



# BLOOM

BY STAFF

PHOTOS BY ELLA ROSEWARNE AND GRACE WANG

For the fourth edition of The Communicator, we chose to embody the theme Bloom. As we enter the spring season, spend more time outside and reflect on the last two years, we acknowledge the ways in which we have grown. In this 18-page spread, we recognize and appreciate the pivotal moments in our lives that have shaped us into the individuals we are today. Small or large, sad or happy, these moments are the crux of our existence; each moment opens new doors in our lives in nuanced and unexpected ways. In this series, we try to capture a range of stories from people of differing backgrounds and experiences to create a well-rounded collection of stories for readers to find themselves in. A black and white photo accompanies each article; the up-close portraits were intentionally taken to capture people in their most genuine and intimate states. We are deeply appreciative of the people who chose to share their stories with us.



# ZAKIYA FORTNER

Zakiya Fortner doesn't have it easy; between school work, a job, a social life and mental health, they often find themselves struggling to find the right balance. As the hefty workload of junior year increases and the end of the year becomes closer to reality, the question really becomes: What do they prioritize first?

For the past nine years, Fortner has struggled with ADHD, anxiety and depression. When their mental health declines, other responsibilities take a back seat. During their freshman year of high school, their mental stability worsened and manifested itself into an ongoing cycle of depressive episodes.

"When I get into an episode, it becomes very dark — very black and white," Fortner said. "Everything moves in slow motion. It's hard to get up, hard to do normal human things like basic hygiene, eating and drinking regularly."

Fortner frequently has to sacrifice one thing for another, and navigating the line between giving too much or too little can be a delicate task. Keeping their mental health stable is often bargained with getting their work turned in on time and spending time with friends can be regularly swapped for taking on more shifts at work.

"Sometimes I find myself taking weeks off of work because I need time to myself and to take time for my schooling ... I'll fall so far behind and then it's really hard to catch back up," Fortner said. "It's really complicated, because it's like what comes first, what is important? Do I take a break from doing schoolwork to better my mental health? But if I do that, I come back to all this work that I have to do. And then what was that little break for? It's really hard to find a good balance."

Meeting Rachel Pashturro was Fortner's moment of growth. The two best friends met through a mutual friend in an English class freshman year and immediately clicked. Pashturro has become someone Fortner consistently re-



lies on — a shoulder to cry on, a voice of reason, an escape for fun.

Without Pashturro, Fortner doesn't know where they would be; Pashturro made the process of getting out of bed every morning less of a struggle.

"Before she was in my life it was very hard to keep going and live and breathe," Fortner said. "I come to school just so I can see her because if I didn't have her, I probably would not be coming to school very much."

When Fortner was questioning their identity and gender in 2021, Pashturro showed unwavering support and acceptance throughout the process.

"I'm not a boy and I'm not a girl; right in the middle is perfect for

me," Fortner said. "[Pashturro] was like, 'No matter what, I will listen and I will help you. We can go shopping for new clothes if you want. We can try to find some more masculine clothes for you and more feminine clothes for you.'"

For the past three years, Pashturro has been a steadfast lifeline for Fortner in times of uncertainty and darkness. With Pashturro's support and friendship, Fortner has been able to evolve into a confident and genuine person.

"She lets me know that it's okay that I am struggling," Fortner said. "She wants to be around me when I'm stressed and [let's me know] that I'm allowed to be all of the things that I am."

# JULIA HARRISON



of who he was became clear in his mind; a piece of his identity clicked into place and he felt it needed to be shared with a friend. He needed it to be shared with someone other than himself.

He sat up straight and texted a good friend: I'm a boy now.

Harrison typed those four words to his friend and the message felt real. He told a friend who he knew wanted nothing but for him to be comfortable in his identity. Harrison had been close friends with her for a long time and although it didn't feel like a strain on their friendship, Harrison worried that a part of himself was being hidden; that worry faded into knowledge. The honesty between the two of them fueled him and his friendship.

"I wasn't only hiding something from her, before I told anyone, but I was also hiding it from myself," Harrison said. "Telling someone made it real. It wasn't just something that I was thinking about."

There was a significant change in himself after signifying this part of his self-image to someone. That night, Harrison shared a piece of who he was with what felt like the world, or a part of the world that mattered. Harrison's identity didn't come from telling someone what "category" he fit into, but it did change what person he knew he wanted to be.

When Julia Harrison was seven years old, his older sister explained what it meant to be non-binary. Immediately, Harrison felt like that fit him. As he grew older and went to middle school, he learned more about himself and started to identify as non-binary. The term felt safe for a long time, but the label that once made Harrison feel open and content in himself shifted into a title that held him back.

During the summer before ninth grade, Harrison started questioning being non-binary. Harrison felt like it didn't fit. He started to have thoughts that were more trans-masculine. And started to realize he wanted to be a boy. He would make statements in his head saying things like "when I become a

boy that's gonna be so fun."

Harrison took what he already knew about himself and made his identification fit more than just his exterior. He wanted to be seen as a boy, not just as transgender. Although being transgender was and is a part of himself, he was not confined to what people wanted to see. Harrison is a person first, he wanted to stay true to himself, and build around the person he already was.

During the summer before ninth grade, one weekend night Harrison slept over at his grandma's house. He lay on the hardwood floor of a small room so he wouldn't fall asleep. He scrolled through his phone as his mind strayed away from the absent abyss of the internet and the strong realization

Ekaterina Angelova's story began on a cliffside overlooking the Black Sea on the coast of Bulgaria. It was at this moment that her life unfolded before her eyes and, for the first time, she could see herself for who she truly was.

Angelova, a current CHS teacher's assistant (TA), originates from Pleven, Bulgaria. Nine years ago, she left the capital of Bulgaria where she attended college to move to the U.S. with her husband and two kids as he pursued his career. Since then, she has found herself taking on multiple volunteer pastimes including working in school gardens at local elementary schools and as a science olympiad coach at Dicken Elementary School.

After learning about the opportunity to become a TA from a friend four years ago, she took the chance; she has always had a love for being in a learning environment and finds fulfillment in providing additional support for students.

"When I learned from a friend about the opportunity for being a teacher's assistant, I decided I wanted to do something that helps others," Angelova said. "I see a meaning in helping a young person overcome difficulties... and helping somebody else believe in themselves and go forward."

It was Angelova's personal experience in high school that encouraged her to serve others. She loved spending time outdoors: She was part of a cave club that explored and studied undeveloped caves as well as a skydiving club.

However, Angelova struggled with self-confidence and bullying as a child.

"I was quite shy and I lacked confidence," Angelova said. "I thought I was very skinny and often kids laughed at how skinny I was. So I had this [perception] that I was not good-looking. And even for two years, I believe, I wore only long pants because I didn't like how skinny my legs were."

But her outlook on life and herself changed during one sunrise in Kamen Bryag, a quaint town in

the northeast part of Bulgaria. Angelova was 18 years old and on a camping trip when her long-term boyfriend broke up with her.

"[The breakup] was really hard for me at that point," Angelova said. "When you're that young, everything seems so extreme and final. I had this feeling that this was the best person in my life and I'm losing something really valuable."

The next morning after a sleepless night, Angelova witnessed something beautiful; she stood on a rocky cliff overlooking the sea as the sun rose above the horizon and dolphins swam through crashing waves. This was a moment of enlightenment. It showed her that no matter what difficulties she was facing, something beautiful would always await: she just had to have

the eyes to see it.

"This was a moment that showed me that things are beautiful and it depends on how we look at them and the world. After that moment, I was not so sad that the relationship ended. I will open up to see what the world has to bring me."

Angelova applied her new outlook to her career, livelihood and family. She now carries with her the lessons she has learned and hopes to pass them on to the students she works with.

"Difficulties are an opportunity for growth," Angelova said. "We should not be brought down by difficulties but consider them like a challenge, and when we overcome this challenge, we will be able to see life with different eyes. Something good always awaits."



**KATIA ANGELOVA**

In 1996, Jeri Schneider, CHS librarian, spent her days driving around in a large van, filled with all different kinds of books. The Ypsilanti District Library's bookmobile drove throughout the local neighborhoods, parking by community areas and waiting for residents to make their selections. The traveling library helped to distribute books to those who couldn't access the physical buildings.

"One day [this] little girl said to me, 'We're so happy that the bookmobile comes. Before the bookmobile came we used to watch too much TV. Oh, and now we just read books and we love it. We're so happy,'" Schneider said. "[That] is why I do what I do."

This college job wasn't necessarily supposed to turn into Schneider's career: She originally wanted to be a truck driver. However, the path she followed eventually led to a bookmobile conference in Bismarck, ND. The Ypsilanti District Library tasked her with figuring out what kind of new bookmobile to purchase for the program. Through all different kinds of specs, prices and vendors, Schneider stumbled upon a transcript of the talks that had occurred at the convention. A certain talk from a previous meeting stood out to her: detailing the new technology and changes occurring in the world of librarians.

"He was talking about disparities in wealth and income and how that was going to impact information with all this technology, and how we'd have to make very concerted efforts to make sure that technology was allocated equitably," Schneider said. "So everyone would have access to all this stuff that was going

to be coming and we didn't even know what it was going to be yet. I decided right then and there that I wanted to become a real librarian and go to graduate school."

The process wasn't easy or clean-cut, but Schneider was determined to make a difference. After reading through the transcript on her plane ride home from the conference, she determined that she would go to graduate school and obtain her master's degree.

"I was a single mom," Schneider said. "I had a baby who was one year old. So it was like, 'How am I going to do this,' but I knew it was what I wanted to do."

After graduating, Schneider worked at the University of Michigan for a few years, but it didn't

fulfill what she had imagined. So, she decided that she wasn't done with school.

"I had lunch with [a friend] about a week or two before school was getting ready to start," Schneider said. "And she was just going on and on about how much she loved being a school librarian, told me all these stories about students and cool things that happened. I got really excited. I thought, that's what I want to do. I want to get out of the boring university and I want to work with kids."

After a handful of years working in an elementary school and one year at Pioneer High School, she finally found home at CHS.

"I've been happy ever since," Schneider said.



**JERI SCHNEIDER**



# ZION MCLILLEY



Zion McLilley sang for an audience for the first time at eight years old. His grandma volunteered him to sing at church, and after he sang the first couple of lines, rows of people responded with an overwhelming applause.

At 11, McLilley feared where his singing career was going because he was mainly singing in a place where he didn't feel accepted or share beliefs: church. At this point, he was considering stopping singing.

"I [didn't] want to be stuck singing gospel if that's what I chose to do with my life," McLilley said. "But meeting [Jacky Clark-Chisholm], who dabble dabbles in other genres too, I knew that I wasn't going to be stuck in a box."

Jacky Clark-Chisholm is one of

his biggest inspirations. McLilley sang for her when he was 11 years old and she told him, "Never give up on your dreams. You have an amazing voice [and] it's only going to get better." This moment motivated McLilley to keep singing.

McLilley, a sophomore at CHS, takes vocal lessons with Travis Pratt, an opera and Broadway singer. He works with Pratt and a group including Brandon Gray, Ciasia Greene and Lauriah Jackson, who have been on programs including America's Got Talent, American Idol, Apollo and The Voice. McLilley met with the group for the first time virtually in October 2020. He immediately felt out of place, but the group welcomed him and his talent.

As McLilley has stuck with sing-

ing, he has grown into the singer and person he is today. In an eighth grade music studies class, he was presented with an opportunity to appear on America's Got Talent, but he was not ready at the time. Now, he feels ready for that step.

"I feel like I could now [because] I have come into my truth," McLilley said. "I'm Black [and] I'm queer. Those are identities I live in every day and I wasn't exactly comfortable with that three years ago when the opportunity was presented to me, but if it was presented to me now — knowing who I am, accepting my truth and walking in my truth — I 100% would be able to do that."

Continuing on, he plans to start a YouTube channel. For the past four months, he has been ordering equipment, planning episodes and crafting his message. He plans to share his experiences and give advice as a Black and queer teen.

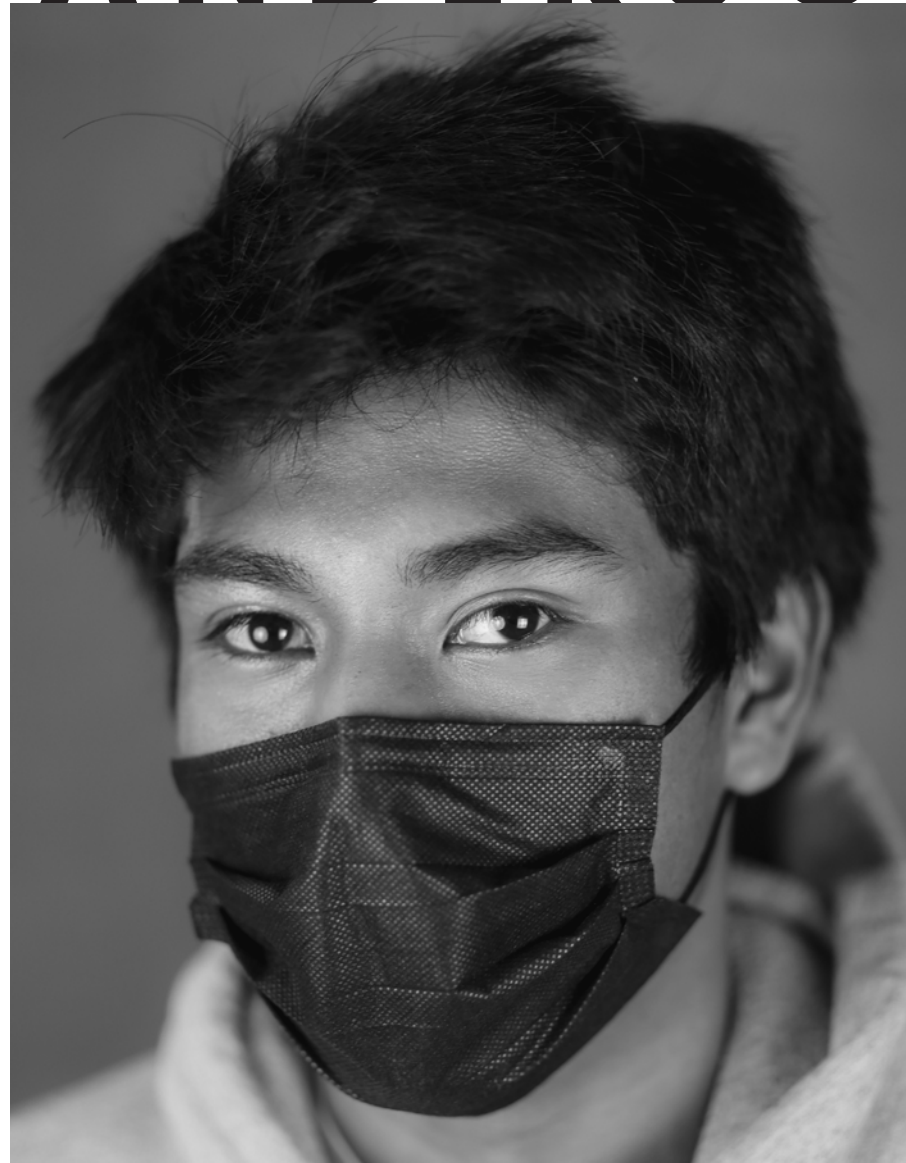
"I know that I live with anti-queerness and anti-Blackness internalized in me, and I feel like a lot of Black, queer people go through that too," McLilley said. "I want to let them know that they're not the only ones [and] share my experience."

While planning the channel, McLilley has looked to one of his favorite influencers, Tarek Ali, a Black, queer man who shares his day-to-day and life experiences only. McLilley hopes to take what he loves about Ali as an influencer and channel it into his position.

"My goal is just to touch somebody and let somebody know that they're not alone," McLilley said.

While McLilley makes this step, he continues to touch people with his gifted voice and soon inspire his peers with a new connection.

# CHRIS ANDERSON



Chris Anderson, a CHS freshman, started running in sixth grade. He has stuck with it since, and now is a freshman on Pioneer High School's (PHS) Varsity Cross Country team. Already used to the training, Anderson found the high school races to be much more competitive and he enjoys being part of a team. The team is close-knit and knows how to support and engage as a team by hyping each other up, giving running advice, joking around, welcoming underclassmen and motivating each other to improve.

Anderson also appreciates how his team members are always happy for each other, even when they don't win.

Anderson's last race for PHS was the Portage Race, less than halfway through the season in the fall of 2021. After leading the majority of the race, he ended in third place after twisting his ankle in the first loop and dislocating both of his patellas, the kneecap bone. Anderson put his patellas back in place and continued to run through the pain.

"Everything was hurting and I was just trying to keep my position. It was a big race so I was just thinking of doing well for the team. In the last 600 meters, I was already drained [and] I was in third at that point. I was really hurting and I pushed right through it. I saw my teammates, and I was like, 'Might as well, if this is my last race, [I'll] give it everything I have.' I was disappointed, more at the end. After I crossed that line, I just fell to the ground. My legs were done, my arms were hurting, [and] I was really dehydrated."

Anderson knew this would be his last race of the season before even crossing the finish line. No longer able to run for over three months, Anderson went through physical therapy, several visits to the doctor and many x-rays. After a while though, he stopped to take time for himself.

"I wasn't really doing much without running, because running is more of a stress mechanism for me to relieve stress and get away from problems. So without it, it was like bringing all my problems together."

Anderson sees running as an extremely mental sport, and without it he felt the impact. He talked to another runner who left the team for personal reasons and how he coped with it, and this helped An-

der. He also kept in touch with teammates and the season's schedule.

Last month, Anderson went on his first run since the Portage Race with the Ann Arbor Track Club at the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) track. He went to one of their practices to prepare for the track season, and he left feeling drained.

While gaining his strength and speed back, Anderson plans to run track for PHS during the spring. Going into the season and beyond, he is taking the important lesson he learned this fall at the Portage race. "I learned that sometimes it's better not to push ourselves, in races or in anything, to be the best [or] to give the team something," Anderson said.



# HANNAH



May 18, 2021 was a day Hannah Margolis, CHS junior, will never forget — it was her 16th birthday. For her, this meant getting her driver's license.

"I'm not typically a morning person, but on the morning of my birthday, I had never been so excited to get out of bed," Margolis said. "I sat in the passenger seat by my mom as she drove me to the Secretary of State. After that appointment, I felt older already."

All through middle school, Margolis couldn't wait to turn 16. She would see her sister driving around and that's all she wanted at the

time. Right when Margolis turned 14 and nine months, she started driver's education. She wanted to make sure that on her 16th birthday she would get her license.

Growing up with an older sister, Margolis admired her sister's ability to drive. After years of watching her sister drive, Margolis wanted the promised freedom of getting her license.

To Margolis, the feeling of driving without an adult is much different than driving with your permit.

"The feeling of driving is unexplainable," Margolis said. "Driving away from my house for the first

time was an experience I will never forget. It almost felt illegal because I was so used to driving with my parents."

Getting her license has played a big impact on Margolis's life. She has gained responsibility and maturity ever since. She picks her brother up from school and is able to hang out with friends more often.

However, there is some sense of loneliness for Margolis. She often finds herself driving alone and wishing she spent more time with her parents.

"I was so used to asking my parents for rides and I didn't realize all the time I was taking for granted," Margolis said. "Being able to drive to the places I used to go to with my parents feels nostalgic. The first place I drove was Target, but being alone in the store felt unreal. I've been dropped off places before, but now I am able to do things on my own time and I am given all this unspoken trust."

There were many changes made in Margolis's life after turning 16. Her family has been supportive of her the entire way and she is very thankful.

Margolis is now almost 17, but she remembers her sixteenth birthday like it was yesterday. She isn't one to have regrets, but looking back on her younger years, she wishes she would've done some things differently.

"If I could go back in time, I would worry less about getting my license and more about enjoying my time being young," Margolis said. "Once you turn 16, the years begin to fly by. Turning 16 was definitely a life-changing experience and it's a birthday I will never forget."

# MARGOLIS

# KARIM



In December 2020, Karim Mohamed, a junior at CHS, left for Egypt.

Mohamed, his two younger siblings and his parents were restless; it had been nearly ten months since Covid-19 swept through Michigan. So, with that, his mother took a break from college, and he and his entire family left home.

One 13-hour flight later, Mohamed touched down in Egypt, expecting to stay only until the summer. However, after some of his family members became sick, the Mohamed's extended their trip an additional six months.

In the year that he spent abroad, Mohamed split time between his maternal grandma's home in Faiyum — one of the country's oldest cities with a population of nearly four million people — and his paternal grandma's house in Beni Suef, an agricultural town on the bank of the Nile River.

"All of my family lives in this huge house," Mohamed said. "It went from just five of us [in Ann Arbor] to 25 [in Egypt]. It was really fun, and I liked it a lot more."

In both places, he was surrounded by completely different — but familiar — social standards. Mo-

hamed, a fluent Arabic speaker, had visited Egypt twice before. Nevertheless, his most recent trip was full of weekend visits to Cairo and cultural surprises.

"[Egyptians] are a lot more direct," Mohamed said. "Here, people are nice about everything. If you're doing something wrong, they'll kindly tell you to fix it. There, they'll directly tell you to stop, and not in a nice way. I had to get tougher skin to deal with all their comments."

More personally, Mohamed also saw this cultural difference play out at home.

"Family is the most important thing," Mohamed said. "My grandma, she's obviously not a 'woke' person. She says a lot of things that are kind of questionable, but no one says anything because we have so much respect for elders. Talking back is extremely offensive."

But between these constant adjustments and heated soccer games in 95-degree weather, Mohamed was ready to go home.

"I was done," Mohamed said. "I wanted to go back ... I feel like Egypt isn't really a place to live, for me at least ... Even when I lived there for three years, I lived in an American neighborhood. I went to an American school. This time, I lived in the middle of an Egyptian city, and it was just completely different for me ... I was ready to go back to my normal life. I had finished my driver's license, but I haven't gotten it yet, that sort of thing."

Regardless, Mohamed believes that Egypt has changed him for the better.

"Before I left [for Egypt], I was a lot more insecure," Mohamed said. "I would always overthink everything. When I came back, I was more confident. I knew that not everyone would be happy, but I'm gonna do the best I can. I don't really care what happens after that."

# MOHAMED



EVERS



BASKEY

Evers Baskey has lived the nightmare of calling your teacher mom. For him, however, it had slightly different connotations. Baskey's mom is a teacher at Clague Middle School (CMS) and he was a student in her class during seventh grade. Having his mother as a teacher allowed Baskey to experience school in an entirely different context.

"It opened me up to different perspectives," Baskey said. "I was [witnessing] both sides of the class: both what I was doing and what the teacher was doing."

Baskey went to CMS because his mother wanted him and his brother to be in the same school as her.

However, this meant that Baskey wasn't going to school with any of the people he had grown up with, like neighbors and family friends. At first, Baskey felt disconnected from the people he was learning with, but being in his mom's class helped to remedy that.

"When my mom was a teacher, it was easier for me to talk about different things that I do," Baskey said. "I was able to just be one person and not act differently at school than at home."

Although having his mother as a teacher helped raise his confidence, Baskey also remembers the awkwardness of this experience. One anecdote that stands out to

him is a time when he was trying to get his mother's attention in the classroom. He didn't want to call her Ms. Baskey, but he couldn't call her 'Mom,' so he was at an impasse.

Awkwardness aside, Baskey and his mother became closer as a result of her being his teacher. They were able to share funny experiences in and out of class, and being together all day gave them more time and space for each other at home.

"There'd be a good moment in class and then that would become an inside joke between [my mom and I]," Baskey said. "It was just spending more time with my mom, which helped our relationship grow."

DATHAN



AUSTIN

It is Dathan Austin's birthday and he feels lucky to be in high school. All day, he has been greeted by waves and smiles and friends saying "happy birthday!" He feels accepted by those around him and loves spending time at CHS.

However, this was not always true. Austin, a CHS sophomore, struggled throughout middle school and into the pandemic with feeling uncertain about who he surrounded himself with. Middle school in particular was difficult for Austin; He didn't feel like he fit in with the boys, so he spent most of his time with the girls. Austin felt out of place in both groups, but still he was able to accept himself as he

was.

"In middle school, not being accepted by people around me [really changed my perspective]," Austin said. "I was like, 'Okay, I guess I'll just live with the people who accept me, because that's all I've got.'"

Transitioning out of middle school, Austin was able to find people he truly connected with. High school brought with it a community of people that was similar to Austin, allowing him to learn more about his identity. Specifically, Austin realized more about his sexuality and explored his own definition of love.

However, high school has not been a piece of cake for Austin. The

Covid-19 pandemic made school work extremely hard for Austin during his first year of high school. He struggled with completing his work and nearly failed his classes. He attributes this to a lack of socialization with his friends and peers. Coming back in-person helped Austin get his grades up.

"I did a bunch of work [and] grinded [freshman year] out," Austin said. "I'm doing work now, I'm not failing. I'm getting back on my grind."

Overall, Austin appreciates the small moments of friendship that he experiences in high school.

"I found people that I connected with [and] I feel seen," Austin said.



# AVA LOWEN



The discrepancy between CHS and Pioneer High School has become apparent to CHS senior Ava Lowen as she reflects on her time in high school. CHS' curriculum and the block schedule create a unique environment that stands out in comparison to PHS. Her teachers and peers alike foster a welcoming and well-balanced sense of school and life.

CHS brought Lowen some of her best friends through a pivotal experience that she had her freshman year on an overnight forum trip. At first, Lowen was not going to attend the trip because she didn't know anyone and found herself lost in the preconceived notions of high school: cliquy friend groups, homework for hours at night, un-

matched stress and not enough sleep.

On that trip, Lowen remembers Matt Johnson, her forum leader until January, 2022, stressing the importance of branching out and not taking life too seriously. Johnson's advice helped Lowen create friendships that have carried her throughout high school.

"Once we got to the campsite, it was disgusting, cold and raining," Lowen said. "We all pushed into one cabin, and we played games together. We talked as a whole class and it felt just like a safe space."

This forum trip up north helped Lowen gain confidence socially. As she interacts with a group of people, she now feels that she can be more open with new faces right

away. This has helped her to become more relaxed and outgoing.

Johnson also helped Lowen structure her future goals and aspirations in a way that has pushed her to find out what she is truly interested in. One of her goals being to potentially pursue a career in the healthcare field. Without Johnson's advice to split enroll at PHS and explore alternative classes that aren't offered at CHS, Lowen wouldn't have been able to discover her passion for classes in the health field.

"Matt just really pushed us to focus on what we wanted to do," Lowen said. "He never tried to tell us that there was one right way or one right path to take."

Lowen has also developed habits in high school that she will carry into the years to come. She tries to split her days into different pieces to make sure that she isn't taking on more than she can handle. She reserves a few hours after school to get her homework done, but she tries to get the majority of it done during the day. At night, and on the days she isn't at school she focuses her time and energy on extracurricular activities, spending time with her friends and family and getting things done for herself.

High school has been a time of major change for Lowen, but she is proud of all of the things that she has learned. Johnson's advice pushed her to find balance in her academics and social life. Being able to choose classes for her career at PHS and stay close to her support system at CHS has allowed her to feel satisfied in her high school experience. Although they are different, each has led her to a different part of her journey.

"Coming out of high school, I am most proud of finding friends that inspire me to be my best self, and exploring my interest enough to understand what makes me feel fulfilled and happy," Lowen said.

# ALLISON MAYER



Allison Mayer is a firm believer in the bad being as important as the good.

In second and third grade, Mayer learned the fundamentals of academics like everyone else. She also learned how a toxic friendship can camouflage itself.

"When something bad happens to you, it really sticks," Mayer said.

Even at the ages of seven and eight, Mayer knew that she was not being treated kindly by another student. For a while, she viewed a girl in her grade as a friend and was able to brush off the painful jabs and violent spats. At the surface, this seemed like any other elementary school relationship. They played together on the playground, they sat next to each other in class

and even had play dates.

After a while, Mayer came to the eye-opening realization that this was no friend of hers and was in fact her bully.

"We were pretty close and then she started doing jerky things and I was like 'okay, but she's my friend,'" Mayer said. "Then after a year, I realized that this was not normal, this was not a friendship."

She began to be fed up with getting her lunch knocked off the table, being hit or having to brush burrs out of her hair after school. She realized that the friendship was growing increasingly more one-sided.

At such a young age, Mayer was still learning what it takes to stand up for herself. She worried adults

wouldn't listen or would disregard her complaints due to her age. She didn't think that adults would be able to understand what she was going through or that they would even believe that she knew what bullying looked like.

When she ultimately decided she had enough, she pushed past her fear and decided to open up to her parents about what had been happening at school.

After the years of torment and working up the nerve to tell the adults in her life, Mayer was finally able to achieve peace. To this day she is grateful for the individuals in her life who listened to her and advocated for her, even in elementary school.

"My parents helped me because they told the school and then I wasn't in a class with her for the next few years," Mayer said. "My teachers [allowed that to] happen so I appreciate that the relationships with the adults were good."

Mayer hopes that no one has to go through this kind of experience, especially at such a young age. However, she is unable to ignore the lessons this experience taught her. She fears that if it didn't happen so early in life, she wouldn't be able to say "stop" or "no" to someone today.

"I'm glad that I can stand up for myself," Mayer said. "I feel like now I can be like, 'No, I'm not interested,' or 'That hurt my feelings.'"

What stuck the most from having a second grade bully was being able to recognize a real friendship and knowing when to ask for help. Mayer didn't know she was getting bullied when it happened. Now, nearly eight years later, she is able to acknowledge what a true friendship looks and feels like.



# WALDEN

# JONES-PERPICH



Contemplation and time away from screens gave Walden Jones-Perpich, senior at CHS, the space to change his habits. Jones-Perpich went on a backpacking trip for two weeks last summer with Outward Bound, a group that hiked through the Gore Range in Colorado, just outside of Silverthorne. One of the days brought about a unique experience that helped Jones-Perpich discover aspects of himself through the physical and mental toughness of the day.

“We had a solo day,” Jones-Perpich said. “It is supposed to be a reflection-type day, because for 24 hours you are alone. I picked a camp spot away from everyone

else... we weren’t allowed a book or anything.”

This isolation made him realize that he had spent the better part of his life being distracted by his phone. Through pure boredom, he discovered that he often gets distracted by his phone and pulls him away from being in the moment.

Re-joining the group after 24 hours alone helped him realize what changes he wanted to make to his own life; one of those changes was to live in the moment more. Being without electronics for two weeks helped him realize that his phone is not something that he should prioritize.

The trip also helped him discover

valuing the difficult things that life presents.

“[The trip] taught me a lesson about determination and finishing things even if you don’t want to do them,” Jones-Perpich said. “We were in the middle of the wilderness. There was no way to get out of what we were doing.”

In the summer of 2022, Jones-Perpich plans to head back out to Colorado for another trip — this time it will be for 30 days.

“This trip has helped me find motivation in pursuing the things that I love and find passion in,” Jones-Perpich said. “I can’t wait to go back.”

# MEGHAN

# PILLOTE



Freshman Meghan Pillote’s life-changing moment occurred in a matter of minutes. Pillote and her friend were having a sleepover, and they decided to climb out onto Pillote’s roof. It was around 3:00 a.m., and they wrapped themselves in a blanket to shield themselves from the February cold. It was dark and there were no cars; the atmosphere was peacefully silent.

Pillote was suddenly hit with the realization that she was growing up.

The sleepover was a few weeks after Pillote’s fifteenth birthday, and she had been grappling with getting older. Maturing brought anxieties over new responsibilities. “It was like, ‘I’m not in elementa-

ry school anymore, I’m not in middle school anymore,’” Pillote said. “What I do actually affects me.”

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, Pillote lost connections with her middle school friends.

“In quarantine, I didn’t have anyone, which really changed my mindset,” Pillote said. “But then, coming out of eighth grade, I made new friends and I started finding myself again.”

Pillote’s new friends make her a better, more mature person. In middle school, Pillote wouldn’t have climbed out onto her roof, but she feels more comfortable with her friends now.

Being with her friend on the roof helped her come to terms with be-

ing 15, as it was recently her friend’s birthday as well. Sitting with her friend reminded Pillote of their unspoken, yet shared experience.

Before this night, Pillote pushed away the thought of getting older. She didn’t want to face the changes, pressures and drama that comes with being 15. After being hit with the realization a few times before, that night on the roof finally helped her accept it.

“Before, [growing up] was kind of a sad thing that made me upset,” Pillote said. “But [at this sleepover] I was actually fine with it. I think it was because she was there. Because I realized, ‘I’m not in this by myself. Everyone else is going through this.’”

# VARA JAMES



Vara James, a CHS freshman, was diagnosed with cancer at nine years old. She had a Wilms tumor in her right kidney, a disease that mainly affects young children with malignant cancer cells.

Her third-grade experience was forever changed. As a kid, James wasn't able to interact with her classmates in the ways she wanted to; The treatment she was receiving greatly impacted her ability to fight off infection.

"I didn't feel normal because I would see my classmates play outside and I couldn't go outside," James said. "I couldn't be in the classroom because my immune system was straight garbage."

Nine months after getting over her first bout of cancer, James became sick again, this time with the cells in her lungs. After surviving cancer two times, her total time in the hospital, through out-patient and in-patient treatments, lasted over 100 days.

"I missed a lot of social stuff with students my age," James said. "But I'm also an only child. So, I never was around kids too much, it wasn't really that big of a deal. But, it was just a lot of hanging around adults and people who ask you stupid questions. Like, 'How are you feeling?' I'm like, 'Well, let's think about it. Yeah, sitting in a hospital bed. Feeling sick. Yeah, feeling great, actually.'"

Through James' days in the hospital, and during times of reflection, she found herself thinking about the fleeting nature of being alive.

"Well, now that I've lived through this I can't take life for granted anymore," James said. "I see people doing stuff that limits their life on purpose. And they're taking it for granted. I get a little upset because [they] don't know what could happen. I basically got three years of my life just taken away."

James' perspective on being alive changed her life.

"I always say commit or quit," James said. "It gave me courage to take more chances. Like applying to Community. I wasn't actually going to do it in the first place, but then I was like, I want to do it. Why not?"

James used the same mindset to reach out to celebrities like James Corden, eventually getting herself

onto his popular series "Carpool Karaoke" as a 12-year-old, and acting in commercials with Jim Harbaugh.

"[It was] all really fun, but I would rather not have the deadly illness, but you know, pretty fun otherwise," James said. "I've done a lot of fundraising, public speaking and stuff like that. [Those] opportunities prepared me for high school because now I can give presentations without being shaky or nervous."

Now that James is in her fourth year of remission, she hopes that others will take advantage of the good opportunities presented to them.

"[It's] so cliché, but live your life to the fullest," James said.

# DEAN REBECCA



tor — instead of entering academia.

After more than a decade pursuing her professional goals and working in various leadership roles, Westrate took a job at CHS as assistant dean in 2017. With the freedom of the school and the support of its staff, she was finally able to focus on a more personal identity: motherhood. Two summers later, she had her daughter, Francesca, through in vitro fertilization. In the time since, Westrate has loved raising her as a part of the CHS community.

"You want your children to be around good people, so even in the pandemic, I don't feel afraid to have her [at CHS]," Westrate said. "When I had her I think everyone came to visit, which was incredible. It's a different side of my identity because of the role that other people now play in my life, because they can be a support system. That new relationship can be really hard to accept when you're raised to be totally independent. This place allowed me to have the support I didn't know I needed until I was here."

Rebecca Westrate, CHS assistant dean, views her life in phases.

According to her, she's had three specific moments of growth: becoming an educator, an administrator and a mother. In all of these instances, Westrate relies on certain bedrock characteristics — independence, risk-taking, logic, common sense and boundary setting — that she learned as a child, growing up in a Dutch and Indonesian immigrant household.

Westrate's first bloom moment came as she briefly lived in South Africa, studying the country's school systems. At 20 years old, she compared and contrasted the various cultures and, more specifically, the various pedagogical approaches. She split her time between a di-

verse boarding school and a township school and noticed differences in funding models, access to education and society's perception of schooling.

"I was young, just finishing school," Westrate said. "I was in the first experience that no one could get me out of ... What I did mattered and society functions very differently there. I had to understand, switch and read the situation. When you're young, you tend to be impulsive or believe that the world is constructed the way your childhood world was constructed. That was the first time that [my reality] was really tested."

It was this experience that helped Westrate decide to become a teacher — and eventually an administra-



Falling in love is a monumental moment in anyone's life. It can lead to many things, including self-growth and heartbreak. But nobody can deny that love is not always an easy thing to tackle. Steve Coron, a fine arts teacher at CHS, would agree.

Coron described the most life-changing moment in his life as when he met his wife. Coron has been married to his wife for 40 years and has children with her.

"I finally found the person that I clicked and connected with," Coron said. "I like the fact that my wife was an incredible artist and her family was a bunch of artists and musicians and really creative people. So I fell in love with her family."

Karie, Coron's wife, was the rea-

son he chose to stay in Ann Arbor instead of going back to his hometown in Northern Michigan. Eventually came the birth their kids, who Coron describes happily with a smile on his face as "big shits."

Coron went on to explain that commitment is often a scary thing that comes along when doing something life-changing, like marrying someone.

"And I've noticed this has been harder for young folks like my kids," Coron said, "To find that one person you want as your partner and someone you think you can be with as a partner your whole life."

Coron thinks that many instances of love come with trade-offs, sacrifices and reconciliation.

"When you commit to someone,

you may think, 'Okay, I need to know this about myself; I'm willing to realize this about myself; I might need to change this about myself to make this work,'" Coron said. "And when it's easy, when you look at that person and go, 'It's easy for me to change for you,' that is rare."

This is where Coron thinks the struggle to commit comes from for younger generations. "I always ask people, when they say they have a boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, I say, 'Is it easy to be with that person?'" Coron said. "And sure, it takes a lot of work. You know, people say, you've been with me through thick and thin, through good and bad, all that. All those platitudes and it sounds hokey, but it's true."

He describes, with a sparkle in his eye, his 40 years of marriage as: "not coming without its hardships. I had to quit drinking. Otherwise I would have lost my relationship with Karie. And it was an easy decision to make, but it was hard to do the work. It has always been easy with Karie and that's part of the reason she has changed my life so much and continues to change my life."



**STEVE CORON**

"In 1990 I made the decision to move down to Texas," Kevin Davis said.

Davis, a staple at CHS, did not always plan on working in the education system.

In 1990 Davis dated someone who had a teaching job in Texas. He decided to follow her to Texas, changing the course of his life in a way that he did not anticipate. His plan was to finish his schooling with a Business Administration degree while he lived with her, but after a year and a half together, they broke up. Regardless, Davis decided to stay in Texas until '97, inevitably shaping him into the person he is today and leading him to the pivotal moment in his life; Davis' decision to stay in Texas changed his life drastically.

"It created more of an independence for me. I learned to rely on myself more — be more independent," Davis said.

Davis was met with many challenges to overcome, his hardest being finances. Davis didn't have the luxury of being able to ask his family for financial assistance, nor did he want that luxury.

"Every once in a while you can ask mom or dad for a couple bucks, I couldn't do that," Davis said. "I had to learn how to financially be independent, and I discovered myself that way. I had a lot of deep thoughts about what I was going to do, who I was going to be."

Between self-questioning and juggling how to become financially independent, Davis came to the realization that, despite him being all he had, he was all he needed.

"The only person I could rely on

was either myself or the person I was dating, and we broke up," Davis said. "I then came to the realization of 'Oh hey, I'm on my own,' and I discovered myself that way. I had made friends and did things here and there, but it was one of those things where I knew I had to know myself a lot better," Davis said.

Faced with self-reflection, Davis discovered himself. In doing so, it helped him establish things he normally would have never done, such as working with kids. Before Davis moved back to Michigan, he had no intentions of working with kids. Davis had gotten his business administration degree and worked for a company called Baby Superstore, traveling around the country open-

ing the stores. After the company was bought out and switched to Babies R Us, he realized he didn't want to work for the company anymore and that there was nothing left for him in Texas.

"You just get to the point where you decide it's time," Davis said.

"When I decided to move back [to Ann Arbor], I started pursuing more educational purposes," Davis said. "In time, I ended up here."

Shaping him into the man we know and love today, Davis' decision to stay in Texas changed his life drastically. He still thinks about moving away again, but he will know when he's ready to move again. At the moment, he isn't. He loves CHS and what it has brought to his life.



**KEVIN DAVIS**