump while the students spoke on the news. The original goal for the GoFundMe was \$500, but by April 17, the total raised was \$8,511.

“With about \$8,500 in the GoFundMe in the end, and then Pamelas in Mill-



A biker travels on one of the trails in Girty’s Woods.

vale raised another two thousand, I’m just so proud that our class fundraiser raised over ten thousand towards this final goal that had to be met... what we did was important because we still raised a pretty good chunk, and the awareness got the community involved which is so important,” Nilson said.

Nilson’s other sustainability students were just as involved. The fundraisers they participated in included a spaghetti dinner held by Sprezzatura, where groups of students helped deliver food, make flyers, and sell raffle tickets.

In addition to that, Tupelo Honey Tea sponsored a fundraiser in the winter with an online art auction to benefit Girty’s Woods. Fedorek and Powell, along with seniors Trinity Machajewski, Alyssa Lorenz and sophomore Sophia Duty made art for this event. The last fundraiser they were involved with was a concert at Mr. Smalls Theatre.

In addition, Shaler students ran their own fundraiser growing trees, and then planting them in the woods. Part of the property had been logged which prompted Nilson and her Sustainability students to grow and replant the trees. In addition to tree planting, they did a community cleanup on April 24 with the Allegheny Cleanways, to get students and the community to help clean up the woods.

“I think in terms of sustainability, it’d be hard not to [stay involved] after

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OPINIONS

Social media stars a bad influence on fashion industry

by Ella Katona

Fashion, something that is ever-evolving and becoming more individualistic as the generations go on, is being transformed through the platform of social media. It has become an ongoing argument on this platform that “social media influencers” are now taking over the rules and jobs of other groups because of their popularity on the internet.

Not only this, they are beginning to take over events as well. One that has been most notably brought to my attention is Fashion Week.



New York Fashion Week, as well as others, has always been the main face of the fashion industry, where fashion designers, brands or “houses” display their latest collections in runway fashion shows to buyers and the media.

They present their top-of-the-line pieces of clothing to their audiences, while using models who have been trained and have worked hard to be in that line of work to show them off.

But, things have changed. Social media influencers who average making millions of dollars per year by making their Tik Toks, uploading overly-edited photos on Instagram, or creating videos on YouTube are now taking the jobs of models.

Just last fall, a YouTube video promoting fall Fashion week was released and blew up with over 4 million views in only 2 weeks. Not only this, the video obtained around the same amount of likes as dislikes.

The main reason for this was that all of the “stars” that were shown in the video were just old-news YouTubers. Thousands of comments just complained about how these “fashion stars” were using their platform for “clickbait and clout” and that their way of trying to make themselves as relatable as possible became “extremely unbearable.”

Many comments I scanned through said the same word over and over again: disappointed. So much so, that they do not want to even follow the event taking place that next season.

These viewers, as well as myself, have grown tired of influencer culture as a whole and reminisce about the times when fashion was presented before social media really grew. When it was raw.

The reason this was even a thought in the first place was because some designer brands still do not have a social media presence to promote their brand. The idea of not having a platform to obtain profitable relationships with big brands, led many investors to become anxious.

These brands started to look to influencers with a large following to support and promote their products, because without that, sales would go downhill rapidly.

Even if social media stars are a necessary evil, companies could at least pick more influencers who are

actually inclined in the fashion field and do use social media as a side. It does not just have to directly be “social media” influencers.

High-end brands are taking these young influencers who have young audiences to promote their products, yet a lot of their audiences are children themselves and can’t come close to affording these products in the first place.

Fashion houses like Louis Vuitton, Prada, and Celine are looking to these influencers such as YouTuber Emma Chamberlaine, 16-year-old TikTok star Charlie D’Amelio, and even Noen Eubanks to be the key to attracting younger audiences to luxury brands.

These influencers, as a result, are promoting the products across their platforms for events like Milan Fashion Week for Prada.

Other influencers like Loren Gray, Chase Hudson, Margot Lee, Karen Yeung, and members of the HypeHouse have not only been seen promoting in Milan, but also in London and New York City modeling labels like Dolce and Gabbana.

Even the Dolan Twins and Emma Chamberlain just last year, were partnering with French luxury label, Louis Vuitton to model its looks.

Yes, these celebrities are helping their companies, but the audiences watching them are getting bored of the same faces over and over again on any platform possible, even non-high-end products.

We want to see new faces and even more people who have actually worked to get to the point of being fashion professionals as an occupation.

If not, at some point fashion industries and Fashion Week will truly lose some of their devoted fans for good.

Sustainability class helps save Girty’s Woods — from page 1

taking Mrs Nilson’s class. We’ve been educated on so much that I never really understood before, and I’ve definitely made changes to my eating and my lifestyle. In terms of Girty’s Woods, I’m excited to be able to go and be a part of yoga and hiking and stuff in the woods and know that we helped to save that land,” Brooks said.

With this land, students and community members will be able to maintain trails, and study and research the woods. Mrs. Nilson even plans to involve her future students with these projects.

“I’m really proud of all these students. It’s

just so wonderful and hopeful to see high school students taking an interest in the environment and just promoting environmental causes. This is like a dream come true for me. To be honest it’s just amazing,” Nilson said. “This has been a really hard year for a lot of reasons and I feel like this was a bright spot in the year, just teaching this class and working with this group of students and working towards a cause like this. This patch of woods that’s now going to be available to go hiking and enjoy, and it’s just so cool that it’s in our district and now we get to share it with everyone.”



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Have a story idea for us?
Have a reaction (good or bad)
to one of our topics?*

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The Oracle

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The Oracle is the official student newspaper of Shaler Area High School. Although it is published by the journalism classes, one does not have to be enrolled in a class to contribute.

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The Oracle reserves the right to condense or omit any letters or articles unfit for publication.

Scheuer retiring after 17 years at Shaler Area

by Maggie Rea

She's the one who stops the bleeding after we've been hit in the face with a basketball. She's the one who takes us down to her office in a wheelchair when we're feeling dizzy. She's the one who takes our temperatures, who gives us Tylenol, who lets us lie down when we have migraines. She's the one who helps us when we're anxious, who smiles at us in the halls. This year, she's the one who contact traces us when we're exposed to COVID. And she's the one who is retiring at the end of the school year.

Mrs. Leslie Scheuer has been a Shaler Area High School nurse for 17 years. She started in the 2004-2005 school year, and she has helped the students and staff stay healthy ever since. Over the years, she's treated many different illnesses and injuries, some serious, some bizarre.

"One of the fun things about being a nurse is there's a story every night," she said. "I had a girl early on who, in her bedroom, her lamp had fallen over and the light had broken so she had cut her foot. She had a pretty good little cut on it, and so what she did was she just took sewing thread and sewed herself up. So she comes in with these stitches on her foot, and I'm like, this doesn't look like any stitches I've ever seen!"

Fortunately, the girl's foot was not infected, and Mrs. Scheuer was able to take the stitches out. In addition to helping kids who sew their feet up, Mrs. Scheuer helps students with Type 1 Diabetes and severe food allergies, as well as students who have seizures during the school.

"In August, before you all come back, I am dealing with what I would consider our kids who could die during the school day," she said. "If we have kids with seizures, for instance, their teacher is going to know what to do until I get there, I've talked to their parents about what we should worry about, and we have a plan."

This may seem like a daunting task, but Mrs. Scheuer's previous careers prepared her for all the medical emergencies she has encountered at the High School. She had no intention of becoming a school nurse when she first went to college; she originally majored in Psychology. She knew that she wanted to work with people, so when the Psychology Department was not a good fit for her, she transferred to a nursing program and was eventually hired in the Intensive Care Unit at Hershey Medical Center, where she cared for cardiac patients.

"I think the Intensive Care Unit training has helped me here, first of all because I work quickly, but secondly, I am sort of able to decide what is really serious and what is maybe not so serious," she said.

After working in the ICU, she got a part-time job doing research for a cardiac-catheterization lab and then started being on call with a beeper. Although she enjoyed her work, it was difficult to organize childcare for her kids with her and her husband both on call. When her daughter brought home a paper asking for substitute school nurses at their school district, Mrs. Scheuer decided to apply.

She went back to school to be certified by the Department of Education to become a school nurse, and, after working at two charter schools, she was hired at Shaler. She had her doubts about being a school nurse, though, especially after working in an ICU, a very high-pressure environment.

"I thought being a school nurse would be really boring," she said.

However, when she started working, Mrs. Scheuer realized that, although she was more than prepared to deal with all of the medical emergencies and illnesses she encountered, she was still learning new things every day about what life was like for a high schooler socially.

"I was very fortunate to work with Mrs. Kramer, who had been here for a while. She knew the building really well, and knew students really well. I learned a lot from her," she said. "I think she gave me a good sense of just what teenage life was like a bit more. Certainly I'd worked in the hospital, and so I knew the medical stuff, but it was a little bit of the stuff you guys go through day-by-day that I just had to learn a little bit more about."

Her day-to-day job entails helping students and staff members who are physically sick, but she is also there to help students through the mental side of things. When people come into her office with anxiety about a speech they have to give or a test they have later that day, she lets them lay down and relax. This could be seen as giving in to kids who are "faking" to get out of class, but Mrs. Scheuer sees it as something beneficial.

"My job is to try and keep people in school," she said. "So if somebody comes down and lays down for forty minutes, and takes a little bit of a stress break, whether or not they're really sick, and that gets them through the rest of the school day, that's seven more classes that they've had that day, as opposed to just going home. Or that helped them cope a little bit, and I think that's okay."

The kindness that drives her to help students in so many ways is not going anywhere when she retires, either. Mrs. Scheuer plans to move to Virginia, where she and her husband have built a house. There, she wants to reinstate her Virginia nursing license and help administer COVID-19 vaccines. She is also looking forward to being involved with a walking trail system near her house and singing with a choir, something she has always enjoyed.

"My mother signed me up for the church choir when I was seven, so I've been singing pretty much constantly... Every place I've lived I've looked for a group to sing with," she said, adding, "I was kind of a choir geek when I was in high school."

Although she is excited about her retirement plans, Mrs. Scheuer said that it is hard to leave Shaler Area. For her, though, the pandemic and its impact on the school has made it easier to say goodbye.

"COVID made it a little less painful to retire," she said. "The previous principal, Mr. Suit, used to say that we are one big dysfunctional family here, and we truly are. I look around, and I get to see you guys grow for four years, and I get to see the staff grow... You sort of get to see people grow, and so they do become family. I'm going to miss that a lot."

One thing she probably will not miss, though, is working through the COVID-19 pandemic. This year,



Mrs. Leslie Scheuer

the nurses were tasked with contact tracing students who may have been exposed to COVID, encouraging kids to stay home if they felt sick, and educating the students and staff about the pandemic.

"This year has been particularly hard, because what I like about this job is collaboration and problem solving and supporting, and COVID is all about rules," she said.

Her least favorite part of working this year, she said, was making phone calls to tell guardians or parents that their child had been contact traced.

"It's basically like I'm grounding you," she said, laughing.

In her seventeen years here, though, Mrs. Scheuer has dealt with outbreaks and emergencies other than COVID. She has helped the High School through the H1N1 virus and flu outbreaks, and even, during her first year here, a flood.

"I started the year of the 2004-2005 school year, and within a month we had the flood, so that's what I remember first," she said.

She ended up having to stay after school with the students who could not get home because of the flood waters. However, it was when she was stuck at the school, eating frozen pizza some teachers had scavenged from the cafeteria and watching the pouring rain, that she started to feel an attachment to Shaler Area.

"We as a staff -- and this is when I knew I really liked working here -- divided up, and some teachers were in the auditorium and people were donating clothing. Some people were in Gym A and people were donating cleaning supplies, and bleach, and brooms, and sponges and mops, and things that you would need to clean up your house if your whole basement was flooded. And a lot of us were getting on school busses and going down to these neighborhoods and helping clean out basements and houses," she said.

From the 2004 flood to the 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, Mrs. Scheuer has been here, helping the students and staff stay healthy and stay in school, and she has made a positive difference in the lives of so many people. When asked if there was anything additional she wished she had done during her time here, Mrs. Scheuer shook her head.

"I don't have anything that I feel is missing," she said. "I think I'm going to go out feeling... maybe it's not the way that every nurse would have done this job, but it fit for me. It felt like me."

From all the students and staff you've helped over the years, whether it was through calling an ambulance, treating a migraine, soothing a fear or just saying hello: thank you, Mrs. Scheuer. We are glad it was you.



Q&A with Post-Gazette sports writer Brian Batko

by Dominic DiTommaso

Shaler Area graduate Brian Batko, one of the Steelers beat writers for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, recently sat down with The Oracle to discuss his life currently covering Pittsburgh sports for a local newspaper.

What was life like at Shaler and Pitt, and how did you get to where you are?

From Shaler High School I went to Pitt, and I knew I wanted to major in something media or media-adjacent. I ended up majoring in Communications, which I found to be not a whole lot of hands-on classes where you're actually learning about journalism and learning how to construct stories and everything like that, so I switched my major to Media and Professional Communications so that was a little bit more practical experience; more journalism and non-fiction writing-type classes. That was helpful for me, but nothing was more beneficial than the experience I got outside of the classroom in college. I got a couple internships after my sophomore year. I interned at 93.7 The Fan. I was already kind of sure that if I get into reporting I would want to do it in sports if I could. I was more in the radio realm at that point but after my junior year at Pitt after having a little bit more journalism background, I started writing for Pitt News, the student newspaper, and had some work published there. I got an internship at the Post-Gazette and I wasn't entirely sure what I was gonna do there, but I just knew that would be a great opportunity to get my foot in the door and learn from real pros. I started as a multi-media intern because at that time in 2010 or 2011 newspapers were trying to get more toward digital media and doing things of that nature. When my internship was over they had another internship open and this was on the sports copy desk. That job was all about writing headlines, proof-reading stories and publishing stuff to the website. I did that for my second internship and they hired me because they had a spot on their nightdesk and they actually hired me right before my final semester at Pitt. After about three or four years of working from 4:00 p.m. to midnight and being completely behind the scenes and wishing that I could get back in a role where I'm actually covering games and reporting on things that finally happened to me and I was covering high schools. Then I started covering colleges for about two and half years and then a couple years ago there was an opening covering the Steelers at the Post-Gazette and I couldn't really pass that up.

Was journalism always something that you wanted to do or did you have another path for yourself in mind?

That was pretty much what I saw myself doing. When I was applying for colleges I think if I would've had a little bit more of a plan in place maybe I would've gone to a school with a more prestigious journalism program or more known for broadcast journalism when I wanted to do that. I knew that it was one thing I was kind of good at. I never liked math or science so a lot of those fields were non-starters for me. I hardly had it all figured out, especially writing for a newspaper. That's something I didn't really envision. I always wanted to do more in radio or even video. I kind of knew what I wanted to do, but it was definitely not something I was 100 percent [sure of]. I more so stumbled into it and I've gotten a lot of lucky breaks, because you certainly need that in this business.

What are some of the most memorable moments that you have covered so far in your career?

I mentioned that my first opportunity at the Post-Gazette was as a multimedia journalist and they hardly needed me to cover anything super serious but I remember being sent to cover the Jerry Sandusky trial up at State College. That was pretty heavy for a college kid. I had read about it of course

and had watched it on TV but actually being there when the guilty verdict was handed down and he was basically being sent to prison and I was just kind of standing there with my camera jockeying for position with 50, 60, 75 other journalists from around the country and that was the first media circus I got to experience. [I remember] the craziness outside of that courthouse and reporters sitting on the ground with their laptops open trying to file stories, getting out their flash drives. I'll always remember that scene. You certainly don't want to cover stuff like that all the time because it is a pretty serious story, but that's what a lot of people get into this business to do and that was pretty memorable.

Do you see more of a competitive or fraternity feel between yourself and other reporters?

[The competitive angle] is definitely there. I think some reporters read the work of other writers more than others. In press conference settings, it's never really like the journalism movies or TV shows where someone who has the big scoop asks the big grand question that catches someone in a lie because in the real world reporting, if you had that scoop, you're not just gonna go out and give it to the other 20 or 30 people that are sitting there. You're gonna go behind the scenes, probably sitting down with your editor to talk about how many sources you have, are they good, do you have another angle ... It's not always as dramatic as it might seem. The players and coaches that we cover I feel are mostly distrusting of the media in 2021 for various reasons. I'll say this: as someone who's covered high school athletes, college athletes, and pro athletes, there's always kind of a give and take. High school athletes are always willing to talk. College is a little bit less than that. Once you get into covering pro athletes, their locker room is open pretty much all the time so access is good but those guys are making millions of dollars and can tell you to go screw off if they want to and occasionally they do. It's not always as fun as it may seem. There's days in which I wish I was back working on the copy desk. It's a very fun job, but it also has its ups and downs like a lot of different professions.

Have you ever been told off before by an athlete?

I don't have any really brutal horror stories like that. This past year [covering the Steelers] everything was on Zoom, so I really only have one year being in the locker room. After games and especially games they lose it's a lot tougher to deal with players because you get to ask them [tough questions] and some of those guys are better with that than others. The first time I really had any sort of dealings like that with pro athletes was when I was an intern at the Post-Gazette, I went into the Pirates clubhouse for something, it wasn't a serious story, but baseball players, compared to NFL players, can be a little bit trickier to deal with sometimes because they have 162 games as opposed to 16 so that's a whole lot more opportunities to talk to reporters like me and have to take a lot of questions. Some of those Pirates, trying to talk to them as a college student who had never been in a clubhouse or a locker room that was a little bit intimidating and there were some players who made me rightfully [intimidated whether it be]



Brian Batko in Cleveland before the Steelers Browns game in 2019.

something like a one-word answer. I remember I tried to talk to the pitcher who was starting that night and apparently that's a pretty big no-no in Major League Baseball and I think he just kind of said "Hey kid, I'm starting tonight. Try me tomorrow." I'm sure I was super nervous at the time but now looking back you realize it's just one of those unwritten rules that you come to understand when you do this for long enough. I think it was AJ Burnett, for the record.

How do you think this job is going to change because of this past year?

I hope it changes back to what it has been. Doing everything over Zoom with the Steelers hasn't been the worst thing in the world, I've certainly been able to adapt to it a lot easier than many of my colleagues. That's just the virtue of being a 29-year old doing this than a 59-year old who's a lot more stuck in his/her ways and doesn't know how Zoom works. The whole point of being a beat writer is you're around the team every day and you develop relationships ideally with the players and it's not always as simple as they're gonna pull you aside and tell you something and give you the scoop. When they can at least see your face and realize who you are, maybe they won't tell you off as much. 2020 was difficult for a lot of reasons because you didn't have any of that face-to-face interaction and for me being someone who was in only their second year covering the team, that was a lot of time lost to try and build those sources and build those connections. Hopefully we'll be back in the locker room and even covering practice in person. We were able to do that but not nearly as much. So long-term effects on the job from this is I think there will be more opportunities to do interviews with people via Zoom where you can actually see their face because a lot of this job is very boring phone calls. To do interviews when you're a reporter a lot of the time you need to make that phone call. I think Zoom is probably here to stay for some extent but it would be good, at least in sports writing, if we can get back to doing this job for the ways it's been for a long time, although social media is another thing that's changed a lot since I [went to Shaler]. To do this job you need to have a handle on Twitter. I don't do too much professional stuff with Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, but a lot of people do. All my stories I post on Twitter and we also do a sports podcast at the Post-Gazette. So a lot of that digital media beyond just the writing can make you a much more attractive candidate when it comes time to apply to various jobs, positions, or even college programs.

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Mrs. Tepshich has turned her love of music into a career

by Savannah Schultis

Choir director Mrs. Kristin Tepshich is a notable staff member and alumni of Shaler Area High School. Her love for music and teaching radiates every day at work, but she's more than just a teacher; she's a mother who values her family, a lover of all things Disney, and a mentor for many students.

Tepshich was born and raised and has lived in Shaler her entire life. She grew up alongside her mom and two younger sisters with whom she has always been close. Her grandparents were also heavily involved in her youth, as she would often travel with them and her sisters. Her dad was a salesman who worked a lot on the weekdays, but she'd see him on the weekends when he wasn't traveling for his job

Tepshich's mom prioritized getting her and her sisters involved in different activities from softball, to soccer, to, most importantly, piano. Tepshich started taking piano lessons around age 7 or 8, after a friend recommended them to her. She went home that day and asked her mom if she could take piano lessons.

In 7th grade, Tepshich tried her luck by auditioning for her school's musical. Much to her mom's surprise, she got the lead role.

"I distinctly remember my mom going, 'Can you sing? Like, is this gonna be okay? Are you their only option?'" she said.

Although no one in her family was a musician, Tepshich had a musical ability that flourished as she grew. In 8th grade, she was given the opportunity to be the piano accompanist alongside the middle school choir. She didn't even know what that was at the time, but she played a song for the director anyway and earned the position.

A year later, former middle school choir director Mrs. Karen Frederick gave Tepshich even more responsibility as an accompanist.

"My 9th grade year [Mrs. Frederick] was like, 'You know what, I need to work with the boys for this one song, can you take the sopranos and altos into the band room and go over their parts?' And more and more she had pushed me on a path, unknowingly, to train for what I do right now," she said.



Mrs. Kristin Tepshich

Going into high school, Tepshich described how almost no one knew what they wanted to do with their life after graduation, but that was never a question for her.

"In 10th grade everyone was like, 'I don't know what I want to be.' I was like, 'Oh easy, I want to be a music teacher.' There was never any question," she said.

After graduating from Shaler Area in 2006, Tepshich continued her musical journey at Duquesne University as a piano major. However, after her freshman year, she realized that if she wanted to be a choir director, she needed to focus more on vocals. Therefore, she switched her instrument to voice and started privately studying.

Along with student teaching and working at Bruster's Ice Cream, Tepshich worked as the assistant director for the Shaler Area musical during her first three years of college. In 2009, the director decided to step down, leaving the position open. That spring she was the head director for the 2010 musical, "Bye Bye Birdie".

A year later, the high school choir director po-

sition opened, leaving another opportunity open for Tepshich.

"The heavens aligned and the person who directed the pit called me and said, 'Get your resume in, the job's open,' and here I am," she said.

Other than teaching, Tepshich takes great pride in her big family. She is married to the high school band director, Mr. George Tepshich and has four children: Abby, Logan, Lyla, and Lincoln.

"We spend so much time together. We do family game nights, we do sleepovers in the basement, we travel all throughout the summer together, we spend lots of time on the boat together, we do family walks and family hikes, picnics. We have a big backyard so they're constantly jumping out there on the trampoline. We spend an abnormal amount of time together as a family and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world," she said.

When it comes to hobbies and alone time, Tepshich loves traveling, describing Disney World as her 'Achilles Heel'. In fact, if teaching hadn't worked out, she would've loved to become a princess at Disney World.

She also enjoys outdoor activities such as yoga, golfing, and traveling to the beach, but it's fair to say that one of the things she enjoys the most is teaching.

"I think one of the things that I love the most about teaching is learning from my students, learning about myself, and learning about how I can be a better teacher. I think a really important part about teaching is that every class I'm a different teacher because I need to teach to the needs of my students," she said.

However, as much as she loves teaching, this school year has been difficult for everyone and Tepshich is no stranger to the obstacles that we've all had to face.

"I feel like when I come into this place, it's not a job. This year I felt like it was a little bit of a job because there were so many things that were just disconnected, but every other year I love coming into work," she said.

Cont. on page 6

THE GRID		If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?	What's your favorite pizza topping?	If you could have lunch with one Disney character who would it be?	Who is your favorite current athlete?	What would you name your boat if you had one?
Freshman Max Milligan		Europe to spend a few days in each country	pepperoni: there is no other option	 Genie from Aladdin	I don't really watch sports	Steel Curtain
Sophomore Katie Ehrenberger		Greece	Pepperoni 	Mater from Cars	Serena Williams	Big Boat
Junior Luke Rolley		Italy	Mushrooms	 Elsa	Myself	Holy Ship
Senior Emily Peterson		Iceland	Green Peppers 	Genie from Aladdin	Jake Guentzel	Margie
Faculty Mr. Sarkis		England	Anchovies	Shrek 	Mikaela Shiffrin 	Seas the day

Life Before Teaching

Teachers share stories of what life was like in different careers before becoming educators

by Corey Sigmund

Believe it or not, some teachers in the high school haven't always been teachers. They had different jobs/careers until a detour in the road changed their path. These teachers had very different lives before landing at Shaler Area High School.

Mr. Eric Schott, English and Journalism teacher, did not always have his heart set on teaching. His goal was to become a journalist. He attended Ohio University, one of the top schools for journalism in the country, and after graduation, he was hired to work for the North Hills News Record. While he wanted to write, he was originally hired to work the "desk" where he did layout and copy editing.

After several unsuccessful attempts to get try to get writing assignments or having his free-lance articles ignored, Mr. Schott quit his job.

"Part of it was not writing, but even if I got to do that I don't know how long I would have kept doing it," he said. "I was starting to realize it probably wasn't what I wanted to do as a career."

He had been a basketball coach since he was in high school and he thought that teaching might be a better fit for him. He went to Duquesne University and got his Masters degree in Secondary Education focused on English and Journalism. After completing his course work, he was hired at Northgate High School as a full-time substitute. The following year, he was hired at Shaler Area.

"I often get asked if I regret (getting out of journalism) and the answer is no," Mr. Schott said. "I enjoy teaching more than I ever enjoyed working in journalism. Now with The Oracle and Journalism class I am still involved in that world too. It's a cool combination of my old job and my current job."

Mr. Schott isn't the only Ohio University alumnus at Shaler Area. Mr. Jeff Ward, chemistry teacher, pursued chemical engineering before he became a teacher.

"I oversaw four areas within our chemical plant that worked on emulsions – the magic of getting oil and water to mix without separating. My daily job was to make sure we had enough raw materials for the reactions to occur, order raw materials if we did not, and troubleshoot any problems the equipment or products had," Ward said.

Once he got into the real world of chemical engineering, he realized it was going to be very different

than sitting in the classroom.

"Being a chemical engineer was not what I had expected, based on what I learned in school. I thought I would be spending a good amount of time doing calculation after calculation on a daily basis....since that was really what I did in my chemical engineering classes at Ohio University. I spent little time doing calculations like I thought and more time learning the equipment, what areas typically would fail, and how to correct for those failures," Ward said.

Mr. Ward worked at a chemical plant that operated 24/7, so he could get a call on his pager or landline phone at any time because of a problem with the product or some type of equipment failure. He said that was a challenge, especially at 4 a.m., and was one of his dislikes about this job.

While working at the chemical plant, Mr. Ward picked up a side teaching job where he taught an "introduction to math" class at a local community college, mainly for adult learners. It did not take him long to realize he loved and had a passion for teaching. Mr. Ward admits to love teaching more than he did his chemical engineering job.

Ward was also a little surprised because whenever he went to get his teaching degree he thought he would end up as a math teacher because of all the calculations behind engineering. But while attending Pitt he was told that he had more of a background in chemistry, so he went into the area of teaching chemistry instead. That is how he got where he is today, teaching chemistry to many students at Shaler Area.

Another Chemistry teacher at Shaler Area also had a career switch. Mrs. Rena Murphy was a circulating nurse in the operating room before coming to Shaler Area.

She attended the University of Pittsburgh and her undergraduate degree is a bachelor of science in nursing. Mrs. Murphy enjoyed the atmosphere of the hospital and the interactions with the patients; her only complaint was the early morning start time.

"Nursing is a really rewarding career and I enjoyed supporting my patients. Working as a nurse in the operating room was nonstop. The days went quickly, though, because you were always on the go and needed to be very organized and aware. Every day was a new adventure," Mrs. Murphy said.

She realized her passion for teaching whenever she helped out in her son's kindergarten class, so she went to earn her master's degree in education.

"I think teaching is in my blood...both my parents were educators," Mrs. Murphy said.

Mrs. Murphy is very happy with her decision to become a teacher. She loves the interactions with the students and getting to teach chemistry as it was her favorite subject throughout her own schooling.

Just like Mrs. Murphy, Mrs. Mary Beth Miller also graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a bachelor's of science in nursing. Before being a counselor at Shaler Area High School, Mrs. Miller was a psychiatric nurse at Western Psychiatric Hospital in Oakland.

She enjoyed the challenges of this job, the work she was able to do, the people she worked with, and the different experiences she had. But it did not seem to click for her as being a school counselor does. She said she did not enjoy working on weekends because a lot of the clients were returning.

The returning clients were at a higher risk and lots of changes in the healthcare system were occurring while she was employed there. Mrs. Miller realized this job was not for her when she no longer enjoyed going to work, and she would receive calls at every hour of the day while in administration.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Miller did not choose education right away whenever she stopped being a psychiatric nurse.

"I went back to school and tried a couple of different classes. I tried another nursing class to maybe become a nurse practitioner. I tried an economics class thinking maybe the business side of the hospital. Then I tried a counseling class, thinking I might go into private practice. I knew I liked education because I did some hospital wide-training and I worked with the student nurses, and I enjoyed that, but I couldn't decide what to do next. Finally a professor suggested I look into becoming a school counselor. I was permitted to start my practicum early because of my background and found that I loved it," Miller said.

Miller is very happy she made the switch. She said it can be challenging just like her nursing job was, but whenever she received this role it felt like all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

Another Pitt graduate among Shaler teachers is Mrs. Nikki Cleary. She graduated from University of Pittsburgh Johnstown with a degree in mathematics.

Cont. on page 13



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Mrs. Tepshich — from page 5

Tepshich also admits that the two things she misses most from a normal school year are her students and performing music.

"The beginning of the year when I was just singing to myself all day long, I got so bored. I love working with raw talent and just molding. It's almost like ceramics- making a beautiful vase out of just this pile of clay getting ready to be formed. So those are definitely the two things I miss," she said.

However, the greatest obstacle she has faced is not being able to hear all of her students singing at once. She admits that there's a lot more responsibility on them to self-assess their performance, but it's lacking that training that she provides. There has been a lot of trial and error this year, but she realized things work the best when she puts her own expectations aside and asks her students what they need from her.

"I think when I just let go and had real conversations in class saying, 'this sucks, but what do you want to get out of this', then I was able to find some inspiration and ideas that could work," she said.

However, she's made arrangements for a spring performance with all four of her choirs on Friday, June 4. In preparation, there have already been a few after-school rehearsals that are going to continue throughout the month of May.

"I'm nervous. I'm excited. Both of those definitely combined into one. I think I'm more nervous about the safety and logistics of everything and I'm a little nervous about getting together and singing for the first time in a year. I just want it to be a worthwhile experience for everyone. I want it to be memorable," she said.

Tepshich has put in an immense amount of effort to help overcome numerous difficulties this year and she hopes to have it all pay off in the end.



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**LA ROCHE
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Babbit again represents SA at state level choral ensemble

by Cassidy Laffey

The Pennsylvania Music Education Association (PMEA) holds a musical festival for high school students each year, and being chosen to participate is one of the greatest accomplishments for a student. Students from all over Pennsylvania audition with the hopes of making it into this prestigious, state-level ensemble, but very few succeed. This is not the case for Zoe Babbit, a senior at Shaler Area, who made it through three rounds of auditions and got to participate as a member of Pennsylvania Music Educator's State Level Choral Ensemble.

PMEA promotes music education and performance through musical showcases and festivals. Babbit participated in PMEA States her sophomore year, but it was cancelled last year due to COVID-19. This year was completely changed from prior years because of the virtual format.

After being given excerpts of songs, students interested in auditioning recorded an audio file performing the piece. Babbit continued on after the first audition and had to prepare another. In a typical year, those who made it past the first round of auditions came together for a PMEA Districts Festival, however, Districts did not happen because of COVID-19.

"I was overjoyed because it was the same week I



Zoe Babbit

found out I got into my top pick for college, and those were the two things I was waiting for," Babbit said.

Shaler Area High School Choir Director, Mrs. Kristin Tepshich, has been training Babbit in Hon-

ors Chamber Choir since her freshman year, and is proud of all she has accomplished.

"It is well deserved because of her dedication, talent, and motivation. Having those three pillars makes an astounding performer. She has all three and seeing her get that gratification makes you as a choir director just so, so proud." Tepshich said.

Once Babbit finally completed the rigorous auditions, it was time to start preparing for the actual festival. Typically, PMEA States is a long weekend where students from all over Pennsylvania come together and sing a choral arrangement, but just like everything else this year, it looked completely different.

"It was a bunch of Zoom screens trying to sing a song together, but muted, and me not knowing where we were in the music. Our director had a lizard that she showed on camera, and it was the real star of the show," Babbit said.

When asked what her favorite part of the experience was, she was quick to mention the lizard, but after further consideration, she said, "Even though it was different, I did still really appreciate the opportunity to enrich myself in new music and I even got to meet the composer of the song!"

Everyone involved in PMEA States sent in their audio recordings of their individual part for the final performance, which will soon be edited together to sound like they performed together.

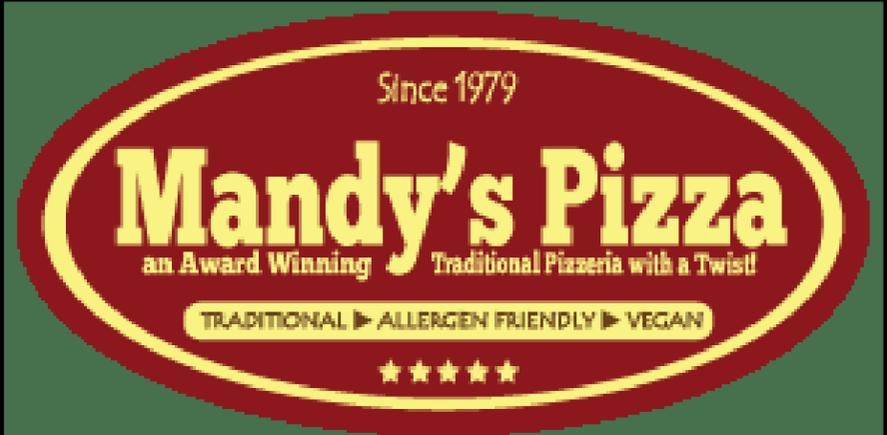


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Teachers share stories of the unpredictable virtual world

by Addison Kania

Virtual learning has been a new experience for all of us. Waking up a minute before class starts in the morning is a new reality for lots of students – not that we’re complaining! It has come with its challenges, like having wifi issues and it has also come with lots of fun memories that we won’t soon forget.

As we were all at home during school, many different disruptions occurred that would not happen in the actual building. I know multiple times my mom would stick her head in the door and I would have to shoo her away subtly while I was in class on camera. Sometimes it was kids interrupting parents.

When at home on Wednesdays, history teacher Mrs. Catlyn DiPasquale always has a fun time handling her kids.

“My kids always ask for waffles the second I log on to 3rd period class. I know all my students can hear them and I usually lose my train of thought. It goes from “Mommy, waffles?” to “MOMMY, waffles please?” to “WAFFLES MOMMY, please?” to “MOMMY WAFFLES PAHHLEASEEE!” Mrs. DiPasquale said.

While teachers’ kids have made appearances in class, so have people’s pets. Whether it be by whining for food or crying for attention, they like to make themselves known. English teacher Mrs. Anne Loudon, knows this well.

“When I am at home on Wednesdays, before 6th period, my cat, Penelope, always wants a special treat and she will cry for it,” Mrs. Loudon said.

Just like Mrs. Loudon, other teachers have had fun experiences with their pets. Ms. Val Scott has often been sitting in the middle of class during virtual learning when her dog would leap onto her lap to get some attention and stick her face all up in the cam-

“They would often request ‘puppy time’ once a week at least. They would get their dogs to get on camera and we would still continue the lesson, but our dogs would have their faces on screen instead of ours! It was fun!”

-- Mrs. Val Scott

era. The students loved it though.

“They would often request ‘puppy time’ once a week at least. They would get their dogs to get on camera and we would still continue the lesson, but our dogs would have their faces on screen instead of ours! It was fun!” Ms. Scott said.

These fun memories definitely made virtual learning easier to handle and even continued into hybrid learning, where some students were online and some were actually in the classroom. This made for some interesting times as the students in the classroom could not always see what was going on in the Google Meet.

Some of Social Studies teacher Mr. William Mitchell’s favorite moments were meeting students’ pets. His favorite one was meeting Catherine Colarusso’s dog, Phoebe, when he began to bark at the

screen to see her reaction. Phoebe raised her ears and began looking all around confused, but that was not even the best part.

“The students that were in the classroom were watching their teacher sit there and bark at the computer screen. I believe it was right there and then when my students believed I had finally lost my mind,” Mr. Mitchell said.

The hybrid learning environment proved to be challenging this year, especially on some teachers’ mental state. Yet, this brought many fun memories to look back on in a time that was hard for everyone to get through.

What especially made it hard on teachers was the challenge of making sure students were logged on to Google Meet and paying attention.

Mr. Eric Schott, a high school English teacher, said that he received a couple of emails from students who said they were either at the beach and the house they had rented has terrible WiFi or they were traveling and probably wouldn’t be able to connect to a Meet.

Mr. Schott definitely has a favorite memory though.

“I have a kid that I know usually just logged in, didn’t turn his camera on and went to play video games. One day I called on him in during a discussion and got nothing, as usual, but the funny part was I saw one of his friends who was on camera pick up his phone and send a quick text. About 30 seconds later the kid turned on his mic and said, ‘Mr. Schott, did you call on me? I think I heard my name, but my audio is really bad today,’” Mr. Schott said.

All in all, virtual and hybrid learning has been pretty challenging, but we can take time to appreciate all of the hilarious and maybe not so hilarious moments that we have from it.

Q&A with SA grad and Post-Gazette sports writer Brian Batko — from page 4

You mentioned sources — how do you build sources and how do you find out which ones are and are not trustworthy?

I wish there was a book because even doing this as long as I have, writing for the Post-Gazette for 5 or 6 years, I guess, it’s never easy. There’s no quick tip for doing it. A lot of my best friends by this point are also in this industry and this is still stuff that we still talk about. You know, how do you just walk into a new team that you’re covering? That’s one thing; a lot of journalists just want to keep climbing the ladder and go from high schools to college to pros, which I was lucky enough to do, but that also means learning new people and learning new faces and getting them to trust you, and again there’s no easy way to do that. I think a big part of it is just trying to be a personable reporter. I mean, the smart ones are going to know and understand that you have a job to do and you might write something critical about them at that point, but your job is to be unbiased and objective, and not be their friend or, one thing you get a lot in covering sports, especially at the college level, which

I remember is even the administrators and athletic directors and head coaches think your job is to promote them. They say, “Why aren’t you helping us out? Why aren’t you writing more about this team or that team or this player,” or “Where’s your Pitt gear?” if you go to a Pitt football game. They just don’t get it. Journalism— when you don’t write for the team or maybe for a fan blog, which certainly has their place too in the landscape of 2021— when you write for the old school places, or if you just try to do the job in the more old school way, you’re there more as a conduit to the fans and to report on what they want to know and kind of just be objective and be unbiased. That can make it tricky to build sources and get people to like you so that they will maybe tell you stuff and it’s certainly, at least in sports, which I can speak to, it’s not as simple as what reporters do on ESPN, where they’ll go out and give you the exact information—like, a certain player signing a three year deal with the Steelers for ten million dollars. If you’re lucky, once or twice that might happen to you as a local writer, but in our job and with what I do, it’s much more about trying to pick up nuggets here and there about this person or what he’s done, what his family is like, what he might be like off the field, and that’s where you can

kind of try to build that. For me, it was just being around as much as I could, not blowing stuff off. I would say some of the older reporters who have been doing this for a long time and do have a source that they can just call up or text when they need something, they don’t have to be at every single practice or interview opportunity. Me, as someone who’s just starting out, I feel like I do. Just being there a lot and always having them be able to see your face, introducing yourself twice, three times, even four times if you need to, maybe give someone a card—I don’t know if that happens as much in 2021 with cell phones— that’s how I try to do it. Sometimes, it works, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s one of the toughest parts of the job no doubt. It can be easy sometimes to just sit there and write, but to go out and kind of call people and get information, you have to constantly work at that.

How hard is it to be critical of someone, especially if you know them?

That part is hard, don’t get me wrong, but also just in general, as someone who grew up loving the Steelers of course and even loving Pitt basketball, you do have to divorce yourself from fandom a little bit. I can’t remember if that was hard for me at first, like just getting out of college, but by this point, I do see the team and the players in sports

so cold and factual that that part of it hasn’t really been too hard. I don’t know how much players themselves or coaches read what we write, because it goes back to what I said. They don’t always necessarily understand what your job is and what the responsibilities are. But there is no doubt that not everybody is going to like what you write all the time and you’re going to get some of those tough phone calls occasionally, but if you really believe in the work that you did and that it was fair, you can absolutely stand your ground on that. It hasn’t happened to me but I’ve seen it happen in the business to other journalists that I follow. I hate to see a player call out a reporter on Twitter or Instagram, I just don’t think that’s the best way to do it. I think sports writers or any journalists would love to have a phone conversation with a player one on one. That’s another thing that has probably been lost a little bit in the Zoom era, that personal connection and personal relationships are a big part of the job. When people see you around a lot, they know that you actually care and that you’re not trying to just mail it in for a paycheck. That’s one thing — paychecks aren’t generally very big in this line of work, so if you do it, you have to really love it.

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SA grad working on improving cancer treatments

by Kiera Harger

Throughout the past number of years, a growing emphasis has been placed on cancer research, as new and innovative techniques have come into play that are adding to progress on understanding this morbid disease. There are more than 100 known types of cancer that affect people every single day. Many of these patients will undergo surgery and chemotherapy to treat their symptoms and hopefully fight off the cancer in their body. Unfortunately, there is no single cure for cancer; a fact which plagues millions of mourning families. Shaler Area graduate, Cody McHale, PhD, is a tumor immunologist who conducts cancer research with a team everyday with a goal to discover better treatment for cancer patients.

McHale describes the science behind his research, “We’re really learning how cancer manifests where you have a shift in the balance between the growth of tumor cells and the balance of immune control, and so we see clinical manifestation of cancer and actual growth of tumors where the rate at which cancer cells grow kind of out paces the rate at which the immune system can really keep them in check. So, we’re really learning that it’s this evolutionary arms race between the immune cells and tumor cells.”

This type of scientific research and analysis may seem like a challenge, but for McHale and his team, it inspires them and drives them towards finding the solution. McHale is involved in a robust research group including a molecular biologist, pediatric oncologist, chemist, and biochemist. Each has their own perspective that can come into play and target their research at different angles.

“I would say it’s really kind of a group effort to attack

from all angles and to develop a new effective cancer therapy. That’s always the goal we keep in sight. It’s our driving force behind what we do.”

McHale leads a busy life that is mostly consumed with his job, “I get up at like 6:45, have some coffee, then drive right to the hospital. I usually start work at about 7:45. Today for instance, I spend about half my day actually in the lab, at the bench doing science. I was growing some macrophages, which are an immune cell subtype, and we are planning to treat

them with a small molecule inhibitor that one of our chemists designed. Then, I went to Kabba for lunch. Then I came back and had two or three lab meetings, caught up on some emails, cleaned up the lab, and left at about 5:30 (but my day is usually 7:45-6:00). I go to the gym. If it’s nice out, maybe get a little golf in. Then, I cook dinner and do it all over again.”

McHale lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. After graduating from Shaler Area High School in 2010, he attended the University of South Carolina for 4 years to get his bachelor’s degree, then continued to pursue a medical degree and a postdoctoral, which summed up to be about a decade spent in higher education.

At Shaler Area High School, McHale felt that there were a number of classes that inspired him and had a strong influence on his education. As a “science guy,” inevitably one of his favorite high school classes was AP Biology. However, he found enlightenment in his AP English and History classes as well. “I think anytime that you’re challenged and you’re taking a stimulating class, particularly about something you’re interested in, it’s hard not to remember that, right? We try to remember things that we either really like or really hate, and anything else in between kinda goes to the back of your mind.”

By taking a variety of different classes in college and high school, McHale obviously does not use everything he learned everyday. However, this shaped him into the intellectual he is today. “There are certainly things you’ll learn in school that you’ll never use in real life, but being a scientist, I would say the Venn diagram of the things you learn in science class and things you learn in your job, it’s a

flat circle. It’s not a Venn diagram, it’s totally overlapped.”

How does one achieve their dreams, move to a warm southern state, and have success? Many high school students want this for themselves, and McHale tells them, “There’s thousands and probably hundreds of thousands of kids just like you who are pursuing the same dreams and so you’ve always got to do something that sets yourself apart.”

Teachers, parents, coaches, etc. tell kids this all



Shaler Area 2010 graduate Cody McHale

the time, and Cody McHale is proof that this actually pays off. College and the job market are extremely competitive. “Anything you can do to build your network and add things to your resume or your skill set [will benefit you]-add new things to your tool belt.”

McHale started researching tumor immunology in his sophomore year of college. The position he currently holds is his first faculty position, but he has been involved in this career for around a decade in some shape or form.

“I think I always knew I wanted to do something scienc-y and my mom always said ‘you know you should be a doctor’ and like any young kid you’re like, ‘Oh yeah I should probably do what mom says.’ I had originally planned on going to medical school to get my MD to be a clinician, and I have a Ph.D; little different. But I always knew I wanted to be in some sort of health profession or biomedical research, and I knew I had a passion for research and basic science. When I was in undergrad, I was working as an undergraduate research assistant at a facility member lab at the School of Medicine of South Carolina and I got along really well with him and enjoyed the work.”

As a tumor immunologist, McHale conducts endless research and works tirelessly everyday. Despite this, he describes his favorite part of his job, “I like answering questions that don’t have answers yet. I like the idea of creating therapeutics or new tools for doctors to help treat patients and improve their outcomes.”

McHale’s energy and drive was easily summed up with, “I like solving problems.”

He enjoys working with his team and hopes to discover something ground-breaking some day. Thanks to people like McHale and his research groups, the innovations we see in cancer treatment are possible.

“I like answering questions that don’t have answers yet. I like the idea of creating therapeutics or new tools for doctors to help treat patients and improve their outcomes.”

-- Cody McHale

AmeriCorps provides opportunity for journalist at Marzolf

by Aidan Brophy

Emily Balsler always knew that she wanted to enter the world of journalism. She served as the editor of her high school newspaper, went to college for journalism, worked for a newspaper right after graduating, and eventually found a position at the Tribune-Review. How she transitioned from TribLIVE reporter to primary school teacher at Marzolf Primary, however, is another matter entirely.

Balsler grew up in West Virginia and later attended Marietta College in Ohio. After obtaining a Bachelor’s in Journalism, she returned to her home state to work for the Parkersburg News and Sentinel for three years.

“I did some reporting, but mostly I did copy editing and page design. I decided that I would really rather be reporting full time, and so I wanted to move to a bigger market, and I wanted to get my master’s,” Balsler said. “So,

that’s when I moved to Pittsburgh, which was in 2013.”

Balsler earned her Master’s in Journalism and Mass Communication from Point Park University, interning at the Tribune-Review twice while working towards her degree.

“I was just lucky that they had a spot open when I graduated about sixth months later,” Balsler said.

However, after five years with the Tribune-Review, Balsler decided to take a step back and move, for a time, in a new direction.

“I have always wanted to do a year of service, or some kind of service program. I just never had the opportunity. I was always working one or two jobs or doing internships,” she said.

That opportunity arose in the form of a local AmeriCorps position. The



program works on a national level, collaborating with statewide programs, local initiatives, and more.

“A lot of times you have to move if you’re doing something like this. They’re not always open in the area that you’re living in,” Balsler

said of her initial reaction to an open AmeriCorps position here in Shaler. “I thought it was a great opportunity. So I just went for it. I interviewed and got the position.”

That AmeriCorps position was Balsler’s current job as a teacher at Marzolf Primary where she has enjoyed her time.

“It’s been really wonderful. I’ve loved it. It’s so fun working with kids, it’s something completely different than anything I’ve ever done. When I was a reporter, I did all kinds of re-

porting, but I did a lot of education reporting. I got to know education and schools from the outside. I covered a lot of school board meetings, I did a lot of policy coverage, and I thought it would be not only a great experience if I wanted to go back into reporting after this, but just to get an insider’s look at what it’s like when you’re really working inside of a school.”

Balsler isn’t completely sure of where she’ll be going after her time at Marzolf ends.

“I could go into communications for a school district, or a college, or the government, or I could go back into reporting.”

But her passion for journalism is still there.

“What I loved about journalism, and what was so exciting about it for me as a high schooler, was that you got to do something different every day... It’s like a continuing education, and no two days are ever the same.”

Despite many obstacles, Shaler Area was able to make “The Wedding Singer” an on-stage reality

by Maggie Rea

Just like every other year, Shaler Area High School put on a successful spring musical. This year, the directors, cast, crew, and pit came together to run four performances of *The Wedding Singer*, the musical version of the 1998 Adam Sandler movie. That would be normal, but this year has been anything but normal. The show was never guaranteed to happen, but, miraculously, it did.

Putting on a musical during a global pandemic presents some interesting challenges: are the actors allowed to sing indoors? Is the pit allowed to play their instruments indoors? Is anyone allowed to come see the show? On top of that, Shaler welcomed an entirely new directorial staff for this production, including director Mr. Anthony Martello, assistant director Mrs. Jennifer Birch, and pit conductor Mrs. Cyndi Mancini. Even despite these challenges, though, Shaler was able to perform four shows, with a small in-person audience and a larger audience watching via livestream.

“Coming into a new environment can be intimidating, but I felt very supported and welcomed by everyone, staff and students alike,” Director Mr. Martello said. “I absolutely feel like the show was a success.”

That feeling is shared by the students who took part in the production.

“Our dedication in rehearsals was only part of our success,” student director Frank Babicka said.

“Our true success lay in the community that was created through time spent together. We put on a good show because the people standing next to us, both on and off the stage, deserved to be part of a good show.”

Pulling off a high school musical always takes the combined efforts of many different people, and that was especially true this year. From the students involved to their parents to Mrs. Thiel and Mrs. Miksic in Activities, a large group of people came together to make this show happen.

“The parents of the cast make so many things possible for the program,” Mrs. Birch said. “This year, they worked extra hard to make everything feel as close to normal as we could get. I owe them a debt of gratitude that I’ll never be able to pay. SATV was also integral to the show this year in a new and deeper level. Without them, no one at home would have been able to see the show!”

The students in cast, crew, and pit all worked tremendously hard to bring this musical together. The cast was able to adapt to performing in masks with more spaced-out blocking. With only three weeks of rehearsals, the pit was able to learn all their music and how to stay in sync with the actors onstage. The stage crew, supervised by Mrs. Loudon, took on a greater leadership role in designing the set, creating costumes, and running the lights and sound than in previous years.

“The crew on stage had maybe 6 total students to move a ton of sets- that in and of itself is a mini miracle. The booth was all student-run, and even though it scared me to give students that much responsibility, they really shined,” Mr. Martello said.

For the students, the freedom to take the lead on some of the technical aspects of the show was exciting, although they were glad to have the support of Mr. Zachary Anderson, the technical director.

“I’m glad that we were able to be independent and work on all of the high-tech things mostly on our own. But it was also always nice to know that there’s someone who can help you when it gets stressful!” Emma Wunderlin, who ran the sound board, said.

On top of the success of the performance itself, the musical was also a success financially. Because the last weekend of the 2020 spring musical was canceled due to COVID-19 last year, Shaler’s performing arts program did not earn the amount of funds

it usually does from shows, making this year’s musical budget much smaller. Even so, *The Wedding Singer* stayed within its budget, and the approximately 360 live-stream tickets and 100 in-person tickets sold to performers’ families generated enough funds to cover all costs.

“We are definitely going to start the year off in a better place financially next year, but we still have a



Sonny DeMasi and Zoe Babbit in “The Wedding Singer”

long way to go to get to where we were pre-COVID when we had all in-person shows with almost every seat in the auditorium filled,” Mrs. Mindy Thiel, the High School Activities Director, said.

Although (or maybe because) putting on this musical was such an uncertain, exhausting process, seeing the show come to life and be so successful was very rewarding for both Mr. Martello and Mrs. Birch, who both said they would look back on this experience with pride.

“My lasting impressions will be the resilience of a group of teenagers who did what every single adult in their life told them was impossible,” Mrs. Birch said. “They buckled their boots and got to work and made it happen through sheer force of will. I’ll also never, ever forget the support the cast lent one another. In a year that was hard and often horrible, I saw them lift each other up and carry one another when their burdens were too heavy to bear alone. The tears and celebration after the final curtain call showed the love and dedication and deep, abiding friendships that came from this show, and more than anything I can take from this experience, I hope the STUDENTS carry those feelings and this accomplishment with them for the rest of their lives. Someday, someone will ask them to do something overwhelming and impossible-sounding, and each and every cast, crew, and pit member will be able to say, ‘I made live musical theater happen during a pandemic. I can do anything.’”

Martello knows that his first musical at Shaler Area will be one that will be hard to forget.

“I think just the feeling of pride I had when we completed our final rehearsal, with every student on stage looking at me, is something I will cherish for a long time,” he said.

“Someday, someone will ask them to do something overwhelming and impossible-sounding, and each and every cast, crew, and pit member will be able to say, ‘I made live musical theater happen during a pandemic. I can do anything.’”

-- Mrs. Jennifer Birch

Spondike selected to another prestigious ensemble

by Hannah Stelitano

Senior Zach Spondike is one of a few students from 11 different states to be accepted into the NAFME All Eastern Honors Jazz Ensemble. This elite ensemble is extremely difficult to receive a spot in, but this is Spondike’s second time receiving an honor like this. In 2020, Zach was one of a few students to be selected to participate in the National Association for Music Education 2020 All-National Jazz Band.

Zach has been interested in music his whole life, but the realization of his true passion emerged in middle school.

“I started getting more invested in music and jazz in middle school and started studying more from there. As my high school career is coming to an end, I’m very proud to say that I’ll be majoring in Music Education, but currently undecided on where I’ll be studying,” Spondike said.

Zach previously auditioned for the 2020 All-States Ensemble on a tenor sax, which made him eligible to audition for the All Eastern Honors Ensemble. The tenor saxophone is one of the primary solo instruments in jazz music, making it extremely difficult to earn a spot in an ensemble playing one.

“Zach went through this process, climbing the ranks, and was notified recently that he was accepted into the All-East Jazz Ensemble. This is a very prestigious honor,” Mr. George Tepshich, SAHS band teacher, said.

Being that the jazz music world is extremely competitive, Spondike being one of 18 students picked to be a part of the NAFME ensemble is extremely impressive. He was one of 18 students to be accepted from 11 different states (Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont).

“I started to think about how far I’ve come and how grateful I am for all of the support I’ve received along the way,” Zach mentioned.

Zach is very talented in playing the tenor saxophone, but, he is also skilled in alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, clarinet, and flute. Tenor sax, his favorite, is the primary instrument he plays.

Now that Zach is a part of the NAFME All Eastern Honors Jazz Ensemble, he will be performing in a concert with students who live as far away as Europe and has also had the opportunity to work with famous musicians like Terrell Stafford and Dick Oatts.

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Cellist creates own path by pursuing passion for music

by Alyssa Hillwig

Raman Ramakrishnan has always had a deep love for music; whether it be The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane, or an hour-long Bach passion, he loves being able to “just close [his] eyes and let the music wash over [him].” Despite the persistence of his love for music over the years, he never could have predicted how far it would take him.

As a founding member of the Daedalus Quartet and a former member of the Horszowski Trio, cello player Raman Ramakrishnan has performed all over the world. When he’s not performing, he’s teaching classes at the Bard Conservatory of Music and participating in the Boston Chamber Music Society.

Born in Athens, Ohio and raised in New York with his sister, Raman Ramakrishnan developed an early love of chamber music—a love that he could share with his sister, who played the violin at the time. As a child, he frequented many concert halls to watch classical performances with his family. While they listened to and observed the ensemble, he only had his eyes on one instrumentalist.

“I really focused on the cello whenever we were at a chamber music concert, and I would just be staring at the cellist the whole time,” Ramakrishnan said. “I don’t know what it was about the cello...it was a big instrument that had this spike you would stick into the floor, and that appealed to me as a young boy, but I also think I just really loved the sound of it.”

Awestruck, Ramakrishnan begged his parents to sign him up for cello lessons until he received the gift of a rental cello for Christmas at the age of seven, a day that he still describes as “the best Christmas [he’d] ever had.” He knew then that he had a passion for playing the cello, but he never originally intended to make it more than a hobby, as he felt that his path was already predetermined by generations before him.

“I come from a family of scientists, on my dad’s side anyway—several generations of scientists, every single one of them. So, that was kind of a path that had been laid out for me,” Ramakrishnan said.

And that path had large footprints to follow. His father, Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2009.

Still, with support from his parents, he continued to pursue music throughout middle school, high

school, and post-secondary education. He ultimately decided to major in physics at Harvard, where he reportedly felt it was a natural course of action, but would eventually decide to go for a Master’s degree in cello at Juilliard after graduation. He was very cautious entering the music industry, as he knew from his mother, who was a children’s book author and illustrator, how inconsistent the arts industries can be.

“Music is not a stable industry, especially classical music and especially these days. So, I had some different options, but I thought that if I was going to try to do music, I would have to do it now,” Ramakrishnan said. “I would have to do it right after graduation because if I had waited any longer, I wasn’t going to be able to jump into a career in it, whereas I could always, or so I thought, backstep to physics or law school or something like that.”

According to Raman, pursuing music when he did was the best decision he had ever made; he finally felt like he could commit to something he loved and had a passion for. His father helped make that commitment by using some of his prize money for winning the Nobel Prize to help fund Raman’s purchase of a Vincenzo Jorio Neapolitan cello that was made in 1837 in Naples, Italy.

With the influence of his musical inspirations, Pablo Casals and Yo-Yo Ma, Ramakrishnan began his career in chamber music right after graduating from Juilliard. By participating in both the Horszowski Trio and the Daedalus Quartet, he was given many opportunities to travel around the world, performing with his closest friends and playing music that he genuinely enjoyed, like the later works of Beethoven.

“I don’t know if there’s anything written that is more profound and more soulful and more exciting to play than those late quartets of Beethoven,” Ramakrishnan said. “Whenever we had one of those programmed, there was always this extra energy in the group and you could also feel it from the audience as well. He was completely deaf when he wrote those pieces and just to think about this guy, who knew that his days were numbered on this earth, writing these pieces that were totally in his head—he couldn’t hear a note of them with his external ears—there it was, just in his imagination.”

Even after all of his years of playing, he and his colleagues all feel a sense of amazement when they have the opportunity to play through some of his pieces.

“With some of Beethoven’s late quartets, there’s always this feeling of awe. The same awe that Beethoven felt with life, I’d like to think. That’s what I get from the music is that this incredible feeling of life seen through a technicolor lense where everything is heightened almost. I’ve felt that many times, sometimes not because of how I play, but when I’m playing and I’m within the piece and within the music,” he said.

With these opportunities popping up for him everywhere, it was always relatively consistent, with concerts and recordings and fairly constant income—until the pandemic hit. The coronavirus pandemic has heavily impacted the music industry, especially the instrumental field of music.

“Even people who are at the top of this field, especially during the pandemic but even before, we were wondering what our next year was going to look like,” Ramakrishnan said. “Maybe some concerts would book out a year in advance, but other than that, we have no idea what’s to come.

We don’t have a tenure in our jobs, so we don’t have that kind of security.”

He experienced many losses of his own when the country went into lockdown, most notably the loss being live performances, and subsequently, a large portion of his revenue.

“In terms of playing, last March, all of my concerts were suddenly gone. A few places—one or two places—very generously agreed to pay their fees to me, even though we weren’t playing a single note for them. By and large, I lost all of that money and I was so lucky to have this position at Bard which helped make ends meet at least,” Ramakrishnan said.

His job at Bard was his only consistent income when COVID hit, but he also feels lucky to have been able to perform in very limited recording sessions, which were very scattered and much different than a professional recording for him, to make some extra money during troubling times.

“We meet in a studio or a small concert hall with an engineer and usually a video technician and we make these recordings of pieces that are streamed later to the public, and we get paid a little for that. Those are much fewer and far between than concerts used to be, and they also feel completely different.



Raman Ramakrishnan

It’s not a concert, which is this other world where you’re onstage and you can feel the energy of the audience and you have this opportunity to make a musical moment together—to make something special happen onstage and in the room that everyone shares together,” he said. “With these recordings, you have these dead microphones and a camera staring at you, and it takes more imagination than I possess to feel the eyes and the ears of the audience there, so it doesn’t feel like I’m making a special moment.”

Even at his teaching job, there was no consistency present at the beginning of the pandemic. With a sudden switch to entirely virtual learning, he had to resort to services like Zoom, Skype, and FaceTime to conduct his classes; that also came with a lot of difficulties for both himself and his students.

“That was difficult because not everyone had a great microphone and it was hard to tell tone color or vibrato or even intonation—all these details we hear so clearly in person we’re not so clear over Zoom. Starting in the fall though, Bard went in-person with a lot of regulations. We masked up and each room was rated for a certain number of people, it had to be well-ventilated, there had to be space in between groups or in between people and that was amazing actually,” Ramakrishnan said.

More than almost anything, he misses being able to travel and perform gigs in other parts of the world. While having a son and a teaching job made it difficult for him to travel as frequently as the members of his trio would have liked, he loved being able to make a wordless connection with people he would not have known otherwise.

“The world is a big place but it’s also a small place in that people are pretty much people everywhere and it’s heartening to realize that when you’re traveling around, we’re all just human beings and music is something that can bring us all together in the same room no matter what language we speak or no matter what superficial customs we have. We’re all the same underneath,” he said.

Most of all though, Ramakrishnan misses being able to make that connection with his audience. Whether it be young children or adults, he feels like he took the feeling of engagement between himself and his audiences for granted. But as vaccinations are beginning to roll out at a faster pace, he is anxious to experience that same feeling he has been missing since the initial shutdown.

“There’s a strange thing that happens sometimes, especially if I can see the audience out there. When I can look out and see the audience and I can feel their presence out there, it’s easier to feel this strange connection that happens between people who have never met, never said a word to each other. And maybe they wouldn’t even understand each other if they even wanted to talk to each other. But they can experience a moment together of a whole piece and go on that journey together without the need for a single word. They’re in the same mental and emotional place together, and that’s a special thing,” he said.

“The world is a big place but it’s also a small place in that people are pretty much people everywhere and it’s heartening to realize that when you’re traveling around, we’re all just human beings and music is something that can bring us all together.”

-- Raman Ramakrishnan

Lady Titans section champs after exciting comeback win

by Dominic DiTommaso

A 9-8 win over North Hills on May 11 capped off an 11-4 regular season and a section championship for the Shaler Area softball team.

After a 7-2 loss to start the season at Bethel Park, a four-game and five-game win streak, the latter of which included the section title clinching win, helped launch the Lady Titans into the playoffs.

“Our biggest takeaways of the season were definitely that we can beat anyone and we are a very strong team when everyone does their part,” junior Corey Sigmund said. “What made us successful was that we just all love to play softball in general, but it seems extra special when we all play together. We always pick each other up, and if one person doesn’t come through someone else will. We are all very hard workers and are always confident in ourselves.”

On the road, Shaler went 4-3, with wins including a 14-4 blowout over Hampton and an 8-3 victory over Fox Chapel. They were undefeated at home, going 7-1 at Hilltop, having wins that included a 15-0 shutout of Oakland Catholic, a beatdown over Mars 13-3, and an 11-1 stomping of McDowell. In the section, Shaler went 8-1, and won nine of their last ten regular season games.

Seven games got postponed during the season, and one game, a second outing against Oakland Catholic, got cancelled. However, all that mattered was they were able to finish the season, something that did not happen in 2020.

“It was a great feeling being able to play the sport we love together again,” junior Mallory Moran said.

Perhaps the most memorable moment of the season was a 9-8 home win over North Hills, a team that had beaten Shaler Area earlier in the season 11-3 which was their only section loss. Overcoming deficits of 4-0 and later 8-5 going into the bottom of the seventh, a walk and a home run made it an 8-7 affair, followed by a walk-off double from junior Natalie Spears that made Shaler Area Section Champions.

“I was very nervous stepping into the batter’s box but I knew I was due for a hit,” Spears said. “It was one of those hits where as soon as the ball hit



Junior Kayleigh Newland at bat against North Allegheny. (Tom Rekowski)

the bat you knew it was a good hit because it felt so good. When I ran to second base and saw Corey score the game winning run, I was so excited. It was truly one of the best feelings ever when all of my teammates ran onto the field to hug me and we all celebrated together. I have never experienced an environment with so much enthusiasm and energy. It was something I’ll never forget.”

Despite having two less hits than North Hills, the Lady Titans outscored the Indians 5-4 over the final three innings to get the 9-8 win.

“The game was such a roller coaster,” Moran said. “I was pacing back and forth the whole time, and in that inning especially. We all knew how much this game meant and wanted to win more than anything. After Nat hit that, it was a feeling of relief, disbelief, excitement, and victory. It felt like the whole world could hear us cheering and it’s definitely a moment I will never forget. We worked so hard for this

game and it was awesome to see it pay off. I honestly haven’t stopped thinking about it since and I believe it is only a source of momentum for us to push even farther and reach our next goals.”

Spears added to that by emphasizing what the team learned from the experience.

“This game taught us all to never give up and that we could do anything we put our minds to,” Spears said. “The motto we were going by in that last inning was for ‘nobody to make the last out’ which is something Coach Keenan always told us to do. Since nobody made the last out, we were able to win the game and become section champs!”

Junior Kiera Harger summed up the season by explaining how her team grew throughout the past few months.

“We learned a lot throughout our season and faced a lot of good teams that really challenged us and pushed us to be better,” Harger said.

Life before teaching

from page 6

ics with a minor in computer science. She worked as a consultant at Deloitte Consulting in downtown Pittsburgh after college, and enjoyed this job because of all the travel benefits that came with it.

“Travel was a major perk and I was able to train and work in several cities around the US (Cincinnati, Houston, Flagstaff, and Orlando). I was even able to live in Sydney, Australia for about 4 months while working on a project,” Cleary said.

After about two years she wanted to settle down and be home more, instead of traveling all over the place all the time. Mrs. Cleary then took a position at Odyssey Software which was also located in Pittsburgh. She had the responsibilities such as being customer support if a program was not working properly, installation at new clients, writing customer reports, and training.

After working there for five years, she realized she enjoyed working with people and showing them how to use software for their business. Mrs. Cleary loved the feeling of teaching people who to do something and watch them be successful.

She is very happy with her switch to teaching because it allows her to combine skills from her old job and her love for math.

“Math was the subject I liked the most while I was in school and I hope that I can help my students enjoy it as well,” Mrs. Cleary said.

Mr. Tom Anke, an Economics teacher, was another teacher who had a journey before coming to Shaler Area. He was an executive recruiter or, as some may say, a headhunter for Fortune 500 companies in industries such as contraction, engineering, design, and architecture. His job was to find executive-level candidates for positions like director, vice president, CEO, CFO, and more. One of his favorite parts of this job were the five-figure bonus checks, but he did not love the 60-70 hour work weeks.

Unlike the other teachers, Mr. Anke’s original plan was to be a teacher.

“I had always intended to be a teacher, but I got married while I was in college and had to skip going to graduate school so I could make money to pay the bills. I ended up getting sucked in by big paychecks and before I knew it, I was going down a path that I had never intended to be on,” Mr. Anke said.

This was an unexpected path for Mr. Anke and he knew that it was not the job for him. His dreams of still being a teacher were still very much alive while being an executive recruiter. The

only thing holding him back was trying to complete graduate school while working 60-70 hours a week.

Once he finally did complete graduate school and officially became a teacher, he was not surprised one bit when he realized he loved teaching. Mr. Anke knew where his passion lied and was very happy with changing his career.

“Becoming a teacher is not for everyone, but it was the right decision for me and my family,” Mr. Anke said.

The final teacher to share his story is Mr. Damian Landolina, a Special Education teacher. He was an electrician before pursuing education. He was not the type of electrician who worked in residential houses but rather in the industrial and commercial parts of the job.

“I worked in many of the big buildings in downtown Pittsburgh and also worked in new construction coming out of the ground. I pulled branch circuit wiring, feeder wire and data wire. I also had to design and bend conduit as a route for the wires to be pulled in. Some days I worked outside in the beautiful weather and sometimes I worked outside in the crappy weather. Some days I worked inside on carpeting and other times inside on gravel. It seems that each job is a little different

from the other even though I often did the same type of work,” he said.

He loved the comradery of this job as it felt like a team, but he did not enjoy the lack of stability. He was not always able to work and was sometimes laid off due to the absence of jobs. Mr. Landolina said he thought this job was a good fit for him, but the instability of it worried him when he had a family to provide for.

Mr. Landolina chose teaching because in some jobs during his electrician career he was a foreman, and he was good at directing without coming off as being bossy. He also has always had a love for science which he agreed to share with the world.

“I found out I was good at telling people what to do without them thinking I just told them what to do. Teaching is very similar. If students buy in to what you do, then they will normally follow your lead. I have always been a science nerd and wanted to spread my science nerdiness around,” Mr. Landolina said.

All of these teachers came from many different paths, but they all share the same passion in wanting to educate young minds. Shaler Area is lucky to have these wonderful teachers. As the saying goes, all roads lead to Shaler. Or is it Rome?

Shaler Area one of few schools to offer Japanese classes

by Maggie Rea

As they say in Japan, “日本語が読める。” If you are a student at Shaler Area, though, you probably cannot read that, because you are not enrolled in Japanese. Shaler Area offers four foreign language courses to students beginning in 8th grade: French, Spanish, Latin, and Japanese.

Typically, around 25-30 8th graders sign up for Japanese, and, as the years go on, many drop out until very few remain. This year, there are only 3 students in AP Japanese, the highest level of Japanese offered.

There are many reasons for the low number of students who take Japanese. It is the most difficult language Shaler offers because it is the most different from English. Students who study Japanese have to learn three new alphabets, while students who take other languages do not. The grammatical structure of Japanese is vastly different from English, and there are nuances to the language that are very hard to grasp. Students interested in learning more about Japan soon encounter these challenges.

“I started taking Japanese because I knew there was more to the culture than I could find out on my own, and I wanted to know about it,” Junior Emory McComiskey, who is in Honors Japanese 4, said. “The typical class has plenty of learning, but has a good amount of fun alongside it. The trade-off of all that fun is how much work it takes to really succeed in Japanese, though. It is by far the hardest of the languages offered here.”

Uniquely, Shaler Area is one of three districts in the Pittsburgh area that offers Japanese to high school students. Currently, Shaler Area has three Japanese teachers: Mr. Steven Baleno, who teaches Japanese at the Middle School, Mr. Steven Balsomico, who teaches at the High School, and Ms. Miharu Hadano, who is a teaching assistant from Japan and helps teach Middle and High School classes. To their students, they are known as B-sensei, Balsomico-sensei, and Hadano-sensei.

All three teachers take great pride in being able to bring Japanese language and culture to Shaler Area, a place with very little ethnic and racial diversity.

“It’s not only enjoyable to work in this language and this culture and to share that with students, but also, when you think of it, here in Pittsburgh and especially in Shaler, students have no exposure to Japan, to other cultures period, pretty much,” Balsomico-sensei said. “And so I look at this as a chance to not just enjoy what I’m doing but also to share this different culture so that the students can learn about something other than Shaler.”

Even if they do not go on to use Japanese in their future careers, the Japanese teachers still believe that the broadened worldview and new language skills students learn are very beneficial.

“When American students study Japanese, that’s the bridge between Japan and America,” Hadano-sensei said. “If American students don’t go to Japan, they don’t know anything about Japan. They don’t know Japanese, or Japanese culture, or the written alphabets. But, if in an American high school they study Japanese, I think they’re able to make a connection to Japan. If they only study Japanese in school, that’s it, but they’re still connected to Japanese language and culture.

That’s a pretty good benefit, I think.”

Learning any new skill is good for a person cognitively, and this is especially true of learning to speak, read, write, and listen to a brand new language



Japanese teachers Mr. Steven Baleno, Ms. Miharu Hadano and Mr. Steven Balsomico.

that is incredibly different from the language someone is used to.

“There’s a certain amount of wiring in your brain to understand this completely different grammatical structure. Unlike other languages, Japanese is as far from English as you can get. So in order to remember it and to learn it, you have to kind of remap your brain in some ways even if you don’t realize you’re doing it,” Balsomico-sensei said. “It teaches you a certain amount of dedication because there’s a lot of information to learn, and if you can get through Japanese, in many ways you can get through just about anything in an educational setting.”

Like all parts of education, the Japanese program was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but to a much greater degree than the average Shaler Area class. Because of rising cases in the U.S. during the fall and winter, Hadano-sensei was forced by the Japanese government to move back to Japan.

This did not stop her from teaching, though: she still teaches all of her morning classes live over Google Meet, staying up late into the night to make up for the time zone difference. For her afternoon classes, she records lessons and videos of herself going to different places in Japan. Even on the other side of the world, she still finds the drive to keep teaching.

“When my students do speaking activities, or the speech contest, or writing homework, and they’re all persevering, I’m like, ‘Aah! I can do this!’ When I have that feeling, that’s my motivation,” Hadano-

sensei said. “Yes, I’m teaching all the way from Japan, but I want to teach my students! When they just keep trying in class, I want to help them in their studies!”

Students in the Japanese program appreciate the dedication that their teachers show in educating them on this different culture.

“I think the reason I’ve stayed in Japanese is because Balsomico-sensei is one of the most interesting, complex, and unique teachers I’ve ever had,” Junior Riley Pegher, an Honors Japanese 4 student, said. “His teaching style and his passion for Japanese, as well as how comfortable he is around students, has made the Japanese classroom a great learning environment as well as making it feel like a family.”

This feeling comes in part from the way that all the instructors teach. Students participate in Japanese cultural events and experience things that they most likely would not have otherwise.

“The coolest thing for me in Japanese is getting to celebrate Japanese New Year,” Caty Clark, also in Honors Japanese 4, said. “Our teacher gets real fortunes from Japan and we get to predict our luck for the coming year. We also get to have traditional Japanese New Year sushi, and throw beans at our teacher who dresses up like an ogre to symbolize shooing away the bad spirits.”

The Japanese teachers know that their class is challenging, so they make an effort to make it enjoyable and exciting through celebrations and an inclusive environment so that students are motivated to persevere in their studies instead of giving up.

“When my students can be like, ‘Yay! My next class is Japanese!’ and feel like we as a class are a big family studying language, they’ll enjoy studying Japanese,” Hadano-sensei said. “The Japanese language is very hard and difficult, but when my students think, ‘oh, I like my friends, and my teachers, and I like going to Japanese class,’ they’ll be willing to persevere through this difficult language, and that makes me really happy.”

“...here in Pittsburgh and especially in Shaler, students have no exposure to Japan...so I look at this as a chance to not just enjoy what I’m doing but also to share this different culture so that the students can learn about something other than Shaler.”

-- Mr. Steve Balsomico