

Writer's Statement

Since second grade, writing has been an enormous and important part of my life. When I entered high school, the idea of journalistic writing through our school newspaper, *The Review*, did not even occur to me. As a freshman, I focused on creative and analytical writing. However, due to medical issues, I had to take a year off from high school. When I re-entered St. John's as a junior this past year, I decided to try writing for *the Review* and thus unlocked a new side of myself, expanding my abilities as a writer and my ability to make an impact on the world around me. The pieces I chose for my portfolio mark my first year writing journalistically, and they are all integral parts of my development as a writer.

My portfolio consists of five pieces that I believe represent my best work from this year. Each piece, whether it was for online or print, taught me important lessons about journalism and its impact. Through "How vaping trends threaten teen health" and "Speak About It promotes consent education," I learned how to handle sensitive information in both interviews, writing, and editing. Both articles handled private information and uncomfortable subjects, including drug usage and sexual assault, thus allowing me to practice skills as an interviewer, putting others at ease while simultaneously delving into difficult topics. "Diet Culture," my first opinion piece, also dealt with a tricky subject, dieting and eating disorders in society. Through this article, I learned how to effectively express a controversial yet important opinion, calling out of problematic behavior without driving away my audience. All of the pieces in my portfolio have taught me about the impact of journalism. For example, my third piece as a staffer, "How vaping trends threaten teen health," was my first experience with a subject that has impacted teenagers and others across the United States. It was and continues to be an incredibly important subject to shed light upon, and through writing this article, I was able to understand and learn about the importance of journalism as a means to spread awareness, educate others, and reveal new perspectives on important issues. In addition, "COVID-19 closes in on the Houston community" was a piece that put together a lot of useful and necessary information that assisted students, faculty, and parents at St. John's School understand the current state of the Coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the SJS community. The article was very timely, informative, and helpful to those who may have been behind or confused about the virus, thus teaching me about the immediate impact journalism can have. As this was my first year trying out journalistic writing, I believe that these works are most representative of the articles that helped me improve as a writer. From "Diet Culture" to "Coronavirus causes decline in pollution, benefits environment," each piece taught me a new skill, from writing captivating headlines to stylistic choices that communicate important ideas. The pieces in my portfolio were each integral parts of the development of my voice and effectiveness as a student journalist.

Writing for the St. John's school newspaper has helped me understand the importance of journalism, whether in a small community or the nation. *The Review* is an amazing publication that has allowed me to substantially grow as a writer and person. I am extremely grateful for the

opportunities and challenges I have been given as a writer this year, and I look forward to continuing my career in journalism throughout high school, college, and beyond.

Article #1:

How vaping trends threaten teen health

Originally published on the Review Online January 13, 2020

*The names of the students interviewed for this story have been changed to protect their privacy. The students are all in high school or college and may or may not be affiliated with St. John's.

Courtney was in seventh grade the first time she vaped.

Her best friend at the time came to her house for their regular weekend sleepover. Courtney knew that her friend was bringing a Juul—she had gotten it from one of her other friends, and had been talking about it the day before she came over. The two girls were sitting together on Courtney's bed when Courtney eagerly asked to see it.

Her best friend pulled out the device and told Courtney that it was completely safe, falsely claiming that there was no nicotine in the cartridge.

“I didn't even know what nicotine was,” Courtney said.

Two years later, Courtney was vaping non-stop: at school, at home, in the bathroom, whenever she got the chance. She was inhaling one full pod a day, the equivalent of smoking an entire pack of cigarettes.

By the time she was a sophomore, she developed breathing problems.

“I would take a deep breath, but it wouldn't go through,” she said. “It was like air was stuck in my throat.”

Just one year ago, only minimal research existed on the long-term effects of vaping. But Courtney didn't have to wait for any more clinical studies—she was so frightened about her health that she quit “cold turkey” on Jan. 11, 2019.

In the long 11 months since she quit, Courtney has persevered through the difficult physical and emotional withdrawal process, but the terrifying consequences of vaping still follow her.

“Everytime my lungs hurt,” she said. “I'm like, f—, I'm dying.”

Medical Consequences

Courtney's fears about her health are well-founded. According to the Centers for Disease Control's extensive report on vaping, as of December, 48 people have died from vaping and over 2,000 people have been hospitalized for vaping-related sickness. The CDC refers to such vaping illnesses as EVALI, short for "E-cigarette, or Vaping Product Use Associated Lung Injury."

As a pediatric radiologist and Medical Director at St. John's, Scott Dorfman has seen several cases of vaping-related lung damage. He said that the total number of young people suffering from vaping illness may be much higher than reported.

Over 2,000 people in the US have been hospitalized due to vaping. (Alice Xu)

Symptoms of EVALI appears similar to pneumonia since both conditions present abnormal chest x-rays as well as a cough and a fever. There is no single test that allows doctors to distinguish one condition from the other, making it more complicated to diagnose.

"There are many people who probably have this vaping-related disease who are not being diagnosed that way," Dorfman said.

As vaping deaths increase drastically, schools have taken a more stringent stance against electronic cigarettes, including Texas A&M University, which banned vaping on "every inch" of their campus in 2019.

Teresa, a 23-year-old who attended Texas A&M for two years, now takes classes at the University of Houston. She bought her first Juul while at A&M and still uses it at UH. She is not concerned about any repercussions because the university policy that bans e-cigarettes is seldom taken seriously.

"People still do it on campus," Teresa said. "You wouldn't get kicked out for it."

Peer Pressure

Unlike Courtney, Teresa doesn't worry about her health.

"The death thing doesn't freak me out as much," she said, "but who knows? In 30 years, we could all be dead because of the Juul."

After discovering the temporary high that nicotine provides, she continues to use the device sporadically and considers vaping "fun." When she heard about the rising mortality rate, Teresa briefly grew nervous, but the fear soon passed.

“I do have that mentality that I’m invincible—that I can do whatever—and it’s not going to affect me,” Teresa said.

Because she is 23 years old, Teresa can vape legally. Many others who harbor the same mindset are underage.

Mikayla, who is 18, has been vaping for nearly two years and doesn’t think she will develop illnesses anytime soon. She first started vaping as a freshman because most of her friends were also doing it. At first, she borrowed e-cigarettes from her friends and older brothers before buying her own Juul sophomore year.

“It’s okay for me to do it because it’s something that I enjoy,” Mikalya said. “It’s my own personal decision, and I don’t care if people criticize me for it. It’s none of their business.”

Mikayla has observed many young people beginning to vape. These adolescents, some of them barely out of elementary school, often have a warped perspective of the dangers of vaping.

“If their older sibling has one, or their older sibling’s friend has one, they think it’s harmless,” Mikayla said.

Other students vape due to peer pressure.

Reagan, a high school sophomore, began vaping in eighth grade. Using e-cigarettes was incredibly prevalent at her middle school, and she began to do so in order to fit in.

Mikayla and Teresa said that vaping, like underage drinking, is a way for high schoolers to engage in teenage rebellion.

“It’s part of being young,” Mikayla said. “There’s some kind of thrill in knowing you’re doing something you’re not supposed to.”

The perceived coolness of vaping is not limited to simple teenage rebellion. Social media and online culture have furthered the societal appeal and attractiveness of e-cigarettes. Vaping is so prevalent online that it appears normal.

Online Culture

Vaping is pervasive throughout social media. From TikTok to Instagram, it is impossible to escape e-cigarette culture, a phenomenon that takes form through comedic videos, memes and even dance trends.

When scrolling through TikTok, many videos feature some type of vaping device, whether it be a Juul or brightly colored puff bars, a disposable form of e-cigarette. TikTok is a platform centered on short dance videos or comedy trends, in which users film themselves performing a new dance or showcasing a certain aspect of their lives in a comedic manner. These seemingly innocent videos often incorporate vaping as a part of the trends.

These trends are dangerous, as they present vaping as normal, commonplace and even cool. One trend features a choreographed dance that starts with a vaping trick called “ghosting.” The other involves users showcasing how many puff bars or Juul pods they have gone through as a coughing track plays in the background. The popular hashtag “juulgang” has over 347 million views, meaning that the majority of TikTok’s 500 million users are viewing videos that in some way showcase vaping products.

“[Social media content] can definitely influence people,” Courtney said. “I feel like it’s more attractive in a way to people, if it’s all over the media.”

On both Instagram and TikTok, teens and adults alike have taken to painting and decorating their vapes. Instagram in particular has many comedic pictures and memes that use Juuling and nicotine addiction as the element of relatable humor.

“If you’re 14 or 15, then you might want to be cool,” Teresa said. “[My little step-sister] watches TikTok and Instagrams and just thinks [vaping is] cool and rebellious.”

Snapchat is another social media platform that has a problematic vaping culture. Because of the rising vaping trend, many teens flash their Juuls on their private stories to appear cool.

“I didn’t even know what a Juul looked like until I saw it on someone’s Snapchat,” Mikayla said.

The online culture surrounding e-cigarettes makes quitting more difficult since users are rewarded with positive messages on vaping. The ways in which these apps showcase nicotine addiction issues minimizes the danger and reality of the problem, and instead presents it as relatable and funny.

Despite all the online positive reinforcement, some, including Courtney, have managed to quit.

Taking the Last Hit

When Courtney began to have trouble breathing in January, she decided to perform an experiment: she stopped vaping for a day and noticed marginal improvement. The breathing problems quickly returned when she returned to her regular usage the next day.

When Courtney quit completely, the experiment confirmed her fears. Throughout the process, Courtney experienced both physical and emotional symptoms of withdrawal, including a fever that lasted for two weeks.

“I felt sick,” Courtney said. “I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, I was nauseous. I’d wake up feeling awful.”

Her physical withdrawal symptoms lasted around two weeks, but she experienced emotional withdrawals for nearly a month afterwards. She became angry incredibly easily and burst into tears at the smallest things, including if her dog walked out of her room.

“[I didn’t give in because] I didn’t want to die,” Courtney said. “I am 15 years old. I didn’t want to die at 30, or of lung cancer.”

Courtney’s fear supplied her with the willpower it took to quit using nicotine. For other users, however, the drug’s effects are too difficult to give up.

“It’s really hard to stop,” Dorfman said. “Millions of people have gotten addicted to nicotine, and even if they know it’s bad for them, even if they want to stop, it’s not a matter of just throwing it away.”

Others have quit because of the expense. A pack of four pods costs around \$20, causing some, including Courtney, to spend up to \$40 a week. For some, this can be a barrier to continue vaping.

“It costs too much and doesn’t do enough,” Reagan said. “It just felt like a waste of time.”

Whether it be due to an extreme medical issue or a simple matter of cost, there are teenagers who have decided to quit vaping. Using Juuls and other forms of e-cigarettes is still generally seen as trendy, but there is hope that the news about vaping-related deaths will contribute to a rising group of teens who view vaping for what it is—a dangerous and addictive practice.

Courtney is now one of these people.

“Even though people will say Juuls aren’t as bad as cigarettes,” Courtney said, “you’re not supposed to put things in your lungs that aren’t supposed to go in there.”

Article #2:

COVID-19 closes in on Houston community

Originally published on the Review Online on March 11, 2020

Update (March 12, 2020): St. John's is closed from March 13 through March 27 due to COVID-19.

Grace Amandes ('17) was sitting on a bus with her friends, headed towards a famous park in Nara, Japan, on her spring break trip when she received an alarming email from Nanyang Technical University, her study-abroad college in Singapore.

NTU issued a mandatory quarantine to students travelling from Italy, South Korea, China or Iran to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. Students in Japan were told to stop their travels and return to Singapore immediately. While university officials did not specify whether those travelling from Japan would be quarantined, Amandes and her friends interpreted the email as "Japan is next."

Nanyang Technical University is one of the many colleges to issue a mandatory quarantine for students traveling internationally in hopes of containing COVID-19.

"It was a very stressful moment," Amandes said. "You're in small town Japan trying to get home, and not a lot of people around you speak English."

Luckily, Amandes was able to book a flight soon after receiving the email. Five hours from the nearest airport, the group rushed to make their flight. While they made it back to Singapore safely, Amandes is still dismayed over the abrupt end to her trip.

"It was disappointing in the moment because I had never been to Japan," Amandes said. "This was actually my first time in Asia."

The impact of COVID-19 is not limited to countries such as China and Japan. Days after Amandes returned from her trip, a janitor at NTU was diagnosed with the virus, despite Singapore's strict policies surrounding the outbreaks.

"It's not really avoidable, no matter where I am," Amandes said.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19, a new strain of coronavirus, was first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December. Although coronaviruses generally circulate among animals, some of them, including the strain discovered in 2019, can infect humans as well.

The virus is now present on every continent except Antarctica and is directly affecting communities in the United States. 14 documented cases of the virus have been reported in the Greater Houston area, and concerns about the disease's potential to spread are rising. COVID-19 is particularly dangerous for older adults and those with chronic medical conditions, although everyone is recommended to take precautions due to the disease's highly contagious nature.

Senior Marina Ring has Crohn's disease, an autoimmune disorder that requires her to regularly take immunosuppressants that stop her body from attacking itself. While other children her age may recover from illness within a few days, Ring's recovery period is longer than average and her symptoms can be more severe.

"It does affect me because Houston is a major transportation hub, and the disease is in the US now," Ring said. "Most kids aren't worried about the coronavirus because it doesn't seem to affect young people, but, for me, that may not be the case."

While COVID-19 may not be as dangerous for most students and young adults at St. John's, many in the community still fear the impact the virus can have on loved ones.

Sophie Gillard's ('19) classes at Barnard College in New York were canceled on Sunday, March 8, so she is returning home at the end of the week. For Gillard, spreading the virus to those around her is one of her main concerns.

"A lot of people [at Barnard and Columbia] are taking precautions around older faculty and vulnerable community members," she said. "I'm very worried about passing it to my grandmother if I get it."

School-sponsored events, spring break trips cancelled

COVID-19's impact on the St. John's community is already impossible to ignore.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 health situation, all school-sponsored trips over spring break have been cancelled. Last Friday, Columbia University cancelled the Columbia Scholastic Press Association Convention in New York City.

"It was a bit of a shock," said Assistant Design Editor Grace Randall, one of four editors on The Review who were planning to attend. "I didn't really expect it because I didn't know how bad coronavirus was."

The annual ISAS Arts Festival was also cancelled in light of coronavirus fears. The festival, scheduled to be held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, brings together over 3,500 students and faculty from 43 schools.

“[ISAS] is always a great time,” senior Julian Westerfield said. “Everyone’s really bummed out about it.”

Many sports teams were prepared to travel out of state for competitions during spring break—baseball and boys’ lacrosse to Florida and softball and girls’ lacrosse to California. As a result of the cancellations, players worry that team goals such as bonding and playing high-quality opponents from around the nation will not be met.

“We don’t get to go to Austin this year, and I think that state is in Houston, so there isn’t a lot of travel this year,” girls’ lacrosse captain Eliza Holt said.

Although disappointed at the trip cancellations, teams have adapted by scheduling more local matches during spring break.

“I was bummed that we’re not able to go to Florida and compete,” said Peter Sall, a sophomore starter on the baseball team. “We’re still going to be able to play [in Houston], and what matters is SPC. It doesn’t take anything away from our chances to win SPC.”

In addition to cancelled school-sponsored events and trips, many students have scrapped their spring break trips as the virus continues to spread.

Seniors McKenna Grabowski, Mia Fares and Mira Thakur had planned to spend their week of vacation in Taiwan but scratched their trip approximately a month ago, fearing infection and an inability to return to the United States.

“We just shouldn’t take the risk of not being able to come back,” Grabowski said. “It’s kind of upsetting, because we had planned a lot, and it’s just such a random circumstance.”

Greater Houston area events have also been suspended indefinitely, including the annual Houston rodeo, which authorities called off on March 11.

“I think the coronavirus has taken over spring break,” Randall said.

Tackling xenophobia from COVID-19

The concerns surrounding coronavirus are not limited to the fear of infection. Because the virus originated in Wuhan, China, xenophobia levels towards Asians and Asian-Americans have risen across the US.

To tackle this xenophobia, the East Asian Affinity Group and Unity Council hosted a forum on March 10 during lunch. Director of Community and Inclusion Gene Batiste began the forum by defining xenophobia and addressing its relevance regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic. EAAG officers then played a video from CGTN America addressing the racist attacks directed at Asian-Americans due to misinformation and fear about the virus.

“The blame is put on a certain demographic of people just to help compartmentalize and make things seem easier,” Unity Council representative Carolyn DePinho said. “I’ve seen a lot of videos of people being harassed on the streets, in grocery stores and in malls, and it’s very unsettling to see such explicit discrimination.”

The forum finally opened the discussion up to possible sources of misinformation and how to combat xenophobia in our own communities. According to DePinho, the best way to fight xenophobia is to be conscious of how racialized the coronavirus has become.

“Be aware that you sometimes read fake news or misinformation, especially from social media,” DePinho said. “Understand that it’s no one’s fault—it’s a virus.”

Schools nation-wide respond to the pandemic

Responses to the threat of COVID-19 have varied across the country, depending on conditions in various areas. Massachusetts, California and New York, among others, have declared states of emergency, and at least 130 colleges across the country have cancelled in-person classes as of March 10.

“[Amherst College] announced we were being sent home by Monday,” Sophie Caldwell (‘19) said. “We understand why it had to be done, but it’s not the way I wanted to finish out my freshman year.”

As universities across the nation close their doors in an attempt to contain the outbreak, St. John’s is also responding. On the morning of March 9, while students enjoyed an extra hour of sleep, Upper School faculty met to address concerns surrounding the virus and prepare for the possibility of school closure.

“[If necessary], we would create a distance-learning setting for faculty and students and operate off of a modified daily schedule,” Head of Upper School Hollis Amley said. “Faculty would use existing resources such as Google Hangouts and Pear Deck to facilitate classes.”

Some Houston schools, such as St. Thomas’ Episcopal, have already closed campus as a precautionary measure due to COVID-19. Many SJS students, including junior Maya Estrera, believe that online school is a likely and unfortunate possibility.

“A lot of stuff is going to get pushed back,” Estrera said. “Our learning and our progress will be stunted.”

SJS clubs are taking initiatives to prevent the spread of the virus.

In addition to preparing for possible school closure, St. John’s is taking precautions, including implementing more in depth cleaning regimes, stocking classrooms with sanitizing supplies and emphasizing student hygiene. Spring break travel, especially to severely affected regions such as China and Italy, is also a major concern.

An email sent out by Headmaster Mark Desjardins asked that families who visit these high-threat locations over the break report their plans to the student’s Division Heads and self-quarantine for the duration of the 14-day incubation period.

Those who alert the school to their travel plans to these areas will receive excused absences during their period of self-quarantine, whereas those who do not inform St. John’s of their plans will not. Many members of the St. John’s community with potential exposure to the virus have already self-quarantined for the duration of the 14-day incubation period, though they currently have remained asymptomatic.

As SJS students continue to keep close communication with peers through grade-wide GroupMe chats, many alumni are finding their way back home.

“Now, the next 48 hours aren’t about studying for midterms or being with our friends or enjoying this time in our lives,” said Eli Maierson (‘19), who currently attends Amherst College. “It’s about saying goodbye, and the worst part is, we don’t know for how long.”

Article #3:

Coronavirus causes decline in pollution, benefits environment

Originally published on the Review Online on April 28, 2020

While indoor spaces in Houston are deserted as COVID-19 persists, the outdoors are bustling with activity. The number of individuals biking, walking or simply enjoying the fresh air has steadily increased as people look to escape the confinement of their homes.

Quality time outdoors is sparking renewed interest in the environment.

“I see lots of people out: families walking together, bicycles I usually don’t see, dogs from a distance,” science teacher Paula Angus said. “Everyone seems to be getting outside.”

Appreciation for the outdoors has intersected with an important phenomenon. Although COVID-19 has impacted people from all corners of the world, causing school closures, deaths and mandatory separation, the virus has indirectly resulted in improved environmental conditions.

“Air quality is getting better here in Houston and around the world as we’re spending more time indoors and less time driving around and going places,” said Graham Hegeman, who teaches AP Environmental Science.

Air pollution is a significant problem around the globe, especially in densely populated areas such as India and China.

In early March, as China sought to contain the outbreak of COVID-19 through stay-at-home orders and factory closures, air pollution levels dropped dramatically. In India, residents of the northern state of Punjab were able to see the Himalayas for the first time in years due to clearer skies.

Biology teacher Neha Mathur grew up in India, and her friends and family told her about new environmental changes.

“People [say] their grandmothers told them about [seeing the Himalayas] and they could not believe it,” Mathur said. “People [are] so excited.”

The lack of air pollution and human presence around the world has also resulted in a resurgence of wildlife activity. While stories about swans and dolphins returning to Venice canals have been

debunked, the virus has still impacted animal life significantly. In Barcelona, Spain, wild boars wander the streets, and in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, baby sea turtles crawl to the ocean relatively undisturbed.

“My parents were saying that they are hearing birds that they have never heard before,” Mathur said. “It’s just amazing.”

However, there are limits to the positive environmental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While carbon emissions may be down, they will likely not remain that way once the outbreak ends.

“It’s more of a drop in the bucket than a real systemic change, which is what we need in order to actually change the trajectory of carbon emissions,” Hegeman said.

Despite the limited scope of the change, COVID-19 has demonstrated the impact that humans have on the environment and the resilience of the planet.

“I definitely think that this is a great learning experience,” Mathur said. “I hope we all go back to normal, but we take these little things with us.”

According to Hegeman, the fate of the environment, however, ultimately rests on whether people realize its importance in their daily lives.

“I hope people will start valuing the outdoors,” Hegeman said. “If any of that trickles into their appreciation of the environment at large, that will be a good thing overall.”

Article #4: Speak About It promotes consent education

Article #5: Diet Culture: When the weight-loss mindset takes over, food becomes the enemy

Speak About It promotes consent education

As Speak About It educator Megan MacKenzie, right, observes, junior advisories engage in small group discussions about consent following the assembly.



Photo by
Grace Randall



By Julia Smith

As the VST lights dimmed, "I Just Had Sex" by the comedy group The Lonely Island blasted from speakers. Nervous laughter erupted. Stage lights revealed a handful of young adult presenters who began to introduce themselves.

The tension was palpable.

Such was the introduction to consent training on Jan. 15 from Speak About It, a nonprofit organization that partners with high schools and colleges across the United States to educate students about healthy sexual relationships through engaging theatrical performances.

Speak About It first presented at St. John's two years ago when administrators asked Upper School nurse Tesa Stark to encourage greater discussion surrounding consent and sex education.

"I liked that [Speak About It] did not give a message that sex is bad, but more about how [students] go about making a decision based on [their] values," Stark said.

Upperclassmen witnessed an abridged Speak About It performance that was approved by the administration. The surprisingly frank performance elicited many responses, ranging from overwhelmingly positive to extremely uneasy.

"I was uncomfortable with the way it was presented," junior Janie Spedale said. "I thought it wasn't talked about well."

Spedale was not alone. Many other students felt uncomfortable with the upfront way in which the presenters introduced issues related to sex.

"I felt violated," senior Leila Rose Wallace said. "I didn't need all of that on a Monday morning."

Speak About It acknowledges these concerns and provides rationale for every candid portrayal of sex of the performance.

For example, the theatrical rendition of a female orgasm that occurred behind a curtain was, for many, the most uncomfortable moment in the performance. Speak About It gives important reasoning for the showcasing of female pleasure.

Speak About It executive director Olivia Harris cites

prominent sex positivity activist and author Peggy Orenstein to justify the group's demonstration of the orgasm.

"Orenstein found that high school- and college-aged boys tend to code a sexual encounter as good if they have an orgasm," Harris said. "Girls in the same age bracket code an interaction as good if they are not in pain."

The educators realize that since the performance covers sensitive topics, a sense of discomfort is to be expected. But, Speak About It believes that discomfort can manifest into important discussions about consent and healthy relationships.

"It's never too early to start having these conversations," Speak About It educator Megan MacKenzie said. "Yes, it's going to be uncomfortable, but this is information that's important to have so that when you do find yourself in a situation where you need it, it's there."

Meridian Monthly, a junior, greatly appreciated the upfront communication of sensitive information.

"Everything they talked about needs to be talked about," Monthly said. "The way they approached it is important because [everyone] learned something. [Students] were paying attention."

The show's forthright and creative approach ensured that students would talk about it.

"There were a lot of students having conversations about it afterward, especially partners," Upper School Counselor Ashley Le Grange said. "I think that's amazing."

Two days later, junior and senior advisories held group discussions of about 50 students led by senior Peer Leaders and moderated by Speak About It educators. Like the show, Peer Leaders sensed discomfort amongst students during the discussions.

"It was hard to get people to participate," senior Peer Leader Aidan Aguilar said. "We aren't really used to talking about [consent and sex], and there can be a stigma."

While the junior and senior performance was replete with explicit portrayals of sexual relationships and stories, ninth and tenth graders partook in a discussion

about gender and sexual identity, with the focus on consent in the context of the digital era.

"They spent a lot of time talking about gender and identity stuff, which I think was good," sophomore Liv Rubenstein said. "Even if a school does have sex ed or talk about consent, generally it's not from a queer point of view."

The Speak About It educators and school administrators strove to create an age-appropriate introduction into the conversation surrounding sex and consent.

"We figured we would start with something that references [drinking and hooking up]," Speak About It program manager Oronde Cruger said. "But it is really a lot about identity formation."

In order to encourage students to answer questions, presenters set up a text line, which allowed freshmen and sophomores to ask questions anonymously.

Underclassmen reactions were similarly mixed.

"Some people thought it was in some ways a little less useful than I perceived it as," sophomore Romit Kundagrami said. "A lot of people thought they were trying to be too [politically correct]."

Speak About It aims to be as inclusive as possible in order to create a safe and considerate environment for all their audiences, even if they use terminology that not all students understand. A similar empathy for others is Speak About It's main message to students about consent and relationships.

"A lot of what we're talking about is just being good to each other," Cruger said. "It's about being respectful and caring."

Many students want to see these conversations continue year-round through basic sex education and forums on consent and relationships. Open conversations about consent at school are often overlooked, and Speak About It was a strong first step in introducing these ideas.

"It was a great experience," junior Mansfield Owsley said. "I thought it was very eye-opening."

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Let's talk about relationships

Dear Readers,

With Valentine's Day just around the corner, we figured this was the best time for an issue focused on love and relationships. No matter your opinion on the holiday, it is necessary to discuss relationships — both at St. John's and in a broader context.

In this issue, we address what St. John's is doing to educate us about relationships but also what they could do better. We analyze the dating culture on campus and across the nation in this era of female and LGBTQ+ empowerment, technology and social media.

Relationships have a significant impact on emotional growth and mental health. They teach us what we enjoy and what makes us feel comfortable while also revealing our own flaws, both major and minor. We also learn vital communication skills and how to support others.

Furthermore, it is important that we distinguish healthy relationships from toxic or abusive ones; thus, we must learn how to define our own boundaries.

Living under the St. John's bubble can be a highly judgmental experience. Just read the centerspread and see. Public displays of affection and conversations about sex are mostly taboo in these storied cloisters.

Because everyone knows everyone, we tend to scrutinize other people's relationships — or lack thereof. This hypercritical attitude hinders our understanding of what

awaits us when we leave high school. People love who they love, and they act on it in different ways. We should let them.

Although we focus on romantic relationships in this issue, platonic relationships are just as important, if not more so. Any relationship can be a source of comfort and support. Friends can provide these feelings just as easily as a romantic partner can.

The statement on Community and Inclusion has a goal of making every student feel "known and loved," so we need to create healthy conversation around relationships in order to improve the mental health of all students.

XOXO,

Izzy Andrews

Mia Fares

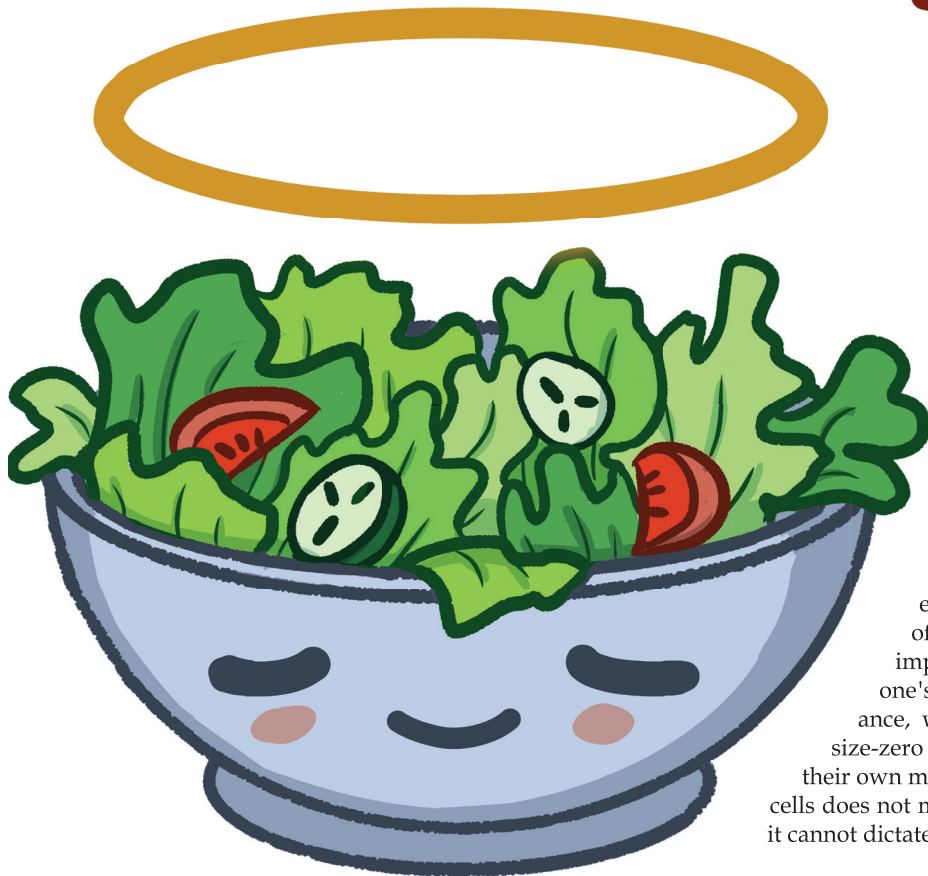
Sophia Lima

Leila Pulaski

2/news
5/features
10/center
12/culture
15/sports
17/opinions



DIET + CULTURE

When the weight-loss mindset takes over, food becomes the enemy

Too often we assume that people who are overweight are lazy, lack work ethic or do not take proper care of themselves, yet it is nearly impossible to determine someone's health from their appearance, weight or clothing size. Both size-zero and plus-sized people have their own medical issues. Having more fat cells does not make you a bad person — and it cannot dictate self-worth.

an obsession. Apple Watches and apps like MyFitnessPal enable this fixation. Americans spend upwards of \$60 billion on diet and weight loss products every year.

We should not feel guilty or ashamed for eating a cookie because a cookie is just a form of energy — and a delicious one at that.

Crash and fad diets are dangerous. Studies show that limiting one's food intake is often a precursor to eating disorders, yet it has become so pervasive in our society that even young children are worried about their weight. In 2015, a study by Common Sense Media revealed that around 80% of ten-year-old girls have been on a diet, and a 1991 study reported that 42% of first through third grade girls want to be thinner.

We have created a society in which children are engaged in risky dieting behaviors that often lead to full-blown eating disorders. Something has to change.

So we must challenge the norm. Do not call yourself fat, shame yourself for eating a slice of pepperoni pizza, or talk about your diet to a classroom full of impressionable students.

Diet culture thrives on our insecurities and the belief that we somehow need to improve. Weight does not determine character, and we are not good or bad because of what we eat.

By Julia Smith

Last year, I was sitting with friends in front of the cafeteria fireplace on one of the few cold days before winter break. One of my friends was sipping on her daily can of La Croix when she jokingly remarked that she might be addicted.

The theory caught the attention of another friend, who warned that carbonation could cause weight gain, or so he had read.

A long discussion ensued. If La Croix had zero calories, then she shouldn't gain weight, but the bloating effects of the bubbles could not be ignored.

As it turns out, La Croix does not in fact lead to extra pounds: its lack of calories ensures that the contents of the beverage will not be converted into fat.

Still, the seed of fear had been planted.

Such reactions are fairly common and reflect a culture in which weight gain is feared and calories are the enemy. In such circumstances, even water — that paragon of health — can be viewed with suspicion.

The Moral Value of Food

"Diet culture" is a system of beliefs that promotes thinness as the only path to health and desirability, but what makes dieting even more dangerous is when society places a moral value on food.

This unhealthy system pervades our society. Celebrities promote dangerous diets while friends make casual remarks about needing to work off dessert. It seems like everyone believes that eating "clean" and exercising constantly not only makes you thinner, but somehow makes you better.

From a young age, I was taught that there exist two types of food: good and bad. Consuming good foods (salads and fruit) made you pure and healthy, whereas eating bad foods (Oreos, Gushers and other sweets seldom found in my house) meant you were greedy, unable to control yourself or simply bad.

While some are not concerned about eternal damnation for eating devil's food cake, many fear weight gain. Dieting is so ingrained in our society that most dread being undesirable more than they worry about their long-term health.

Lizzo recently decided to take a break from Twitter after trolls constantly harassed her and made insensitive jokes about her appearance. This rampant fat-shaming is just one of the ways that overweight body types are portrayed as morally inadequate.

Beauty is Not Pain

Weight loss is a tool used to increase self-esteem and make people feel better. It's February, and by now most New Year's resolutions have crumbled and feelings of guilt are setting in.

While losing weight is not an inherently terrible goal, the extreme focus on weight loss is problematic. Diet culture promotes the idea that conforming to a specific body standard is more important than your health, both physical and mental.

In middle school, one of my teachers took great pride in constantly complaining to the class about her juice cleanse, which made her cranky and tired. All those complaints seemed like an excuse for her to show how she was sticking to her resolution to become a new and improved version of herself.

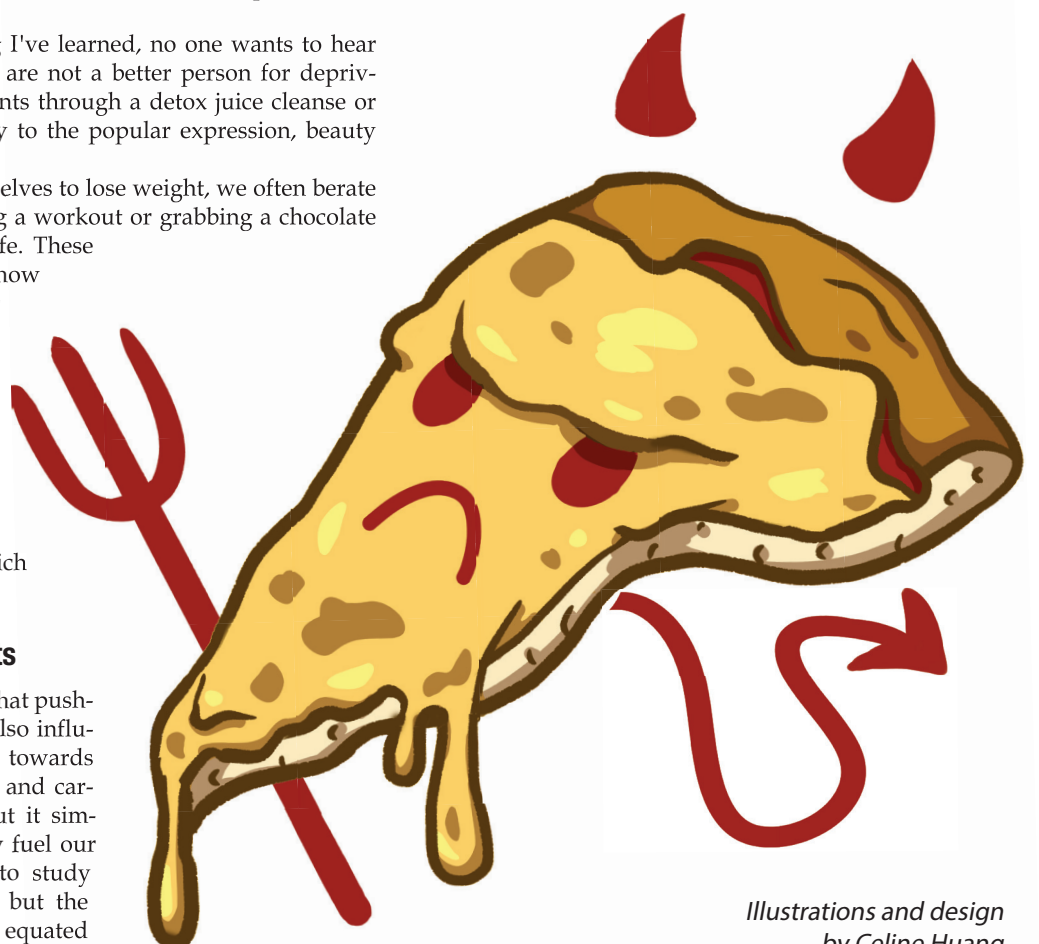
If there's one thing I've learned, no one wants to hear about your diet. You are not a better person for depriving yourself of nutrients through a detox juice cleanse or a water fast. Contrary to the popular expression, beauty is not pain.

When we push ourselves to lose weight, we often berate ourselves for skipping a workout or grabbing a chocolate croissant from the cafe. These rigid ideas about how we eat and how our bodies should look can cause our mental health to suffer as we constantly push ourselves towards some unsustainable goal and deprive ourselves of that which makes us happy.

The Danger of Diets

The body standard that pushes us to lose weight also influences our attitudes towards food. All calories, fat and carbohydrates are, to put it simply, just energy. They fuel our bodies, allowing us to study hard and play hard, but the term "calorie" is now equated with fat.

Calorie-counting has become



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