

My name is Sofia Ball. I'm a sophomore at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School and copy editor of the Northwest Passage. My experience on staff has made me realize the importance of telling stories, normalizing truth and taking risks. My goals have always been to restore faith in the media, give a voice to the voiceless and ask the hard questions. Winning Kansas Scholastic Press Association's writer of the year has re-inspired my love for journalism.

My work below are pieces published in issues of our monthly newspaper, distributed to around 1,600 students in Shawnee, Kansas. In this portfolio, I've reflected on my learning process, as well as highlighted the everyday struggles a high school student can only try to overcome.

1. **No Answer** - Covering national issues can be daunting, and it almost always begs the questions, "is there anything more to say?" I've come to realize what a narrow way of thinking that was, especially since you're not proposing new methods to solve a problem. As journalists, our goal is to make people care about them. In this news feature on gun violence, I've localized it through the passing of a transfer student, DeMarcus Houston, who was shot, and his impact on the community. I've also found statistics showing increased rates of gun violence amongst adolescents in the Kansas City area.
2. **All At Once** - Most high school students have experienced grief once or twice in their young lives, whether that's for a grandmother or guinea pig, but it's almost never that of a best friend. This story illustrates the passing of rising senior Will Ensley, a varsity swimmer, straight A student, boyfriend and so much more. When I heard that the guy I went to school with passed on my way to 2nd hour math — someone I previously talked to for a previous sports recap — had died in a multi-car pile up, I was devastated. When Will's parents took me up to his bedroom at the end of an interview, I thought to myself "I can't do this." I learned to channel those emotions through my writing and reporting. I saw all the intricate affects one person can have on another's life, that grief is messy and hard to talk about. I feel an immense sensation of gratitude being given the opportunity to cover such a tragedy.
3. **Breathe Again** - I realized that journalists are exposed to a mix of new scenarios and conflicts throughout their careers. This can be exciting, sad, upsetting, etc., which is what I felt through the course of writing this story. Courtney Allison was diagnosed with cancer her sophomore year of high school. Knowing that I'm pulling all nighters, making candy salads and friendship bracelets at the same age in which her weekends were spent in a hospital bed made me feel guilty. But also, it made me curious as to how the tears, treatment plans and doctors appointments never consumed Courtney, how she's never let her illness define her. This profile represents the ways people face hardship, how it can destroy relationships and form new ones. I am still baffled by Courtney's enthusiasm. The fact that she's now an older sister, high school graduate, and cancer survivor is simply amazing.
4. **Easy A** - I always thought that in the case I'd have to hide a source's identity, it would relate to experiences of enduring misogyny, racism or assault of some kind, not for a

student who does her friends homework to make some extra cash. At first I dismissed the idea, then I was intrigued. We always aim to tackle the hard stuff, but sometimes stories like these can be just as worth telling, and at times more interesting.

5. **It's Complicated** - This news feature was published in our last issue of the year. It started when I noticed students in my chemistry class grabbing their car keys and walking out mid-lesson. It may have caused Ms. Long to roll her eyes, but only for a split second. And it wasn't just chemistry: it was also English, U.S. history and art class. Some people weren't showing up to school altogether, whereas others were called out early by parents for a "doctors' appointment." Throughout the reporting process, I continued to ask the same, yet simple question, "Why?" Why were students leaving? Why didn't parents care? Why weren't teachers doing anything to stop it? It's important as journalists to continue asking those types of questions and answer them throughout the story, leaving little easter eggs for the reader to keep going. I found that by law students are forced to attend school, but they fail to see this as an issue, as afternoon naps are preferred to earning a GED. And as for adults, well, many have given up or don't have a solution.

NO ANSWER

Increasing rates of gun violence in the KC area has a deadly impact on teens design by Greta Grist

On Nov. 16, senior DeMarcus Houston was rushed to the hospital after being shot in Kansas City, MO, two miles from the Kauffman Stadium. He did not survive.

Junior Amare Williams was scrolling on his phone when he saw the news. His reaction, disbelief.

"I was confused 'cause I was like, he's not dead 'cause he was here yesterday," Williams said. "I saw a post like 'Rest up little homie.' And I was just like, dang. He's gone."

He texted Houston just to make sure the news was true. No answer.

A few days ago they were talking. A few weeks ago they were placing bets on games. A few months ago Houston's cousin had asked Williams to look over him once he transferred schools.

While Houston was new to Northwest, he sat in class, waited in the lunch line, heard the static of Mr. Haney's walkie talkie.

Now he's gone.

Increasing rates of gun violence in the KC area are targeting adolescents on street corners, by bus stops and in parking lots. Not only are teenagers the perpetrators of this violence, but are finding themselves more in the line of fire.

The Kansas City area hit a record-number of homicides in 2023, peaking at 182 killings according to a Daily Homicide Analysis provided by the Kansas City Missouri Police Department, which is 12 more than the previous year.

In the last five years there's been a 21% increase in killings across all demographics.

However, there's been a 280% increase across ages 0-17.

Houston was one of these victims.

Northwest student resource officer Mark Coenen has been on the force 27 years. He expects rates of gun violence amongst adolescents to continue to increase.

"I don't know why it's on the rise and more younger people are resorting to gun [use]," Coenen said. "I think 20 maybe 30 years ago where someone was mad at somebody, they would fight and punch it out with their fists. But it seems like today younger people are resorting towards using guns to solve those problems rather than using their fists. Why that is, I have no idea."

Gun violence is the third-leading cause of death in teens according to the Population Reference Bureau. A 2023 Johns Hopkins study states gun violence is the leading cause of death in all children in America.

In an Instagram poll posted by the Northwest Passage, 35% of respondents said they have been affected by gun violence in the KC area. The poll was posted before the shooting at the Super Bowl parade in downtown Kansas City, which killed one and injured more than 20 others.

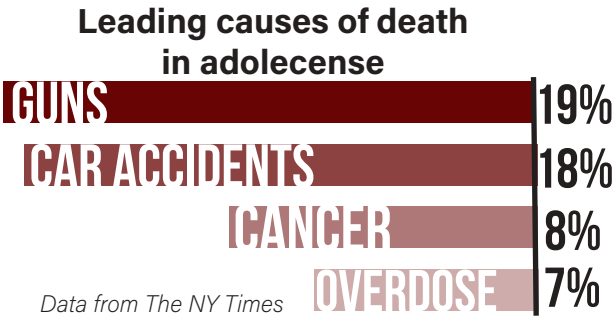
One million people were estimated to attend the parade. The shooters and the victims were predominantly children. Many Shawnee Mission Northwest students went to the parade and were witness to the events at Union Station, including sophomore Haylee Bell.

"I was inside the hotel sleeping," Bell said. "I hear the siren and see a bunch of cop cars. My first thought was that was just part of the parade. Then my mother comes in and says there's a shooting



A Kansas City Police Officer stands behind police tape Feb. 14 at Crown Center. Officers surrounded the area after a mass shooting occurred following the Chiefs Super Bowl Parade, leaving one dead and over 20 injured. The situation ended in two juveniles being put in custody.

Photo by Haylee Bell

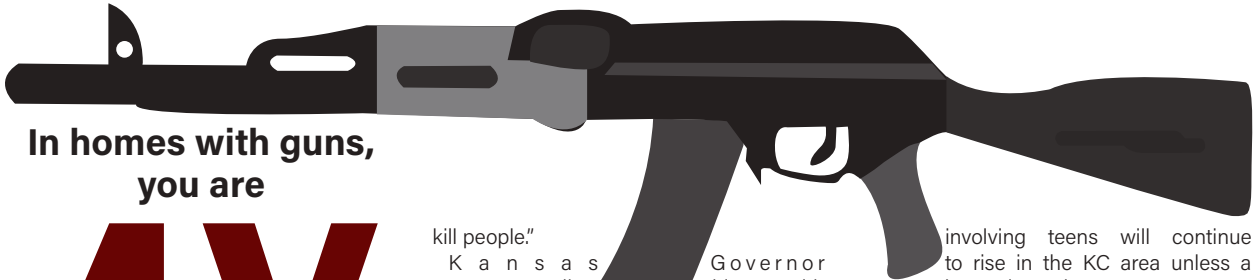


going on. I immediately run to the window, and I see cops running straight toward us. My first thought, because I'm a photographer was I want to get down there and see what's going on. But we stay in our room for a bit. I remember reporters did not know what was going on, nobody did."

Other events in the last year alone affecting Shawnee Mission students include a gun threat at Shawnee Mission East on Nov. 30, a fight where a firearm was allegedly pulled after a football game in the parking lot of Shawnee Mission South, an incident regarding a shot being fired at Oak Park Mall and a shooting near the Crown Center food court.

In Coenen's 19 years of working with the district, he estimates that twice he's had an experience with a student bringing a firearm to school. While this is rare, posts across social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitch often have views or streams of teenagers glorifying weapon possession and use.

"I see it on snap stories and Instagram stories all the time," sophomore Bella Alvarado said. "Guys waving guns at the camera



In homes with guns, you are

4X

more likely to die by accidental shooting

Data from healthychildren.org

and they are usually not much older than I am."

Juan Campos, an outreach worker who works with at-risk teens to avoid gun violence, told NPR in August of 2023 that petty arguments

and online disputes can lead to deadly violence in neighborhoods, alleyways and apartment complexes.

"It's hundreds of people on social media, versus just one or two people trying to guide youth in a positive way," Campos said.

Sometimes he gives teens warnings, expanding on the deadly consequences that can arise from violent actions, but "it doesn't work all the time."

The amount of shootings in Kansas City has sparked talk of gun law restrictions amongst local politicians.

In response to the Super Bowl Parade shooting, Missouri House Democrats have said they will aim to defer bills authorizing concealed weapons in churches and exempting firearms from sales tax. Crystal Quade, the Minority Leader in the Missouri House of Representatives and candidate for Governor, said at a press conference on Feb. 20 that she wants to introduce a constitutional amendment that give cities the ability to override state gun laws.

Missouri State Senator Bill Eigel, a Republican campaigning for Governor, made a social media post on Feb. 15 hinting that a lack of firearms was responsible for the crossfire.

"One good guy with a gun could have stopped the evil criminals who opened fire on the crowd immediately," Eigel wrote. "Guns don't kill people. Thugs and criminals

kill people."

Kansas Governor Laura Kelly sides with stricter gun law.

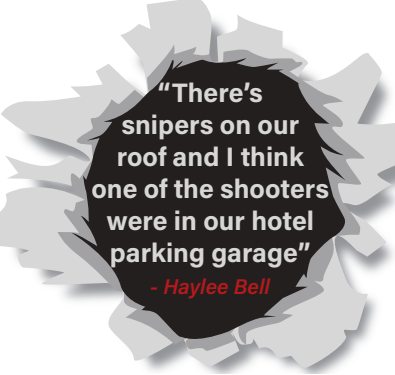
"Prevalence of gun violence has invaded our schools, our campuses, our entertainment venues, our workplaces and our homes," Kansas Governor Laura Kelly said at an address at Kansas State on Feb. 16. "I look forward to the day when we can have open, honest discussions about the cause and work towards a safer society for all of us."

The influx of gun-related incidents regarding teenagers has led to the gun debate spilling into Northwest, too.

"Kansas City, or KCMO [are] not the safest," senior Spencer Creden said. "I've been in most of those parts where I've seen people get mugged or robbed off the street. And it's one of those things where it's going to happen. It's just a matter of whether you're going to protect yourself or not."

Some students such as Creden believe the answer to decreasing rates of gun violence amongst adolescents is to lower gun restrictions. Senior Kayley Givner, president of Young Democrats, takes an opposing view.

"I don't think there's [anything to] avoid this from happening," Givner said in reference to the parade shooting. "Bad people are always going to find a way to do bad things. It's in our rights that you can carry a gun. I don't see that ever going away. It's going to be hard to [make a] change. I think the government has stepped in before and it's definitely their time to step in again.



"There's snipers on our roof and I think one of the shooters were in our hotel parking garage"

- Haylee Bell

It's an overwhelming issue that needs to be discussed because peoples lives are at risk. We see this every single day."

Some believe rates of gun violence

involving teens will continue to rise in the KC area unless a change is made.

Houston is a victim of this trend. "I showed him classes where I usually go," Williams said. "And all my friends. We were at the lunch table roasting each other

In a poll posted by the Northwest Passage

35%

of the responses said they have been affected by gun violence in the KC area

before he passed. I said 'Your nose strong,' he said, 'Bro you got a flexible forehead.'"

"It didn't make any sense," Williams said. They still laughed.

According to Williams, Houston loved to make money and play basketball. The two played 2K and Madden, talked sneakers, and watched "Baddies East."

"It's kind of a ghetto show," Williams said, laughing. "I'm pretty sure when you see him, you probably thought he looked ghetto. Like the way he dressed and the way he talked. So I just wanted to make it clear that he wasn't. He was nice. He was chill. You could always talk to him no matter what."

They took turns driving whenever they got food. Houston was always showing him new spots in the city, always eager to pay.

In class, Houston was quiet, a hard worker. Music was his passion.

He texted Houston just to make sure. No answer.

Houston was on the path to graduation, he had hopes of making "beats," even starting his own clothing line.

"When he passed away I just lost another friend to gun violence," Williams said. "I don't really know how to explain it."

Story by Sofia Ball

ALL AT ONCE

Members of the community grieve the loss of Will Ensley



by Sofia Ball
design by Greta Grist

Photos Courtesy of Tad Lambert

July 26, 2023.

Senior Josie Malara was getting ready for a job interview when she got the text.

"Call me ASAP."

Suddenly, she's sprinting down the halls of Overland Park Regional Hospital, asking every nurse in sight if they knew where Will Ensley was.

Will Ensley, the boy she met her freshman year of high school. The boy who asked her to homecoming.

"I eventually found him."

The boy she watched Little Miss Sunshine with and he complained the whole time.

"He was in the ICU."

The boy she spent hours with at the park, swinging in hammocks as their parents left dozens of missed calls and messages.

"His mom hugged me."

The boy she dragged to Spirit Halloween for fun, only to end up in his pickup once again, watching the sun set.

"She asked if I wanted to see him."

The boy she Facetimed on Christmas, watching the eagerness he had putting Lego sets together.

"It didn't look like him."

The boy she spent a six month anniversary with, watching Nightmare Before Christmas in PJ's when she said

"I love you," for the first time, and he said it back immediately with a smile on his face.

"I was in the room till they forced us all out."

On July 26, Ensley, an incoming senior, was rushed to the hospital after injuries sustained in a nine car pile up. He passed away that morning.

In a letter to Shawnee Mission Northwest families, Principal Lisa Gruman wrote, "Death is always difficult to handle, but especially when someone is so young. It will be important to recognize that all of us

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will need time to process what has happened and express our feelings.”

This story is about grief, the impact Ensley had on loved ones and the impression he left on everyone.

Like Ryan Lee.

He would never be the same.

Lee swam in high school and at the University of Kansas. He calls himself “a swim nerd.”

He never wanted to teach, not at first.

But 17 years in, he met Ensley

“A coach’s dream,” Lee said.

The first time Lee laid eyes on Will, he was barely old enough to ride in the front seat. He was afraid to put his face in the water. Varsity swimmer, senior Will Ensley, school record holder of the 100-yard breaststroke, was afraid to put his face in the water.

“Wow, this kid is not good,” Lee thought at the time.

Even so, Lee had made a connection, a friendship with a boy he met during the night program at Turner High School.

“I always ask my athletes to sacrifice the normal teenage stuff,” Lee said. “With Will, I never had to worry.”

Ensley always had to eat chicken, rice and sweet potatoes the night before a meet, and spaghetti and vegetables the night before that. He went to bed at 9:30 p.m. and had the same breakfast each morning. His walls were smothered with team pictures and medals. Still, to this day, at the center of Will’s desk is a tidy stack of notebook paper with lists of stretches for every day of the week.

Ensley had good grades, college credit, neat handwriting and the kind of notes people paid for. He was a good student, a good athlete, a good person. He was a creature of habit. He was disciplined.

But deep down, this well-mannered young man, who was told he’d have a bright future one day, was still a vulnerable little boy, afraid of the water. The one who trusted his coach, and soaked up his every word like pool water.

As the years progressed Lee and Ensley spent more and more time together, discussing practice, records and what he could do to help the girls swim team. He split times of Olympian swimmers as Lee watched in amazement.

They grew together.

They understood each other.

Now, Ryan Lee can’t step onto a pool deck without choking up.

“I think of him every day.”

The trip through Swan Drive is hilly, full of bright houses with brick driveways, surrounded by a forest.

A peace lily stood by the front door. Photos sat on the mantle of the stone fireplaces. A knit blanket folded over a rocking chair.

“I’m not even sure where to start,” Sharon Ensley, Will’s mother, said.

The house was quiet. Tissue boxes appeared on both sides of the brown couch.

“It helps to speak about him,” Randall Ensley, Will’s dad, said. “It helps us process it better. I don’t think I could keep it in, anyway.”

In the weeks since Will’s death, they have gone on bike rides and walks. Mr. Ensley is back at work part time as a sales rep. Several weeks of dinners, plants, texts and letters had been sent to the Ensley home. Their older son, Jack, is off at college.

Things are moving so fast, yet nothing’s changed.

Will’s bedspread is untouched, the grandfather’s watch he’d wear to school dances remains on his nightstand. His backpack, his pens, his “Well Dressed Wednesday” magazine are just where he had left them.

But there was nothing on his bedroom floor to explain his dislike for movies, his trip to the Oregon Coast, or the time he caught a catfish in a kayak and it pulled him around the cove. There was nothing in his notebooks that described the way he’d lay on the dog when he was little or the time he made potato pancakes for a Friendsgiving.

His favorite TV shows, ‘Stranger Things’, ‘The Umbrella Academy’ or ‘Breaking Bad’ weren’t stitched in his letterman jacket. There was nothing to show for the time he went to Raising’ Caines, got food poisoning and was scared to go back.

“I’d like to get through a day without crying,” Mrs. Ensley said. “I know it will come but it’s so hard to live without him. I laugh sometimes thinking about his pronunciation of things when he was a kid or the way he danced.”

There will always be reminders.

There will always be days when Mr. and Mrs. Ensley feel like a dark cloud that no one wants to look up and see looming over them. They will always miss their son, and nothing can change that.

“Don’t take your friends and family for granted,” Mrs. Ensley said. “Love people while you have ‘em and we know that Will was loved. So that makes me feel better, but makes it ache more too, you know. Kids don’t always think that they need to tell their friends how much they love them but they really should. I know there are kids



that didn’t get to say what they wanted to to Will until after he was gone, and plus —”

Mr. Ensley jumps in, “It isn’t just kids, it’s a lot of people.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Ensley says, “but you don’t think you’re going to die.”

“Lots of people go through life thinking them and their friends and family are all kind of bulletproof and they’re not,” Mr. Ensley says.

There’s a long pause.

“Life is fragile.”

A few weeks ago Tad Lambert was planning a trip to Canada. Planning was an overstatement.

Most people take their senior trip to Mexico, New York, Miami or California.

But Lambert is choosing Canada.

It was stupid, but it wasn’t.

These days nothing was out of the question, whether it meant roaming around Nebraska Furniture Mart on a Tuesday afternoon, taking on a few extra shifts at his summer job in Lakeview Village, scrolling through his camera roll or grabbing his keys for a spur-of-the-moment McDonald’s run.

It wasn’t because he wanted a new bed frame, needed the money or had an insatiable hunger for a quarter pounder with cheese.

He wanted to feel something. He needed a distraction

It had hardly been three weeks since he attended his best friend’s funeral. And already it felt like everybody moved on.

While others were making dinner plans,

CONTINUED FROM 11:

taking IRP notes and selfies, Lambert was in a constant battle with his thoughts.

He hated to be alone.

His Instagram story, meant to be his way of saying goodbye, a diary entry, a tribute to Will, already had double the likes as his second most liked post. Which were genuine and which weren't Tad couldn't tell, but either way it felt like a trend.

It made him angry.

It made him angry that they weren't there in the hospital, that they hadn't seen the excitement on Will's face when he got a new water bottle, that they never showed up at his house unannounced for a "boys night," that they never ate on his bedroom floor as Will did homework, or screwed around with Happy Meal toys.

Others got sad at the mention of Will in school assemblies, or emails to parents or the senior tribute on the football Instagram. For Lambert it's every time he walks through the front doors, every time he sees a white truck on the highway, every time he opens messages.

It's all the time. It is every day.

Because no 17-year-old should have to walk up to a casket, watch it lower to the ground, shovel a scoop of dirt.

No 17-year-old should have to lose their best friend

No 17-year old should have to graduate without them.

* * *

Mr. Ensley sets his son's urn in the ground. He places a shovel of dirt atop it. One by one, members of the boy's swim team walk up and pour a small vial of SMNW pool water into the ground with Will.

Josie went home and watched Little Miss Sunshine that night, her favorite movie, the first movie she ever watched with him. She still has his sweatshirt, the one she got him in Arizona, and sealed in a plastic bag, so it never loses his smell.

The first day of school, all eyes were on her. Once a week, she meets up to talk with the Ensley's. She still has AP Psych, Environmental Ed and Independent Reading with Mrs. Anthony.

She went to Sonic after Bonfire and ate pancakes on paper plates at Senior Sunrise.

She's not planning on going to homecoming.

"Can't do that," she says.

She's still a teenager.

As for finding hope.

"I'm still figuring that out."


But everyday, she tries.



BREATHE AGAIN

Senior Courtney Allison's journey with cancer has made her who she is today

by Sofia Ball
design by Kennedy Wolfe



Smiling, senior Courtney Allison watches her students Oct. 25 at Nieman Elementary. Allison has been coaching cheer for 2 years and teaches grades 6-8th. "[Moments I live for] are when I make a correction and I can see the students that are taking a correction and using it to get better and not immediately shutting down," Allison said. "I feel like I'm more of a peer role model because I'm somebody closer to their age who maybe they could relate to a little more."

October 28, 2022.

Courtney Allison woke up at 6:00 a.m., which was oddly early considering that for the first time in ages she had time to make breakfast. A Pinterest worthy piece of toast, lathered with peanut butter and honey. She had time to pin her hair just the way she liked it, and time to do her makeup, all without bothering to glance at the clock. Until she made the mistake of realizing an hour already passed.

They were supposed to leave in two minutes and the upstairs usually bustling with the commotion of zippers, bookbags and electric toothbrushes was silent. Allison anxiously texted her 14-year-old brother Tyler.

You up?

You up?

You up?

She rapped on his door, urged him out of bed and groaned as she heard the shower running minutes later.

She pulled in the student lot at precisely 7:39 a.m..

Allison had a doctor's appointment, she was supposed to leave 10 minutes early at the end of the day. But to her surprise, she was handed a slip with the time to leave circled now, signed by the secretary.

Confused, she called her mom, who sounded off and was coming to get her now.

Her first thought was that somebody died, which was ruled out because otherwise Tyler would be there too. Stepping into her mom's red RAV 4, the first words she heard was "you're being admitted". Did she mean the mental hospital? Allison was painfully confused as to what was happening.

She was confused when she stepped into the ER.

She was confused when she needed a chest X-ray.

She was confused when the doctors said she couldn't eat.

She was confused when her mom explained that had cancer.

Soon after something inside her snapped, and Allison was forced to pick up the pieces in a hospital gown, drowning in care bears, casseroles and cards sent by teachers, grandparents and kids she hadn't talked to since the 4th grade.

That day after the E.R. appointment her mother, Andrea Allison, couldn't face her without tearing up as she clutched the same snotty Kleenex. Slowly she got better at putting on a brave face, at making the "I'm fine's" more realistic.

It took a while for her siblings to visit. And even then Tyler would look anywhere in the room but Allison. Piper, her 12-year-old sister, gave her a letter about how she felt was losing her sister to cancer. And Jake, the youngest, couldn't keep himself from making bald jokes. His favorite was about the beige beanie she often wore, asking "where's your shell peanut?" anytime she'd take it off.

"The hardest part was when you're hurting like that you wanna blame somebody," Allison said. "My body was trying its best and I had to come to peace with the fact that I could be dying and I didn't need to think about it anymore."

Allison had Hodgkin's Lymphoma, type B. That is when Lymph Node Cells start to multiply in an abnormal way and begin to collect in certain lymph nodes. The affected lymphocytes, by causing them to lose their infection-fighting properties, make you more vulnerable to infection.

The doctors found four masses (infected lymph nodes) in Allison's chest and upon diagnosis rushed her into surgery.

"I do remember that I was starving," Allison said. "All I had was [breakfast] and they needed me to fast for the labs. I had to ask if I could eat and they said no, because I had a biopsy later. I was so thankful for the toast."

The only symptoms Allison presented prior to treatment was back pain and trouble breathing. It was the chemo that made her sick.

NW Passage

What most people don't realize is that chemo isn't some cure or cold medicine you swallow fast to get better. Chemotherapy is so toxic that if you were to pour it on your skin you'd suffer rashes, burns, vomiting, dizziness, the list goes on. To Allison it felt like the worst flu. As if she was a juice box and some five-year-old with sticky hands had sucked all the fruit punch out of her. She was crabby. She couldn't eat. When she wasn't huddled over the toilet, she was curled in a ball watching "The Proposal."

And in March 2023, Allison went into heart failure due to doxorubicin, a form of chemotherapy, also known as "the red devil". Due to its toxicity, a cardio protective medication was given just before the treatment.

Soon after Allison experienced side effects. Her hands and feet turned purple, her resting heart rate was 130/140, her blood pressure was through the roof and she couldn't walk 10 feet without getting out of breath. A walk down the hall was a marathon for Allison.

Within the first two months, you could see her ribs. Allison could feel the little independence she'd gained as a high school girl slipping through her finger tips.

"The second night I had to deal with my first shower," Allison said. "I had a pick in my arm, it was sore so I couldn't bathe myself and I had to learn to be vulnerable with my mom. She saw me naked. She hadn't seen me like that since I was born. You have to be comfortable with it because it's either your mom or a nurse. So obviously I'm gonna pick my mom. I had to hit the call button to go to the bathroom. I had people making sure that I took my medicine and if I was eating. I felt like a baby."

Andrea graduated from JCCC with her RN in 2010, she'd left her nursing job at the hospital job over four years ago. Now she works in hospice. She'd grown accustomed to the suffering, to the anxious tapping of fingers and silent tears of mothers, each asking the same questions. She found a purpose in granting patients comfort in their final moments.

But no amount of schooling, testing or case studies would prepare her for what was to come.

"I felt a lot of guilt because Courtney had all sorts of symptoms for a while and we explained them all away," Andrea said. "That day in the doctor's office I knew what we were looking at. Twenty five pounds of weight loss, she had no energy, she felt full even when she didn't eat, she had swollen lymph glands all over her throat. Before it was tummy trouble and anxiety. I felt like I failed as a nurse mom for not coming to her sooner. She was at stage four cancer when we found her."

Andrea dropped everything. She was there to watch "The Princess and the Pauper" and read Allison the Amelia Bedelia books.

She left her job, her own mother practically moved in the day she got the call. She witnessed Allison's room convert to a junkyard and sat with the fear of her daughter losing the spark she once carried.

Never before had she missed a game of Tyler's or one of the million sports Piper played, now she missed many.

"One of my good friends from high school, her daughter, had the same cancer two years prior in 2020," Andrea said. "She recovered. Ainsley had it her senior year as well. It was nice to see someone make it to the other side. I knew that the cure rate after the first six months of treatment was 90 percent."

It gave her hope.

Meanwhile, Allison began to live through her siblings, wishing the annoyance of every other person she stumbled across say "I'll pray for you." or "everything's gonna be alright." would fizz out.

She'd listen to her brother and his girlfriend giggle in the kitchen as they made funnel cakes or listen intently to Piper's 6th grade drama. She craved normalcy.

She tried going back to school, which didn't work out initially and started making her bed, and floor somewhat visible.

Allison became closest with her Aunt who recovered from breast

11 | profile

cancer and often said things like "You are brave." or "You can do this," instead of "It's gonna get better," because she realized it was a choice.

Each day Allison attempted to pull herself out of the steep hole that was her depression. Whether this was by going to physical therapy every weekday from March to June, spending more time with Jake, "I'm not afraid to admit that he's my favorite sibling," or forgiving her father.

May 10, 2023, the doctors informed Courtney Allison that she's in remission.

She still worries for inevitable fever to spike.

She still worries for her mom and her younger siblings.

She still worries that it will come back.

"I always had to remind myself that it's something that happens,



May 10th, photo provided by Courtney Allison.

not something that somebody did to me," Allison said.

Her last round of chemo was over five months ago.

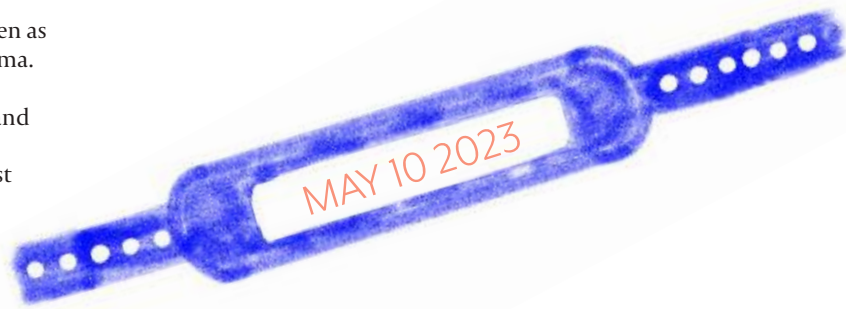
Now, Allison is a Spirit Club rep, assistant coaches cheer, picks up trash after football games and lab aids for Athletic Director Angelo Giacalone, one of her biggest supporters.

Allison has hopes of becoming a teacher, because maybe then one less kid will cry over fractions, maybe then one less kid will drop out, maybe then one less kid will feel alone in their struggles.

"I don't wish it never happened," Allison said, "I've gone through a rough experience I almost came out of it with more empathy than going in. At PT I saw kids who couldn't walk there, kids in the waiting room that were way younger than me. A kid came in from the system with foster parents."

May 10, 2023, Allison walks the halls of Children's Mercy hospital, a row of nurses greet her with applause. She rings the cancer bell, reverberating against the linoleum flooring.

"I feel like I can breathe again."



There’s more than meets the eye with Olivia Beck

December 2022.

Winter break had just ended and Olivia Beck could barely get out of bed, every inch of her body ached. She couldn’t even keep a spoonful of strawberry yogurt down. Her best guess was that she caught a stomach bug from her cousin, who came down from Kansas City, Missouri for the holiday.

Beck had never taken a Physics class in her life, and the more she forced herself to read chapters from the online AP Physics textbook the more it felt like someone had emptied a vacuum canister in her head.

A JCCC student sent the link to his Canvas, with some cash and a deadline of a week to submit a three page assignment. She gave herself two days. It’s how she kept business smooth.

It started freshman year.

Beck was the shy kid, who had just moved to Shawnee from St. Charles, St. Louis.

She was smart, classmates noticed. She didn’t talk often, she got her work done fast and right the first time, an overachiever, an academic weapon.

She started doing homework for her friends to be nice. Some Orchestra, mostly Math, every once in a while a Shakespeare essay or two. Then it escalated.

Before she knew it, she had 50 customers and an extra two or \$300 to spend each month. Which Beck usually used on anyone but herself.

Beck’s friends always called her “the smart one”, which annoyed her. Smart implied that things came easy, that it was talent, which it wasn’t.

Easy is not the way to describe Beck’s life.

Her parents had her at 19 and split before she was born.

Every woman on her mom’s side had a child before 20 and she came from a military family.

“My mom said school comes first every day of my life,” Beck said. “Dad

says I can do whatever I want as long as my grades are good.”

Students see her in the hall, in her Arizona t-shirt and sweatpants, speedwalking to College Trig, teachers listen as she rambles on about In The Time of The Butterflies.

Everyone knows her as the girl who will do everyone’s homework, except for all her teachers and her parents.

Either way, no one sees the tears in her eyes around Christmas. No was standing in the doorway when her mom broke the news, wrapping her in a hug as tears rolled down her face. The day she found out her cousin, whom she would’ve called her brother, died of a drug overdose.

No one felt the awkwardness of having a strange man in the house. Her mom got off of work one day and her new boyfriend trailed behind, bringing four stepbrothers with him.

“He’s goofy sometimes and mean when he wants to,” Beck said. “I love him now, I just didn’t like sharing my mom.”

No one was on the phone with her mom when she told Beck her grandma had passed away from cancer.

“It didn’t register to me that the people I was close to could pass away at any time,” Beck said.

But school was simple, Math had the answers, English was just words on a page, Biology was memorization. Beck likes doing others’s work, she

likes being busy, even if it means pulling all nighters, she likes that she can shut down.

She likes getting praise from

her teachers, she likes making her parents proud, she likes the 10/10’s, it makes her feel special. It helps her get away.

If you were really close with Beck you would see her love for scrap booking.

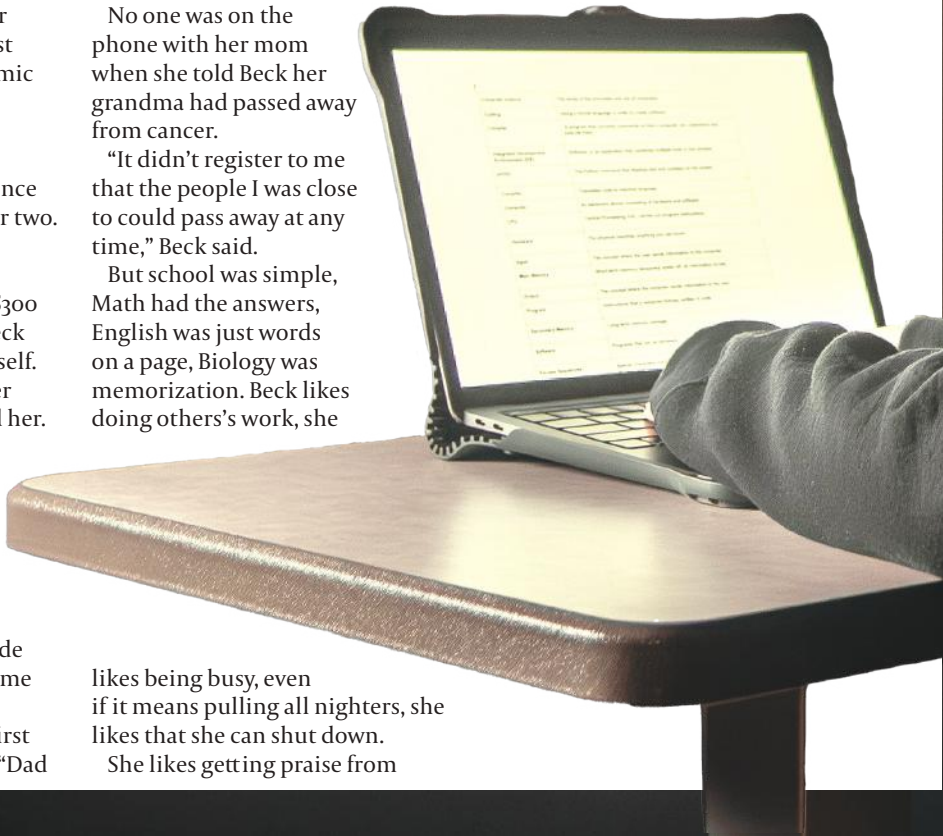
“Because I’m 85,” she says.

Or her obsession with true crime and forensics, her natural talent for roller blading and baking brownies. You would know that her favorite thing to cook is fettuccine alfredo and that her mom is her best friend in the world.

“I don’t really want people to know about what I’ve been through,” Beck said. “I don’t want them to see me that way.”

But not many people do, and not many people will get that chance.

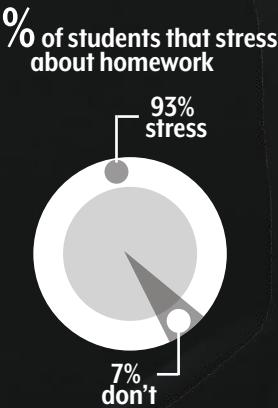
People will still see her as the girl who will do everyone’s homework, except all her teachers and her parents.



EASY A

by Sofia Ball
design by Stella Miyares
photo by Finn Bedell

Vast numbers of students stress about homework



IT'S COMPLICATED



photo by Addison Griswold

Northwest represents a rising national trend of chronically absent students story by Sofia Ball

Sophomore Jillian Thimesch's alarm blares on her bedside table.

She hits snooze once, then again and again until she realizes it's an hour to noon and school started at 7:40 a.m. But at this point, why bother?

Instead of grabbing her car keys, frantically combing her hair and racing out the door, she decides to just stay home. This may annoy Thimesch's parents, but not enough to drag her by the feet. This may make Thimesch feel guilty, but not enough to leave her bed.

In total, Thimesch has more than 20 unexcused absences this school year, meaning she's considered chronically absent.

"It doesn't take long for us to finish that one little work sheet in math," Thimesch said. "I feel like I'm just scrolling through social media for the rest of the day, when I could get it done at home and take a nap."

Thimesch isn't alone: she's part of a national trend of high school students who are choosing not to come to school.

"There's not a district who isn't experiencing this," Northwest Attendance Specialist Tyrone Foster said.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, a student is considered chronically absent once he or she has missed at least

10% of school days or 18 days in a year for any reason, excused or unexcused. This is different from truancy which only categorizes excused absences. In total, 21% of Northwest students are presently chronically absent, nearly twice as many as a decade ago, according to data provided by the Northwest Office.

For the senior class at Northwest, 35% are chronically absent, whereas for freshmen it's 13.8%. According to incoming Superintendent Dr. Michael Schumacher, seniors in all SMSD high schools are 44% chronically absent. All high school students are 20% chronically absent.

"We need our students in our building so that we can provide them all of the support that they deserve," incoming Superintendent Dr. Michael Schumacher. "Lower performance, and mental health concerns are incredibly troubling for us."

Around Northwest, group essays are submitted unfinished, lab observations incomplete and seating charts sparse, causing tensions to rise between students and teachers as the district continues to search for answers.

"If it were an easy problem to address then there wouldn't be a crisis," Chief of Student Services Dr. Christy Ziegler said. "That's why it's important. There's all kinds of data regarding student success

later in life. But if you're missing your education that impacts your job, your future and so forth."

In 2016, 13% of public school students were considered chronically absent, according to the American Enterprise Institute. An estimated 26% of public school students nationwide were chronically absent last year — a 15% rise from before the pandemic, according to the American Enterprise Institute.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on school attendance, according to Ziegler. Not only are students more prone to stay home for every sniffle and sore throat due to previous regulations, but aspects of online learning have given many a sense of normalcy.

If a high school student has the chance to complete their assignments or take notes through Canvas, they fail to see the benefits of in-person learning.

"That really tells us that we need to make sure they've got a reason to come to school," Ziegler said. "That there's engaging instructions, and students can feel they belong."

Despite state laws requiring that students meet a certain level of attendance, they may miss school for a variety of reasons, according to a handout from the Kansas Department of Education. Many are absent due to barriers such as chronic illness, house instability or poor transportation. Others struggle academically, socially or are bullied. Some students feel disengaged, with no meaningful relationships established with adults in school, discouraged due to lack of credits or are lacking culturally relevant material/lessons.

Some students fail to see the reality or consequences of their actions when skipping — which can lead to involvement with the district attorney's office, possibly sending their parents or guardians to court. Instead, they brush off the warnings and letters sent home as empty threats.

"I haven't been to math in two months," senior Brooklyn Bridwell-Keaton said. "I've just accepted the failure there because I was gone so much, I [now] use second hour as a free period."

Some teachers take severe offense to students who skip, others find ways to adapt their teaching styles, such as posting video notes or updated modules and many have accepted what's out of their hands.

"I've been teaching for 17 years," English and creative writing teacher Sheila Young said. "And absences are the worst I've ever seen. I don't take it personally, but I do worry about it."

Math teacher Mira Davidovic says as attendance has dropped since COVID, she feels annoyed and sad because she cares about her students.

"People who end up with a D move on and continue to struggle in other math classes," Davidovic said. "There's just nothing I can do about it."

Science teacher Michael agrees.

"It's their education," Pisani said. "If it were my kid, I'd be walking them to class. I don't wanna say too much more and get myself in trouble."

IB Diploma students, track athletes, cheerleaders and theater kids alike are beginning to experience burnout, or something similar due to COVID, even though less is expected of them. Logic might justify that there are only a few more weeks left, a couple tests, and some half days, but that doesn't stop them from hitting the snooze button like Thimisch or pulling into a Starbucks drive through instead of the student parking lot.

It's complicated," Thimisch said. "If I really wanna go home or I'm desperate I'll sometimes fake an illness. But usually I just won't show

up in the first place. It's nice to have a rest day every once in a while, but missing class has definitely dropped my grade. So the guilt is there."

Some students also tend to suffer from mental health issues keeping them from school.

According to Bridwell-Keaton, the average classroom setting doesn't meet the needs of students prone to hyperactivity. She proposed lengthening passing periods and letting all students listen to music during work time in order to keep more of them in class.

"I have chronic ADHD," Bridwell-Keaton said. "I have to have four different modes of brain stimulation to be comfortable. I'm in the back room in Yearbook, playing a game on my phone, while designing and there's a Youtube video on. And I get my work done."

Some parents, such as Thimisches', have offered to buy her a PS5 if she can make it a full month in school, whereas others have given up entirely.

District officials have worked tirelessly brainstorming ways to keep students in class. Is the answer social media, sending email blasts to parents, PJ day?

According to Ziegler, SMSD will utilize Sources of Strength to promote inclusivity, and address any feelings of anxiety.

Attendance specialists, such as Foster, have also been hired recently, across the district to monitor rates of chronic absenteeism in high/middle schools and to increase communication with student families.

"The way I present it to them, [graduation] is a goal," Foster said. "It's a small goal, but an important one. 'Just two more weeks,' I say. I'm not gonna get everybody because not everybody's gonna buy into that. Some kids are like, 'I don't care.' Some parents are like, 'I've had it up to here with them, I don't know what to do.'"

On his desk, Foster has a list of between 30-40 student names that are on the path not to graduate. He claims that if he can get at least 80% of those students to walk the stage come May, then he's done his job.

Until then, teachers will continue to unload their frustrations, students will sleep through first hour and administration will ask the same questions.

"I'm trying to improve," Thimisch said. "I swear."

The highest rates of chronic absenteeism are in grades 8-12

Grade 08: 22.6%

Grade 09: 19.4%

Grade 10: 27.1%

Grade 11: 30.5%

Grade 12: 44.8%