

Rose Kanaley NSPA Statement

One of the first lessons taught in any room of student journalists is that everyone has a story. Nevermind if they seem quiet or boring or the most unlikely of candidates. The hard part, but most rewarding to learn, is finding what story to tell. I was always an observer — constantly people watching and intrigued by anyone's new hobbies or plans for the weekend. When I joined the school newspaper, I knew it was my chance to move from an observer watching people to a storyteller covering them, and I've spent the past few years telling them. Now, I've learned that being a writer is just as much about helping others develop their stories as it is working on your own, and I've spent my time as a journalist doing just that.

Time to Break the Silence: <https://smeharbinger.net/time-to-break-the-silence/>

After approaching a story during sexual assault awareness month, I stopped to find a new angle and question how it connected back to our school. The lack of a sex education, specifically covering consent education, was clear. I began connecting with those designing our health curriculum at the school, district, state, and national level as well as students victims of sexual assault. I had to learn the best way to approach interviewing victims of assault as well as how to tell a story with many potential triggers to victims of assault. I spent hours during each interview listening and empathizing with the girls as they shared their story with me. I grew much more comfortable in my interviewing skills through this story.

Spell a Little Spirituality: <https://smeharbinger.net/spell-a-little-spirituality/>

In this feature I helped share the story of Halley Vogts, a student who's practicing of Paganism and identity as a witch brought self-love and positive change to her life. With a great deal of misunderstandings to the reality of this spirituality, I wanted to be careful to share her practices and story without any room for disdain. In bringing light to Halley's story, I was able to bring truth and perception to a topic many don't understand, while also developing my own personal writing style.

A Higher Promise: <https://smeharbinger.net/a-higher-promise-for-black-lives/>

Around a year ago, signs with a black heart started being placed in the yards of many in my community. Their significance was clear amidst the Black Lives Matter movement, and I learned of how these simple signs, made by two teen girls, brought feelings of safety and support to people of color who saw them, particularly in a predominantly white community. I learned that some of the most powerful stories are found simply through observation and asking questions.

Qualified for Quarantine:

<https://smeharbinger.net/qualified-for-quarantine-boys-swim-and-dive-missed-sunflower-league-meet-due-to-team-covid-exposure/>

This sports-feature changed just before a deadline after a COVID exposure on the swim team hurt their last chance to make it to finals. I interviewed many swimmers and coaches to find accurate information amidst speculation and rumors on the team's exposure, and find how this affected the swimmers on a deeper level. I learned that some of the best, most relevant reporting is what's done on a short deadline.

Setting A New Principal: <https://smeharbinger.net/setting-a-new-principal-new-principal-announced>

The announcement of a new principal caused upset in the student body and staff, but was also an exciting step for the newly-selected principal. I was able to do in-depth reporting to cover the new principal's plans and how the decision was made with varying opinions being factored in. This story helped me learn the importance of sharing all sides in a story, and how to put together a variety of different opinions into one focused story.

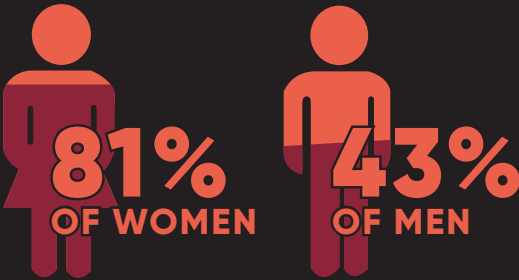
IT'S TIME TO BREAK THE SILENCE

Sexual assault survivors and other community members believe the limited consent education in the SMSD health curriculum leads to increased sexual violence

**Names changed to protect identity*
by rose kanaley
T H E N -
SOPHOMORE
JANE Rogers* remembers walking to his house, down his basement steps, then being pressured to smoke marijuana. After that, her memory goes blank. The drug's reaction with her previously taken prescribed medication caused her to black out — she was unconscious, and unable to consent. The next thing she remembers is stumbling home down the road. Her mother started crying when she saw her come in the front door, and immediately drove her to the hospital.

THE FACTS BREAKDOWN

Kansas and SMSD policy call for
ABSTINENCE-BASED
sexual education curriculum



sexual assault cases in K-12 schools increased 50% from 2015-2018, likely because people were more willing to open up about their experiences as more awareness is being brought to the subject



Propped up in a hospital bed, doctors spent hours performing examinations with the rape kit. They took pictures of the bruises and bite marks all over her body, then collected samples of the hair and semen they found in her. The truth was clear: Rogers was raped. As national Sexual Assault Awareness Month starts April 1, East students like Rogers are desperate to advocate for the struggles victims of sexual assault endure, and what schools can do to prevent incidents like this. In

SEX EDUCATION CURRICULUM
4th GRADE
receive instruction on family sexuality by the end of fourth grade

**Information from National Education Department, NPR and SMSD*

an Instagram poll of 339 votes from primarily East students, 94% thought consent education and setting sexual boundaries should be more emphasized in the high school sex education curriculum. Rogers, among other students, feels that including more consent education within the high school health curriculum is imperative. Without it, she believes students aren't prepared for the seriousness of sexual relationships, and potential dangers that come with it.

Consent is when both parties consciously and enthusiastically agree to partake in activity together. Rogers explains it's not saying yes after saying no seven times, it's not being unsure and it's not being black-out drunk or unconscious — but other students, who have missed out on consent education, may not have the same clarity as they've never been taught in school.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, a sexual health research organization, an effective consent education should include information on the prevention of sexual violence and emphasizes consent in sexual relationships, along with establishing what makes a healthy relationship and how to avoid unhealthy ones.

“What sex is about is consent,” Rogers said. “If there's no consent, then it's not sex. It's rape. So if you're going to teach sex, you have to teach consent, because I feel like no kids are ever taught that, or they're not taught enough about it.”

East's current sex education unit is a two-week unit within the semester-long required health course.

It's one of the

things.

The standards of the sex education curriculum taught emphasizes abstinence, according to Barney. Parents are also given the option to excuse their children from the sex education unit for personal reasons per board policy. Barney stated that the importance of consent and refusal skills are included in the units with coverage on sex education. But according to Henton, these skills still aren't currently being taught in the classroom.

Although health teachers meet once a year with other teachers across the district to suggest and discuss changes to the curriculum, Henton finds that the content is restricted to the given requirements. The only room for teachers to make individualized decisions within their classroom is how they choose to teach the required content, whether it be with presentations, lectures or projects.

Henton believes that including a consent education within the health curriculum is important, and hopes one will be added in the future, whether by Barney or through meeting of the East health teachers.

“It's definitely a necessary thing that needs to happen because we're seeing every single day that there are issues with [sexual assault] and whenever we have our meeting again, I think that'll be something that's brought up to add into the curriculum to make sure that we are teaching that,” Henton said.

In the state of Kansas, schools are not required to follow a specific curriculum, but are required to meet the minimum “performance and quality criteria” guidelines the Kansas State Board of Education establishes for the

helping other victims, posting to her Instagram story and letting those following her know she's there to talk about their experiences and share support.

She hopes more awareness will be raised on sexual assault, including the physical and mental effects — and believes that begins with talking about it in classrooms. She hopes boys and girls will leave health with an understanding of the physical and mental toll sexual violence can take.

For example, Rogers' assault left her in the hospital for three days with her organs ruptured so brutally that still, when she urinates, blood comes out.

“The bleeding got so bad that [my doctors] thought I had a tumor,” Rogers said. “I didn't, I just was bleeding.”

According to RAINN, the world's largest anti-sexual violence organization, victims of sexual assault and violence often experience depression, flashbacks, PTSD, panic attacks and dissociation following the acts.

Junior Sarah Williams*, another sexual assault survivor, agrees with Rogers, hoping other students will be informed of the mental effects sexual violence can lead to after experiencing them firsthand. After drinking too much and blacking out one night during the summer, a friend raped Williams while she was unconscious, and unable to consent.

The emotional trauma weighed on her — she pushed people away, pushed her feelings down and blamed herself. To cope, she turned to drinking and smoking to the point where it became almost an every day occurrence. She didn't know of an available support system for assault victims, and it wasn't for months that she finally realized the magnitude of the problem and stopped her habits.

“That just put me into an awful state where I was like, ‘Oh my god, let's [drink every night],” Williams said. “It's just a normal thing.”

She hopes the incorporation of what to look out for in potential sexual experiences and the effects sexual assault and harassment can have on people will eventually be included in the sex education curriculum, and provide other students in similar scenarios resources so they don't have to go through it alone.

Rogers entire life changed after her assault. She wishes no one has to experience that, and that schools provided more resources to those who do. Then, maybe her friends wouldn't wear only baggy clothes to shield their bodies from any attention or possible harassment. Maybe she would feel comfortable walking alone at night. Maybe she would trust the men in her life.

“It affected the way that I view the world and the way that I view people,” Rogers said. “[Women] shouldn't have to feel afraid to walk

down the street. I shouldn't have to bring one of my guy friends with me every time I go to the mall alone. I want to be able to do things by myself without having someone near me 24-seven because I'm scared I'm going to get assaulted, or robbed or something worse.”

For Williams, the in-school health unit on sex education was lacking relevance and lasting impact due to the little information provided. After taking the class, she barely recalls what content was included — and wouldn't be surprised if others couldn't either.

“If I don't even remember it, clearly there's something that needs improvement within the school,” Williams said.

East alum and University of Kansas junior Isa Fimbres helped start KU's first support group for victims and survivors of sexual assault and harassment, Support for Survivors KU. She believes students should receive a consent education before entering college as well as have resources like support groups for victims who have experienced sexual assault, and that the lack of one is harming students.

KU and many colleges across the country require all students to take a virtual sexual harassment education and prevention training course annually before the school year begins. However, Fimbres finds that the course provides more of an awareness on what sexual harassment is than prevention education, and would be more effective if students had exposure to this education from an earlier age.

She doesn't view the current standards at colleges or schools as effective, as she sees many peers dealing with sexual assault and harassment on campus.

“Everyone [on the Support for Survivors Exec Board] knows someone who has been assaulted, if they aren't that someone,” Fimbres said. “That is enough for change to need to happen.”

Fimbres would feel safer in her college environment if she knew students were receiving a consent education in high school, and she believes students would be safer going into college if they had as well.

“Lots of times when kids come to college, they aren't ready for all the things that are about to happen,” Fimbres said. “They don't see the signs, when you're meeting all these people who could potentially be a threat or have behaviors that would be off putting, if you had had better training.”

To Williams, boundaries need a place in high school curriculums, and until more sexual assault awareness and education is brought to light in the district and state education, teens will feel less safe.

“I feel like a consent education is the first step to solving this problem,” Williams said. “Or even just making it better.”

CURRICULUM PROGRESSION *Information from Kim Barney, the assistant director of curriculum and instruction at SMSD

8th GRADE have an understanding of how to reduce risks related to adolescent growth and development, male and female reproductive organs and the risks and preventions of STIs

12th GRADE must know about the importance and benefits of abstinent behavior and risk-reducing strategies by graduation

SPELL A LITTLE SPIRITUALITY

Spiritual witchcraft practice helps East alum Halley Vogts form a positive bond with the universe

by rose kanaley

Vogts sprinkled rose petals, incense ash, rose quartz and the ashes of a paper with a self-love symbol drawn on it into a brand-new mini jar she'd ordered off Amazon, and tucked it into the cubby under her window.

She made this spell jar — a physical form of the bond created through a spell — as an embodiment of self-love, something she makes about twice a month, each time trying to implement a new element of positivity into her life like stress relief or new connections.

Recent East graduate Halley Vogts is a witch. No, she doesn't wear a pointy hat or ride a broom or turn people into frogs — although she's heard the stereotype. She follows and practices witchcraft and Paganism, which, to her, represent a spirituality that brings powerful Pagan and feminist energy, and it has brought positive change into her life. The spell jars are just one piece of this.

Paganism is a religious movement incorporating beliefs or practices outside of the main world religions, in particular nature worship, and encourages practitioners follow their own inspiration and beliefs.

Vogts likes to bring her spirituality into all aspects of her life, and tries to do something relating to it at least once a day. Vogts considers witchcraft and Paganism a spirituality path for herself rather than a religion as she doesn't follow any set of rules, and her practice can be something as simple as setting the intentions in her mind to feel free in the coming week, lighting incense in her room or opening one of her spell books and doing research.

"It's more, at least for me, the sense of putting something out in the universe and striving for it," Vogts said. "It's not immediate, it's not completely structured, but it helps at least with myself to put effort into something and feel like I'm trying to pursue a greater good."

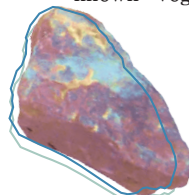
She sets her own intentions through manifestation and meditation, whether that means telling herself she'll make more money in the coming week or writing out her hopes

for the week, and puts her beliefs of witchcraft's moral into practice daily.

While Vogts has never been very religious, she has always been a spiritual person, believing people get back what they put into the universe.

The strong feminist energy coming from the abundance of women identifying with Paganism and pull of being a part of something bigger immediately attracted Vogts to this form of witchcraft. She had understood parts of witchcraft and the spirituality for most of her life, but in seeing the welcoming culture of it through the large representation

HALLEY'S FAVORITE CRYSTAL



ROSE QUARTZ SYMBOLIZES: universal love harmony compassion

of the LGBTQ+ community involved, she began doing more research.

"Anything is possible in the weird, weird universe that we live in," Vogts said. "And just feeling like I'm part of something bigger, more connected with the universe is an amazing thing for me, and I love having that be a part of my life."

Vogts still takes part in the more physical aspects of witchcraft, like collecting crystals and making spell jars. She stops by the top floor of White Light Bookstore often, her favorite spot to shop for crystals. There she looks through crystal digital cards, which show what each crystal represents so you can find one crystal to resonate with and buy — although she also likes to pick some simply because they're pretty or make her feel good.

This practice isn't just a hobby. It's a spirituality that's changed Vogts life.

"If I can't look at myself in the mirror

that day or whatever's going on, it helps me kind of think back," Vogts said. "I'm just a body. It's doing whatever it's doing. It almost makes everything seem just a little bit simpler around me. If I'm having a really bad day, I guess it helps me get roots in with my life back again, like, 'Hey, things will be fine. Mother Nature's on my side. Everything's alright.'"

Vogts' friends have noticed the positive changes spirituality has brought to her life as well.

Barstow junior Christian Aldredge has known Vogts for over four years, and he

with the information.

"There's this really nice freedom that I feel, like you can get from getting a tarot reading, and it gives you a really vague description of whatever that card means," Vogts said. "I just really love how silly and how big it can be because it gives me options to think about what is really affecting me and what I can really work on."

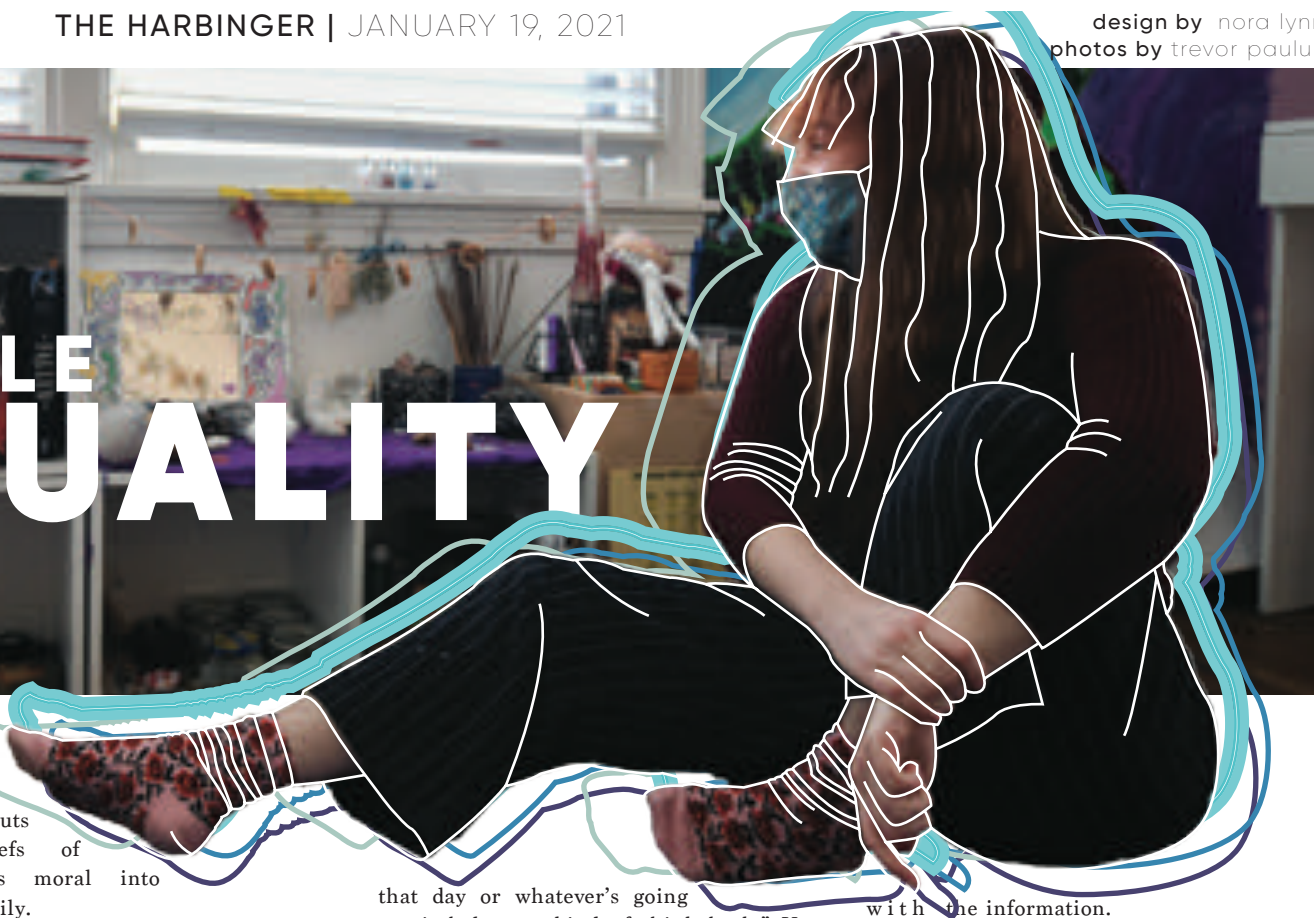
Vogts finds her practice of these spiritual beliefs something of a private and personal place for self-growth. Still though, Vogts loves to talk about it with her friends and family as much as they'll listen. She celebrates some Pagan holidays with them, such as Yule, a holiday to celebrate the Winter Solstice, and Samhain, a celebration of the end of harvest season and a day when the veil between the dead and living is very thin.

Vogts hasn't found a large group of people with similar beliefs, but she has connected with junior Aina Lewis over their shared spirituality. Both, regardless of this remaining a more personal matter, found comfort in the close friendship and fostered more personal growth — Lewis can ask Vogts how she's celebrating Yule, or where she goes to buy her favorite tourmaline crystals.

"I think that helps me, like, I am not alone in my beliefs," Lewis said. "And that brings some sort of confidence with it."

Regardless of one's specific beliefs or path taken in witchcraft and Paganism, Vogts knows one thing — it's a positive path.

"It's very easy to be morbid, and think the universe is just a big, vast, endless thing in my life that has no meaning," Vogts said. "So with witchcraft, I really love how accepting they are and how convenient but it's almost in the sense of no matter what you come from, no matter what you do, there's a way for you to be a part of it."





One of the Black Lives Matter heart signs in a Prairie Village yard. **photo by elise madden**
by rose kanaley

A HIGHER PROMISE FOR BLACK LIVES

SCAN ME | STORE

Scan here to view Amari and Sa'Mya's website and purchase a sign for \$10



Amari and Sa'Mya Lewis founded A Higher Promise, a business selling signs with a black heart, to start conversations about the Black Lives Matter movement

us was really the whole point of A Higher Promise.”

But their intentions for A Higher Promise aren't solely based on spreading awareness and starting conversations about race — it's also a way to remember and honor their brother.

Amari and Sa'Myas' older brother L.J. Lewis died of gun violence in Kansas City in August of 2019. It was his character that inspired their business and leadership — and even the name, A Higher Promise.

L.J. always kept his promises to his family. When he promised to help them practice for their orchestra trips, he always followed through. When he'd promise to come watch one of Amari's Stage Right Performing Arts performances, even if she didn't see him in the

audience, she'd know he was there from the flowers or card he left for her. Now, Amari and Sa'Mya are keeping their own promises to him while keeping his memory alive through A Higher Promise.

Now, five months after starting A Higher Promise, the sisters have sold over 5,000 signs, managing to reach all 50 states with their business. They spent most of their summer and now their after school hours going through sign orders while working on their website and social media presence.

With the expansion in their business' popularity, instead of placing the black heart stickers on each sign individually and shipping them personally, they now go through a distributor. The sisters have made connections with multiple local churches and even Donutology, hosting sign distributions at their locations.

Each sign is priced at \$10, the profit from their business has been going to the sisters' college education funds, and they're looking to begin donating more of the profits to local nonprofits like The Learning Club.



I think that it being specifically a heart, it softens people to the [Black Lives Matter] message. And that way, they can receive it more than they would if it was just words, and they were like, 'I don't like that because it's a political statement.' A heart can't be a political statement.

amari lewis | co-founder

In addition to selling the signs, they've been using their Instagram and social media presence, @ahigherpromise, to partake in other supportive actions like promoting Kansas City's Black Business Saturdays. On Saturdays, they'll post about different local Black-owned businesses such as Loray Easterwood Realtor and Eat Her Cupcakes, featuring information about the business and a quote from the owner.

Currently, Amari is working on a new website for A Higher Promise that she plans to have up and running by December.

The site will break down the history of the Black Lives Matter movement and educational resources for the reader, with articles she included to help educate people about racism and how they can help move the conversation forward to make people more aware of racial injustice.

In the future, the sisters hope to expand their business to promote a range of other social issues, like LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights.

Senior Reilly Kenney has known the Lewises from Stage Right for four years and agrees that in this predominantly white community, there's not enough attention paid to working on diversity and inclusion. Living in Johnson County and attending an 85% white school, Kenney's proud to now see the signs all across yards in the East community and believes they are a big step towards starting conversations about recognizing white privilege.

“In this area, I feel like our eyes aren't very open to other perspectives,” Kenney said. “We don't have a very deep understanding of what might be going on in other parts of the country at that moment, or in the past, and [the signs] help us open our eyes and understand one another and really start to recognize how we can make a difference.”

The biggest surprise to the sisters was the amount of support they've received. Both Amari and Sa'Mya were shocked at the rapid pace A Higher Promise grew, and the number of people they'd never met who wanted to buy their signs. Sa'Mya wasn't just shocked at that, but also at the number of white people living in predominantly white communities who were focused on making change.

But for two teen girls, it hasn't been easy. Amari and Sa'Mya struggled watching their peers relax and enjoy their summer while they were busy packaging and shipping signs or holding a sign pick-up event. A business is a lot to take on, especially as teens still in school.

But both of the girls saw that the outcome of their work far outweighs any social sacrifice. Amari and Sa'Mya know that even when they'd rather just go watch a show or stop feeling the pressure of being a leader in this movement, they're making change through A Higher Promise for another young Black woman tired of facing discrimination.

“We're still teenagers,” Amari said. “And so there are things that we want to do like watch TV, or just have time to ourselves. So I will say that the hardest part was kind of giving up our summer, but at the end of it, it was really worth it.”

With all the work they put into the business, Amari and Sa'Mya are proud of the message they're spreading and the impact it's leaving in Johnson County — and around the country.

“Especially in Johnson County, where people may be afraid of stepping outside of whatever everybody else is saying, I feel like the black heart is like this safe way of saying, I think... different,” Amari said. “And [the sign is saying] what I think is that all people matter, including Black people, including undocumented people, including wrongly convicted felons, including whoever.”

BLACK LIVES MATTER





Following a positive COVID test from one of the boys on the team, the boys' swim and dive team must miss their league meet due to an eight day quarantine

by rose kanaley

The boys swim team missed their Sunflower League tournament after a COVID exposure on the team.

After a team member tested positive for COVID after coming to practice, the rest of the team had to quarantine starting Feb. 1 and be tested on Feb. 3. With the Varsity Sunflower League Prelims on Feb. 4 and Finals on Feb. 6, the team had to miss the tournament, according to Head Coach Wiley Wright.

According to senior Kaleb Hagg, after receiving a text in the groupchat from a teammate, he and the other swimmer found out of their exposure. All boys swim and dive team members were called out of class by either their parents or the nurse if in class, and were sent home to quarantine.

While members of the swim and dive team aren't aware of who tested positive, all had to quarantine and received tests on Feb. 4. Without being able to practice or compete for 10 days, swimmers like freshman Reece Baker are concerned for how they'll be able to prepare for state, and for their final tournament before state.

"When you miss even three days, let alone two weeks of swim, it really gets you out of shape and takes a while to get back to where you were," Baker said. "So that's going to be pretty hard for our swimmers at state."

While most of the swimmers are confident they'll be able to be prepared for state despite the break in practices according to Hagg, many are still nervous they won't have the chance to qualify for state.

Unable to compete in the tournament, many swimmers were left without one of their biggest chances to qualify for the state meet, which is already more competitive as only the top 24 times in each event will compete at state due to COVID precautions. With their Last Chance meet now as the only meet before state, many swimmers are worried about meeting their state times, something they've been working towards all season.

Baker was looking to cut his 200 IM time down to 2 minutes and 15 seconds in the Sunflower League meet, so he now hopes to break that time in their final meet before

state. Senior Sullivan Goettsch was also hoping to use the league meet to qualify for state, and is now hoping he'll be able to make it in their Last Chance Meet on Feb. 11.

"[Leading up to the league tournament], we take what's known as tapering for a few days where we don't go as hard in practice to prepare our bodies for the meet to get better times and get cuts, and we won't be able to get the opportunity this year at league," Goettsch said. "We'll have one last chance next week, which isn't nearly the same atmosphere. So hopefully, a lot of our swimmers can still get the times to go."



We'll have one last chance next week, which isn't nearly the same atmosphere. So hopefully, a lot of our swimmers can still get the times to go.

sullivan goettsch | senior

Hagg, along with most of the senior swimmers, was especially upset to miss this league meet. East held a 16-year winning streak up until last year, where they lost to Olathe East, and had been working all season to reclaim that first place status in the league.

"It just, it kills you on a whole other level, just knowing that we were in a position to take back our league run that we had a few years ago," Hagg said. "It was one of my biggest goals this year as a senior, and to not have the opportunity really does hurt, but I'm just gonna just kind of try and move on from it as well as I can and not let it affect the ultimate goal of winning state."

The non-seniors know how important it is to the team to reclaim the status of first in the league, and according to Baker, will be even more determined next season to earn it back for the current senior swimmers.

"It's definitely gonna give us a drive," Baker said. "We're losing a lot of really good seniors, so we're just going to try

to do it for them."

While the team has had to quarantine after an exposure before, this is the first meet they've been left to miss due to COVID. The JV boys swim team faced a COVID exposure at the beginning of the season, but as the meets hadn't started they only missed practices.

Throughout the season, they've had to follow KHSAA guidelines as COVID precautions. These precautions require that the swim and dive teams wear masks anytime outside of the pool and are spread out more than before in their lanes. Some of the biggest changes, according to Hagg, have been the move from their normally three-hour practices to two hours, and not being allowed to practice for the two week period over winter break.

According to Baker and Hagg, the team has felt as safe as possible in practice with their COVID guidelines in place.

Missing one of their last tournaments was not only a problem for those who had still hoped to get a time for state, but also made seniors like senior Sullivan Goettsch sad to be missing one of their last tournaments on the team.

"A few days ago, I was already kind of down because I might have a total of four more swims already, and now that number has been cut in half, essentially," Goettsch said. "Just knowing that the end is closer than you think it is, it's hard to imagine."

While it's upsetting to the team that they can't compete in one of their last meets, Hagg is sure that this setback will only fuel their hard work to prepare for state.

"If anything, it's just a little bit more fuel to fire that we missed out on a good opportunity for us that fast times," Hagg said. "We still have our Last Chance Meet coming up that's the week before state, so I think after once we get back in the pool and get practicing at a high level we'll have a really good last chance meet and we'll still show that we're one of the strongest teams in the state even without a swimming at league."

QUARANTINE SCHEDULE *The boys' swim and dive team's schedule for quarantining and competing*



setting a new PRINCIPAL

The new East principal Jason Peres is looking forward to assuming his position and embracing the school's community

by rose kanaley

New East Principal Jason Peres will assume the position for the 2021-22 school year after working in the Blue Valley school district for over 20 years, with six of those spent in administration, with hopes to recreate a close sense of community that was taken away during the unconventional school year.

"I'd always dreamed of running a school and creating an atmosphere where kids are always welcome and being responsible for that," Peres said. "That's something that's always been important to me, and it has always been a career goal of mine. And when the Shawnee Mission East position opened up...I could see myself there."

Peres found out about the position from his wife about three weeks ago, applied and was one of five candidates selected to proceed to the interview process. He's never worked in SMSD before, but he knew East's strong reputation as a tightly-knit school built on community support was something he wanted to be a part of.

"I believe East is a true community-based school," Peres said. "And from what I believe, there is a real turnout of community support for all the activities, athletics, academics — every piece of programming that goes on at Shawnee Mission East has some piece of community support backing it, and that's incredible. You don't find that everywhere, and I know that's what Shawnee Mission East is about. And that really attracted me to East culture."

Peres was able to experience

that community and meet the East staff at the faculty meeting on April 27th, reducing the nerves he initially felt when walking in.

"The second I got in the room and saw everybody, it just felt good to be back with the faculty and be all in one room," Peres said. "We've essentially spent a whole year being apart or meeting via Zoom... So while I didn't know most of the people there, it was just nice to be together as professionals."

Peres plans to spend more time in the East building before August, but first has to finish up the school year as an Associate Principal at Blue Valley Southwest. After that, he plans to spend time preparing for the year by getting to know each staff member before the 2021-22 school year starts.

Until he is able to spend his days in the building, he is communicating with SMSD officials a few times a week on an as-needed basis, receiving updates on East and talking through his transition into the position — a process Principal Dr. Scott Sherman has assisted him with.

But Peres' biggest goal is to bring back more normalcy to the school next year, and hopes the the pandemic will settle down enough to allow that to happen.

"Schools have typically been community centers and due to the pandemic, we just couldn't have that," Peres said. "I'm most excited to get back to that, because school is really a special place and I love being the center of a community."

Beyond that, Peres said he

can't share his exact goals until he builds a deeper relation to the community and works more with East's leadership team to figure out what is most important.

Some students and faculty, according to students like senior Anabelle Merchant, were hesitant about the decision, and hoped for the new principal to be someone already in the district. Merchant reached out to many students before the decision was made and encouraged them to send in letters and advocate for Dr. Susan Leonard, a current Associate Principal, to be selected.

"She's awesome for the community, and she is definitely the biggest advocate for students and wants to put us first," Merchant said.

However, Merchant is trusting that the district selection process did its job in selecting the strongest candidate and, along with many other students, is looking forward to meeting Peres.

"I'm sure the district did what they thought was in the best interest of our community and I'm excited to see what [Peres] can do," Merchant said.

According to SMSD's Chief Communications Officer, David Smith, filling the principal position consists of putting out the job description, opening it for applicants and conducting paper screenings and an interview process.

"We do a paper screening of all the applicants," Smith said. "And for this one, that included the people who went through the paper screening, included our principal representatives along with representatives from human resources, our teaching

and learning department and the executive leadership team."

After completing the paper screening process, they narrowed it to five candidates and had two rounds of interviews along with a performance component, according to Smith. The interviews included representatives from the teaching and learning department, human resources, DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), special education, the executive leadership team and three representatives from teachers and staff at Shawnee Mission East.

After going through this process, Peres is looking forward to meeting and connecting with the students and staff — he knows that there's often apprehension that comes with new faculty, but he is looking forward to building the new relationships.

"In public schools when there's always change, there's always a little apprehension," Peres said. "And my goal is to make that as comfortable as possible so that I can become part of that culture and they can accept me so we can move together as a team."



THROUGH THE YEARS

Some of the previous positions Jason Peres has held over the course of his career until becoming the principal at East

