



Gas leak evacuation caused by sewage buildup

Karan Singh | Managing Editor

The ice cold wind howls outside as students are led out of the building and into the parking lot surrounding the school. Inside, the hallways lie vacant, nothing but a putrid smell lingering in the air. “We are evacuating the school due to reports of a smell of gas,” the voice had said on the loud-speaker moments prior.

Murmurs and whispers of what could be going on float around as students wonder how they could be experiencing, yet again, another gas leak. During the previous school year, on January 30, the first gas leak evacuation in the school’s history was caused by a leak in the boiler room.

Restlessly, over 1,400 students wait outside in 39 degree weather, eager to go back to their classes. Staff pass around blankets and jackets to those wearing short sleeves.

Fire trucks flashing bright red lights park at the front of the school. Students and staff are asked to move further away from the school, a preventative measure to avert further emergencies.

To keep them from freezing, the evacuated groups by the athletics entrance are led back into the main gym, where they are asked to wait until the building is cleared to be let back into their classes.

At this point, students have become confused as to the real cause of the evacuation, and begin questioning what could have occurred.

It was soon discovered that the evacuation was not caused by a gas leak.

“When facilities arrived on scene, they determined that there



Students wait outside in 39-degree weather after being evacuated from the school due to smells of gas. The smell ended up being a sewage leak. Photo by Karan Singh.

was a backup in the sewage line,” school principal **Michelle Luttrell** said.

The backup, located by a boiler room near the choir room, led to a pungent smell that was reported by many students as a smell of gas. This led to facilities assuming that a gas leak was the cause of the unpleasant odor and taking fast action to evacuate the school.

When a gas leak occurs, a set procedure is put into place. First, a notification is sent to staff through the school’s Raptor system, alerting all of an evacuation.

“We have to call the Fire and Rescue and the Security Operations Center to let them know we’re evacuating,” Luttrell said.

Once an evacuation has been

initiated, there are certain adults in the building that have specific roles to follow. Luttrell is the incident commander. All communication comes from her to parents and students from the division.

Facilities worked from around 1 p.m. to 11 p.m. to clear up the sewage lines located under the fine arts area of the school. Luttrell was told that after some campus tree work, some debris ended up in the sewage lines running underground.

During her many years as principal, Luttrell has received news of strange things being flushed down the toilet, such as articles of clothing and apples. She inquired about reports from facilities to make sure objects such as these weren’t the cause for the backup, however, she

has not received much information.

“We have contractors in our building almost daily, working on things that may need fixing,” Luttrell said. She emphasized the importance of customary practice for bathrooms in the future, asking students to keep problems like this from arising by not flushing abnormal objects down the toilet.

For the remainder of the school day, most bathrooms were shut down. Students and staff were only allowed to use the restrooms near the auxiliary gym as facilities continued to work on fixing the issue.

“Everyone was super cooperative and really flexible,” Luttrell said, emphasizing the swift conduction of the evacuation. “It went well.” •

Lewis: ‘We’re not going to tear this building down’

An explanation of County building maintenance and refresh

Aspen DeWan | Staff Writer

Fire alarms, rooftop units, tennis courts, and resurfacing the asphalt and concrete are just some of the replacements coming to our high school in the future. Loudoun County Public Schools pays for these scheduled replacements, but how is it determined when to make replacements?

“It’s a very complicated process,” Chief Operations Officer **Kevin Lewis** said. “We break it down into multiple components.

This building itself, built in 1954, will last forever. The brick walls, the block walls, the structural steel, we can keep that going for a long time. The systems are another thing.”

The systems, which include the HVAC and lighting, are placed on a life cycle. These life cycles determine how long the items will remain in the school until they are replaced. Where a light fixture may last thirty-five or forty years, at some point of time, it won’t be efficient anymore. “We used to have

big fluorescent tubes, and then smaller fluorescent tubes, and now we’re at LED lights,” Lewis said, demonstrating the move to more efficient technology. Now, with LED lights, “the amount of power we use fits into our sustainability plan,” Lewis said.

Everything has a different life cycle, and where some things have a large life cycle, others have smaller ones. For example, painting is placed on a seven year cycle, HVAC systems are around thirty years, the outdoor track is placed

around ten years, and lighting is around thirty years. For efficiency, the district tries to coordinate certain replacements, such as lining up the replacement of outdoor track with the turf fields.

Lewis, who has been working with Loudoun County Public Schools for over twenty-four years, says that the district engineers use their experiences to the district’s advantage. “Certain manufacturers last longer than others, and so we

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Students: here's why you have to read

Valerie Rife | Guest Writer

Recently, an article from LCPS administrative office was shared with the Secondary English educators lamenting that students in college cannot read. In "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books," **Rose Horowitch** emphasizes the fact that "to read a book in college, you have to read a book in high school."

While the structured study hall policy may need some tweaking, its required 20 minutes of reading has potential benefits in fostering better reading habits and overall academic success. Students who read for 20 minutes daily increase their test scores, are placed in the 90% of their peers and learn 1,800,000 words per year (Nagy and Herman, 1987).

Stronger vocabulary and building stamina will benefit students' future success in college and beyond. Literacy Coach **Penny Kittle** highlights **Malcolm Gladwell's** 10,000 hours rule: the key to success in any field has little to do with talent, it is simply practice, 10,000 hours of it—20 hours a week for ten years (Grossman 2008) ... volume matters."

Kelly Gallagher, a full-time English teacher, reading guru, and author of *Readicide* laments that students do not read at home. He states, "nearly half of all Americans ages fifteen to twenty-four do not read books for pleasure."

With sizable portions of students not reading on their own, it is imperative that we provide the time, space, and consistent practice for reading to improve their literacy and general academic growth. LCHS is committed to promoting life-long learners and the benefits of SSR/independent reading outweigh the possible inconvenience that can be remedied through learned time management.

While it is true that many students may be burdened with heavy workloads from AP courses, the structured reading time can serve as a mental break from the intense focus required for subjects like calculus or history. This break can help refresh their minds, making them more productive and efficient when they return to their assignments. The loss of 20 minutes might seem significant; however, it is important to weigh this against the long-term benefits of improved reading skills.

For students involved in sports, extracurriculars, or jobs, strong reading and comprehension skills can lead to better academic performance overall, which in turn can open more opportunities in the future. Neuroscientist **Maryanne Wolf** states, "so-called deep reading -sustained immersion in a text -stimulates a number of valuable mental habits, including critical thinking and self-reflection, in

ways that skimming or reading in short bursts does not." For those of you who find yourself needing to read for a subject, that is completely acceptable, just simply read your text.

Toddlers "melt down" when parents ask them to eat vegetables, but parents are not going to allow their children to make poor food choices based on a lack of understanding in the moment. Similarly, we as teachers are holding strong as we understand the value of reading and benefits it can lead to future success beyond LCHS. Students taking college level classes were surveyed as to their reasons for not wanting to read during study hall. The results indicated not enough time. Again, strengthening executive function skills would be advantageous instead of "giving up" reading.

Best-selling author **George R.R. Martin** states it best in "A Dance of Dragons," in which he writes, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies... The man who never reads lives only one."

As per **Jon Gordon** and **Damon West's** well-known allegory of the impact of boiling water, we can choose to harden like an egg, soften like a carrot, or in the case of independent reading, we can opt to enjoy the refreshing subtleties and flavors of brewing coffee as we embrace "The Crucible" and expand our critical thinking and our perspectives. •

THE COUNTY CHRONICLE

Loudoun County High School
415 Dry Mill Rd., SW
Leesburg, Virginia 20175
phone: 571-252-2000
fax: 571-252-2001

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

BEREK HARRISON
TAYLOR HELFER

LAYOUT EDITOR

TAYLOR HELFER

COPY EDITOR

SCARLETT ASHFORD

MANAGING EDITORS

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BUSINESS MANAGER

ASPEN DEWAN

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SOFIA ORDONEZ CRESPIN
ALEXA STERNER

ADVISER

VALERIE EGGER

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The Two Party System does not represent the people

Nur Mustafa | Staff Writer

Picture one day where it's Autumn and you're attending a pep rally for the upcoming football game. The mascots, with pool noodles, battle for their lives on the gymnastic mats. One mascot falls, and students roar with excitement and undying hatred for the opposing school. It's an extreme and barbaric take, and yet accurately depicts the unwarranted rivalries among schools.

Only I'm not talking about high school. This is the unfortunate reality of the U.S. political system. Candidates from two parties, Democratic and Republican, run against each other with opposing values, naturally accumulating hatred from the people. It's utterly ridiculous how these parties' antithesis have created a divide among the supporters, in which they've created hatred toward each other.

This divide in our nation is awfully embarrassing with the January 6 United States Capitol attack, the social media slander, and hu-

miliating presidential debates circulating around golf skills. There is no middle ground, and despite having third parties, it's evident we are run by a two party system. This two party system is one proven to be problematic and being more harmful than what it was intended to do. Some countries are run by a multi-party system, a structure the U.S. ought to adopt.

For example, Iceland consists of a constitutional republic with a multi-party system where the executive power is run by the government. Iceland has a voter turnout of 81.2% of those who registered, while the United States stands at 65.4%. This difference in civic engagement displays the higher satisfaction in Iceland toward their various candidates, compared to the U.S.'s depressing turnout where citizens would rather not vote than vote for a candidate that does not represent them. Other countries with a higher voter turnout than the U.S. also include Austria, Germany, and Türkiye.

It shouldn't be the norm where citizens don't feel seen in their country. The Republican and Democratic parties follow two different extremes, leaving many people unrepresented and their issues and crisis's unaddressed. If there was equal opportunity for third parties, such as the Green Party or Libertarian Party, there would be much higher representation for the people.

The Green Party, for example, prioritizes the protection of the environment, but they also advocate for social justice, such as price ceilings and a strong security system in order to improve America's quality of life. The Libertarian party values individual liberty, as well as the avoidance of military intervention in other countries. Both parties address issues that the Democratic and Republican parties fail to even acknowledge, but are unable to win due to lack of recognition and votes.

However, that can change. It's a democracy for a reason, the peo-

ple hold the power. If a third party were to gain a minimum of 15% of the national electorate, they'd qualify to participate in a presidential debate, ensuring the nation wouldn't have to be stuck between a rock and a hard place, weighing the lesser of the two evils.

It's insane that it's the twentieth century and we're still upholding a political system dating back to 1796! Even then, the writers of the Constitution did not support the ideology of political parties, and yet the nation is dominated by two of them. Not only as Americans, but as people we have evolved and in order to have a flourishing society, it's time our political system evolves too.

As Americans, as humans, we should fight for our beliefs and not settle for the bare minimum when it comes to living. All it takes are small steps, because collectively they drastically alter the polls. So when the next presidential election rolls around, take a step and educate others on third parties and support a party that supports you. •

Current school schedule hinders student mental success

Scarlett Ashford | Copy Editor

Have you ever been sitting in class, and you look at the clock expecting class to be almost over, only to realize it has only been 30 minutes? We're led to believe the lack of focus is our fault, but how are students supposed to succeed when our day-to-day schedule feels more like a factory than a school?

I am truly an advocate for improving our education, but I also strive for a healthy balance between work and rest. 90 minute classes with little to no break fail to promote this, and we may be unintentionally adding fatigue to the already sleep-deprived and overworked student body. Of the few studies researching the academic benefits of traditional length classes versus 75-90 minute classes are inconclusive; both show equal benefits and drawbacks to the various types of classes. Therefore, we should focus on the mental effects of these contrasting schedule types, since that is where they truly seem to differ.

At Heritage High School, my friend has built in club time once a week, which promotes the entirety of the student body to join a club, and also reduces any time spent outside of school on extracurriculars. Incorporating clubs into the schedule can improve our sense of community, and provide newfound opportunities to those looking to expand or deepen their interests.

Clubs also provide a break at the end of the day. Research recommends a 10 to 20 minute break for every 45 to 50 minutes working or studying. This is due to various factors, such as allowing your mind a chance to relax so it can refocus, or simply so you can move your body after a long period of immobility.

In contrast to this schedule template, our school only permits students a five minute "break" between classes, with a 30 minute lunch break around half-way through the day. These aren't true breaks because your mind isn't relaxing, it's thinking of the next class you need to get to or stressing over the quiz you have that day. Some students even use lunch as a chance to cram study, not to mention that although, yes, lunch is technically 30 minutes long, five to 10 minutes is spent traveling to and from the cafeteria, resulting in only approximately 20 to 25 minutes of actual lunch time, which can result in adverse health effects on students, such as less intake of healthy foods.

In addition to a lack of necessary breaks, there is also a struggle to maintain students' engagement during the 90 minute class periods. A schedule that would promote student engagement could be modeled by the two-hour delay schedule, with classes lasting an hour, for lunch to be extended, and an hour devoted towards clubs. The extra min-

utes can be used for extra studying time, or it can be spaced out throughout the day to act as small breaks between classes. Although I've heard some teachers argue that adding extra break time may increase student misbehavior, students won't necessarily be roaming the halls, but rather spending time with friends for an extra ten to fifteen minutes while being supervised by their teachers. Furthermore, during the school days with two hour delays in January, I failed to notice any misbehavior.

Beyond the schedule, another complaint I often hear from my fellow classmates is that although schools have been around for centuries, the rows of uncomfortable desks facing the board remain the same. School classrooms do not offer a space which promotes learning, and are filled with hard desks with thick metal bars that seem to trap you like a prison cell, barely leaving room

for mobility. Their uncomfortable and entrapping nature does the exact opposite of improving education. Rather, students will find themselves squirming and losing their already fading concentration. "Soft" furniture, such as comfortable seats or couches within an open space, as may be found in office spaces, can help academic achievement and increase curiosity in students.

At work, adults are allowed to stand, stretch, or have breaks. Students are forced to sit.

Schools should have space for students to thrive as growing people. If we do not take into account the nature of our current students' lives, then we cannot do our best to support them. Giving students, and teachers, the time, space, and environment they need to succeed isn't possible with the current schedule. Students need time to socialize, more breaks, shorter classes, and a longer lunch. •

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are very particular about the manufacturers we use because we know we can fix them,” Lewis said. “We have a lot of folks that look at this equipment and determine when it should be done.”

According to Lewis, all equipment is on the same cycle regardless of the building’s age, but older buildings do present some challenges. At County, one challenge is the tile. “That’s the character of this building, so we won’t replace that tile.” Out of the corridors, they did the best thing they could to try and match the old tiles, which was seventy years old.

What is currently the library used to be the main gym. “We had to figure out how to treat that space with the history and significance it needed,” Lewis said.

“Very similar to the building systems and infrastructure, furniture is also categorized,” Office of Support Services **Brian Stocks** said. “We have the classroom set, the main office furniture, we have furniture in the libraries, and then we have the cafeteria furniture.”

They are all treated differently as far life cycles go, but according to Stocks, classroom furniture tends to outlast the evolution of the delivery method of education. The combination desks that are present in the school right now are not working well for the current year. “But these are in good shape, structurally they are sound,” Stocks said. “They are well within their life cycle management of approximately thirty years.”

Built into the Capital Improvements Program, beginning in 2027, the replacement of all combo desks will begin to phase in, which because of additional funding from the Board of Supervisors will be expedited. “This spring, summer, we plan to replace all the remaining combination desks in Loudoun County Public Schools, secondary schools,” Stocks said. “This school will see that immediately.”

Cafeteria tables are handled a bit differently, being managed with a life cycle of fifteen years. They don’t place the order once the fifteen year mark is hit, however. Instead, an evaluation begins, where physical visits are made, inventories on the tables, and assessments on their conditions.

“We work very closely with our facilities operation team, because our custodial staff move those tables, they collapse and move. And they can actually become dangerous if the table is not functioning correctly to the staff that are moving them,” Stocks said. “If anything is ever broken or reported that is damaged, we replace that through our maintenance and our operating budget.”

They also work very closely with the media centers and libraries, including the media center staff, who help them when they’re in need of replacements. “They’re not as defined with a specific duration of time, but more based around the functionality. As we know, our libraries are changing. A lot more materials are electronic now, but we still have a need for that standing furniture,” Stocks said.

For unplanned replacements, such as equipment malfunctions and breakages, the county processes work orders. “Every single day, something breaks everywhere,” Lewis said. “We have about one-hundred and fifty technicians that go around with certain specialties.”

“We spend millions of dollars every year maintaining our buildings,” Lewis said.

“We have a very strict philosophy. If it’s broken, it must be fixed,” Lewis said. “The trick is, sometimes we don’t always know if it’s broken.”

“We have a group of people on call every single day of the year for things that could happen anywhere,” Lewis said. “Every school is required, like on a holiday or a weekend, usually a custodian or a facilities person, is required to come to every single building, all one-hundred buildings has to be looked at every day.” During these checks, staff look for signs of problems so they can be reported.

In addition to replacements, some equipment requires cyclical care. The floor tile, Lewis said, has to be stripped and re-waxed every three years. Every summer, a team of custodians will enter the building, take out all of the furniture, strip and wax the floors, and bring the furniture back in. This process occurs at every school.

Different items in the school are grouped together depending on their lifespans, allowing them to be replaced together. “If we’re here and we can do the lights at the same time, a lot of the time we are doing the lights and the ceiling grids, and the ceiling tiles,” Lewis said.

One of the more current projects is called a critical system replacement. Schools where the HVAC system is thirty-five or more years old will have their ceilings ripped down and all of their lights replaced, including fire alarms, and everything wired up in the systems to put in new unified communications systems. This project is set to occur in all schools over a span of eight years. The district is currently on year three.

“Our goal has always been to have as little impact on students and staff as possible,” Lewis said.



The school track with rough and crumbling edges. It is planned to be resurfaced in 2028. Photo by Aspen DeWan.

“So we’d wait till school was out, come in, do as much as we could, and come back.”

“We can’t do all that work in the summer anymore, so now we’re starting in spring break,” Lewis said.

Someone in the school is designated to enter work orders, which can typically be entered through a system called Asset Essentials, previously known as SchoolDude. “If a desk is broken, if any piece of stand alone equipment is broken, that’s entered into the same system,” Stocks said. “And we will respond to that as quickly as possible.”

“We would not ask for you to wait till four desks are broken before we come,” Stocks said. “We will come out for one desk. We need to make sure that every child has a seat, and every classroom is intact, with operational furniture.”

If this is the case, why are items sometimes not repaired or replaced quickly? Lewis says that it’s an issue of reporting it.

Lewis says that many people assume someone knows about the issue but in actuality, no one has reported it. “We can’t fix it if we don’t know it’s there.” His message to students is to report issues to a teacher or administrator.

“For us, Loudoun County Public Schools maintains the facility. What we do here at the school level is submit something called a work ticket,” Principal **Michelle Luttrell** said. “And it goes to the division, and we can say to them,

‘hey, this is not working, this is broken,’ and what they do is they get it and they patch it out to a contractor, or **Mr. Mobley**, who is our building engineer. And the division covers the cost of those things.”

“If we want to add things to the building, then we have to use our budget,” Luttrell said. Luttrell also said that the tickets sit in a queue if not yet accepted, along with the tickets from all one-hundred schools, which all have to be filtered. They can be sent out to the different departments in the division, but priority and when things get attended is a factor in how soon the tickets will get picked up.

With questions of our aging building, Park View High School has been in the news for its planned demolition. But Lewis says County will not follow that route, citing building quality issues at Park View that do not exist at County.

“With the historical significance, we decided that we were going to take a different route than Park View,” Lewis said. “And that was what triggered us to go ahead and start working on the restrooms and other projects, because now we’ve decided we’re not going to tear this building down, and we never will.”

“There’s lots of things happening here over time,” Lewis said. “And we will continue to do that and maintain this building, because it’s a jewel, it’s the flagship of the county.” •

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Loudoun County election results showcase national trends

Berek Harrison | Editor-in-Chief

It would have been normal to assume the presidential election would be very close. Polls put Vice President **Kamala Harris** and former President **Donald Trump** neck and neck, not just in the national popular vote, but also in terms of the Electoral College.

Election day seemed like a different story. Trump won the presidency with over 300 electoral votes. He won the national popular vote by over three million votes, and also won all seven swing states. Republicans won a majority in both the House and Senate.

Loudoun County and Leesburg itself saw a shift toward Trump compared to the 2020 election. Many counties and districts saw similar trends.

Harris would ideally have comparable results to **Joe Biden**'s performance in 2020. Biden won with 306 electoral votes and set records with his popular vote. Biden also did well with battleground states. He only gave up five of the 15 battleground states and one electoral vote from Maine, according to CNN.

In the 2024 election, Harris was

unable to win over any battleground states. Six battleground states switched from Democrat to Republican in 2024.

In individual counties, Harris also underperformed when compared to Biden in 2020. One example of this is Loudoun County.

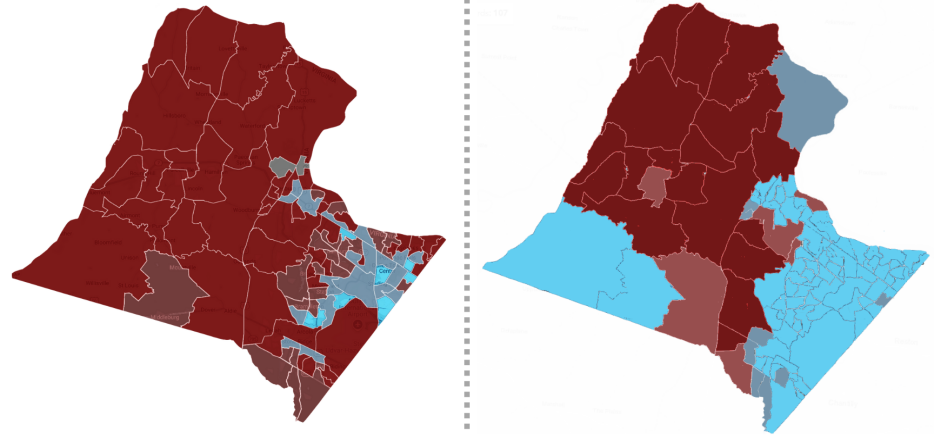
Although Harris won Loudoun County, and increasing the number of Democrat-won precincts compared to the 2020 election, the Democrats had nearly 10,000 fewer votes than the prior election while Trump received 10,000 more votes. There was an overall shift toward Trump and the Republicans.

This shift was not unique to Loudoun County. "More than 89 percent of counties in the United States shifted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2024 presidential election," The New York Times said, "Mr. Trump improved on his 2020 margin in 2,793 counties. His margin decreased in only 319 counties."

Despite the success of Trump, polls showing Harris and Trump nearly tied weren't necessarily inaccurate. According to University of California Professor **J.D. Warren**, high quality polls, such as the New

Loudoun County 2024 vs 2020 Election Results

2020 Election	2024 Election
Voter Turnout: 79.93%	Voter Turnout: 71.9%
Biden-Harris: 138,372 Votes	Harris-Walz: 129,280 Votes
Trump-Pence: 82,088 Votes	Trump-Vance: 92,107 Votes
Biden-Harris: 61.54%	Harris-Walz: 56.2%
Trump-Pence: 36.51%	Trump-Vance: 40.13%



Dark - Republican ; Light - Democrat

York Times/Siena College Poll, which showed a near tie, still predicted Trump's 50.2%-48.1% lead within their margin of error which for The New York Times poll was 2.2%. "Overall, high-quality polls were quite accurate," Warren said.

Even if polls seem neck and neck, or put one candidate ahead, it's important to consider the margin of

error, the amount that values in a poll are likely to differ by. Along with this, even elections that seem overwhelmingly one sided, may have candidates differ by small percentages like what happened this year. Regardless of who's predicted to win or how much they are predicted to win by, voting matters and will have an impact. •

Club feature: UNICEF, Latin, Math Captains

Taylor Helfer | Editor-in-Chief & **Karan Singh** | Managing Editor

As classes get more demanding throughout the year, finding a place to engage in fellowship is important to maintaining a healthy school-life balance. At the UNICEF club, Latin club, and Math Captains, a feel-good environment is what they're all about. **UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S EMERGENCY FUND**

UNICEF is an international organization that provides humanitarian aid to children. The organization, as well as the club, helps raise funds for these causes.

"It's for kids that are being affected by wars or who don't have enough food or water and need shelter," club vice president **Aspen DeWan** said.

The club meets every three weeks to discuss fundraising opportunities. Their most recent fundraiser was a Halloween bucket raffle.

Last year, the club had the opportunity to video call with kids from Afghanistan.

"They were all inventors," DeWan said. "One kid invented a proposal box, but when he opened it up, it lit up on the inside. Another kid built a lamp."

It's kids like these, who don't have access to resources to make a successful living based on their abilities, that the club helps support.

UNICEF is currently planning a bake sale during First Friday in February, to raise money for more

donations.

Club president **Zach Johansen** emphasizes the importance of joining a club such as this one.

"We want everyone in UNICEF to truly care for the mission that we stand for and to want to help," Johansen said. "It's very important to help everyone and that is the biggest thing we want people to learn."

LATIN CLUB

Last school year, when Latin teacher **Lynn Krepich** retired, many Latin club members thought that, like the language, the club was dead. But, with the help of senior **Caroline VanEpps**, the club found a new sponsor, **Matthew Landers**, and were able to revitalize the club.

"I had never taken a class or worked with [Landers] before, so it means a lot to me and others that he wants to help us continue Latin club this year," VanEpps said.

At most of their meetings, there are snacks, friends, and most important to club members, like junior **Mark Giardina**, mythology themed arts and crafts.

"I really like arts and crafts," Giardina said. Giardina had taken Latin I and II and was upset to hear that the Latin culture could potentially not be at County, but joined the Latin club to spend time with his friends and engage in Roman culture.

Thankfully, Latin has been thriving through events at the club such as Saturnalia, an ancient Roman holiday worshipping Saturn. They hope to simply teach all there is to learn about



(Left to Right) Junior **Nathaniel White**, retired Latin teacher **Lynn Krepich**, senior **Caroline VanEpps**, freshman **Linden Rosati**, senior **Pierson Lee**, junior **Emma Hawkins**, junior **Nik Scuric**, junior **Mark Giardina**, and junior **Taylor Helfer** stand in front of the Latin club car at the Trunk or Treat event on October 29. Under the sponsorship of Spanish teacher **Matthew Landers**, the Latin club has been able to keep the Roman culture alive.

Roman culture.

"We have members who love all sorts of topics such as Roman battle history, the Latin Language, ancient Greek mythology, classical poetry, Roman culture, and more," VanEpps said. No Latin experience is required, so if anyone is interested in talking about Classical antiquity, or just eating snacks and hanging out with friends, they are extremely welcome."

MATH CAPTAINS

Math Captains begins with a fun, group-based competition called AMC, where students can win candy.

Math Captains meets bi-weekly on Thursdays after school in room 256. The club eases students who may be having trouble with their math work.

"If you look at a problem and you have no idea how to solve it, we'll

talk it through, and you'll find a lot of things you thought were hard were really easy," club vice president **Aurora McLaughlin-Peconom** said.

This year, the club is planning on expanding its horizons by becoming a part of the Math Honor Society. "We're also looking to tutor and start a math club with Simpson Middle School," McLaughlin-Peconom said.

Math Captains hopes to inspire students to not just gain an interest in math, but also to ask for help when needed.

"Our club isn't about getting better at math. It's to show that everyone can be a part of math," McLaughlin-Peconom said. "We want people to know that when school is getting hard, there's someone here to help you." •

STUDENT LIFE

Search for the perfect hot chocolate for a cold day

Taylor Helfer | Editor-in-Chief

As the winter months approach and the weather gets colder, cozying up with a warm hot chocolate feels like the perfect remedy. Three locally-owned cafes offer hot chocolate for purchase, but which is the best?

Each venue is rated by scoring the overall atmosphere of the place from 0-3, and hot chocolate from 0-7.

GOOSECUP-10/10

Opened in January of 2021, Goosecup offers an inviting environment with a boho aesthetic and calming atmosphere with lots of seating and drink prices ranging from \$1-10. Additionally, Goosecup has longer hours, opening at 7 a.m. and closing at 8 p.m., which is ideal for students who want to work after school.

Walking in, the holiday decorations, abundance of plants, and overall calm atmosphere was very pleasing. It seemed to be the perfect spot to relax.

Upon the first sip of my drink, the cream blended well with the chocolate and was not too powerful, which is a common mistake with hot chocolate around town. It was also warm, but not hot enough that it would burn my mouth, allowing me to sit down and enjoy it immediately. Every single sip of this hot chocolate was enjoyable, and the hints of cinnamon made it even more addicting.

As I was ordering, I noticed a variety of menu items, which would perfectly pair with a warm drink. They offer a variety of breakfast, lunch, and dinner snacks which are sure to appeal to both those who prefer either sweet or savory.

Because of the welcoming environment, the distinct creaminess and tastiness of the hot chocolate, I

have no choice but to give Goosecup a 10/10. As I write this review, I only want this hot chocolate ten times more.

SR COFFEE CO- 9/10

SR Coffee Co opened in Leesburg in 2021 and has lots of traditional coffee options, as well as fun limited time holiday options, such as gingerbread matcha to appeal to all of your coffee wants and needs. SR Coffee Co also has many breakfast and lunch meal options, and drink prices ranging from \$4-9. This shop is open from 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily.

The overall atmosphere of this shop was somewhat surprising, as I was expecting a warm, inviting kind of shop. However, the bright white walls threw me off, creating more of an office-like atmosphere, rather than the calming coffee shop vibe I'm used to. I will say, however, that the holiday decor and the wooden accents toned things down a little.

The hot chocolate was straight out of your classic Hallmark Christmas movie. It was picture perfect and most importantly, it tasted like your average chocolate milkshake. It was sweet, and had a rich chocolate taste, with just the right amount of cream, adding to the overall milkshake taste. By far, it was the best hot chocolate I've had to date.

Unfortunately, the store closes before school even ends, but is open early on weekends. But, the breakfast and lunch options would be perfect for a Saturday study day.

Due to the slightly unwelcoming environment, but the addictive taste of the milkshake-like hot chocolate, I give SR Coffee Co a 9/10.

SECOND NATURE COFFEE- 4/10

Taking the spot of recently closed King Street Coffee, perhaps



This hot chocolate from Goosecup, has not only a pretty exterior, but a hint of cinnamon and a creamy composition, making this a rich, chocolate-y beverage for a cold day. Goosecup has been open since 2021, serves a variety of hot and cold beverages, and is open well after school ends to make it a perfect study spot. Photo by Taylor Helfer.

Second Nature Coffee hopes that their wide variety of drink and snack options create a warm, inviting atmosphere designed to make you feel right at home. Second Nature Coffee is open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., has limited seating if you choose to dine inside, and drink prices ranging from \$1-10.

Because this place is rather new, I had heard no big news about this shop's items, and was excited to get a hot chocolate. Upon walking in, the staff was very friendly while I was ordering, and the atmosphere of the shop was especially cozy given its holiday decorations, wooden furniture, and smaller space.

Upon first sip of my hot choco-

late, however, the whipped cream, which was very creamy and sweet, overpowered the taste of the hot chocolate, which was lacking in flavor. This hot chocolate was overly watery, and it severely diminished any sweet chocolate flavor that is essential to a hot chocolate. If anything, the whipped cream was the thing that added most to the beverage.

Hot chocolate aside, this place would be perfect for an after school study spot, especially given its location and hours.

Despite the cozy atmosphere of the shop, the severely water-down and tasteless hot chocolate leaves me to give Second Nature Coffee a 4/10. •

Spotlight on Electives

This is a short sampling of the many electives available. To learn about more electives, scan the QR code below.

Taylor Helfer | Editor-in-chief

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy, a semester course, teaches you to question everything, and with that, defend your thoughts. According to the course description, "Students who take this course will explore the world of ideas and may develop some ideas about their place in the universe." Students will study a variety of topics, such as Ethics, Free Will and Determinism, Futurism, and more.

ACCOUNTING

Accounting is a year-long course which emphasizes the "basic principles, concepts, and practices of the accounting cycle." Students will also learn the skills to journal and post transactions or prepare financial statements. For those interested in a business future, taking accounting is helpful in teaching you financial practices that can aid you in your future career. The prerequisite to this course is Computer Information Systems.

JOURNALISM

Newspaper and Yearbook are year-long courses which produce a physical publication: newspaper issues at the end of each quarter or a yearbook at the end of the year. Both courses challenge you to learn how to write, from captions to infographics to full-length articles or features, on top of learning skills such as photography and layout.

AP HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

AP Human Geography, which was recently changed to an elective rather than a history course, is a year-long course that studies human life and how human life is affected by geographic and human conditions. Some units of the curriculum include political processes, cultural patterns, population and migration patterns, and even agriculture and rural-land use patterns. Although not an official prerequisite, having a background of World History is encouraged.



Course selections are happening now. To view a list of electives and their course descriptions, scan the QR code!

NJROTC hosts a night of food, friends, and fun

Karan Singh | Managing Editor



Left: (Left to right) Sophomores Medina Canic, Eva Rodriguez, Bailey Welch, Lily Gingerich, Nava Gessesse, Iverson Paredes, Mariana Martin, Sierra Shaffer, Justin Goodhart, Felix Dema-Nahr, and junior Aaliyah Trammel. This year's military ball was held on December 20 at the Landsdowne Resort Ballroom in Leesburg. Photo by Sabrina Simpkins (@sabrina.photographs).

Middle: (Left to right) Seniors Athishaya Srinivasan, Aly Milt- enberger, Sadie Byers, and Abby Taliaferro. "It was hard to pick my final look, as it was my last Military Ball," Byers said. "I eventually found inspiration from my sister's closet." Photo by Karan Singh.

Bottom left: (Left to right) Juniors Claire Pho, Aurora McLaughlin-Peconom, and Graysen Armstrong. As the lighting inside the venue was dimmed after the dance floor opened, students took it upon themselves to find the perfect lighting for their photos. "We found this back patio with all the lights," McLaughlin-Peconom said. Photo courtesy of Aurora McLaughlin-Peconom.



Bottom right: Juniors Caitlyn Kozowyk and Fallon Murphy. Along with Kozowyk, Murphy also brought along her sister to join her for the event. "The Military Ball is such a fun night, but having my friends and family with me makes it even better," Murphy said. Photo by Sabrina Simpkins (@sabrina.photographs).



‘I want to be the best for my team.’

Junior Zoe Ward leads basketball team with determination

Alexa Sterner | Staff Writer

It’s January 18, 2024 and the girl’s varsity basketball team is losing a close game against Dominion High School. Junior **Zoe Ward** steps up with all the pressure to win the game and makes three shots in a row.

Her coach calls a timeout as they are now tied with Dominion. Once the timeout is over, Ward runs a play that scores. County ends up winning the game with a score of 50-46.

Ward has been playing basketball for 12 years, training since the very beginning.

“I started because my dad wanted me to be a multi athlete and play something in the winter while I waited for soccer season,” Ward said. “Ironically, I don’t play soccer anymore.”

Ward played soccer up until her freshman year of high school and is fully committed to basketball now.

“I like how fast the pace of the game is compared to other sports,” Ward said. “I love the friendships I have made and the different teams I play with and against.”

Ward quit soccer not just because she wanted to focus on basketball but also because her greatest challenge was in the way. Ward dislocated her knee three times and had to get knee surgery. Doing soccer and basketball would have been too much on her knee so she had to make a choice between the two.

“My knee couldn’t handle all the stress I was putting on my body in between all the training I did so I had to quit something,” Ward said.

Although Ward has proven herself as a basketball player, as she is one of the top scorers on the team, she still struggles with the repercussions of her injury.

“I think my mentality is a lot worse because I know I can be better and more aggressive for rebounds,” Ward said. “I’m just scared of getting hurt and being out for months again. I’m constantly overthinking that I’m never going to be the player I was, I should pass the ball up because I’m going to be short on a shot, or I’m not going to be able to shift quick enough on defense and my teammates or gonna be mad.”

Ward’s knee injury had affected more than just how she plays but also her mentality. Despite this, Ward has learned to work on



Junior Zoe Ward shoots a basketball during a varsity girls basketball game against Loudoun Valley on December 15, 2023. 18-51 Loudoun Valley. Photo by John Klimavicz.

her mental game.

“I have already gotten better at focusing on the next play. If I make a mistake and I continue to work on it,” Ward said.

This new mentality Ward has started to develop has helped her become a better player.

Ward has to make sure to maintain a good headspace as basketball has about two to three games a week with practices in between.

She trains every Wednesday and Sunday morning, typically does some open gyms, and plays with her friends at different courts.

“Last summer I did strength training and shooting clinics, which I plan to do again,” Ward said. “I typically focus on shooting, dribbling, moving around the basketball, strengthening myself and my knee, and working on my mentality after missed shots or bad games.”

Ward spends most of her free time in the gym on the weekends and after school, focusing on basketball.

“I would definitely say I am more of an athlete than a student,” Ward said. “I have many late nights studying for tests and doing my homework. I have been to school early and stayed later for extra help on topics.”

Ward has to maintain a balance between school work and basketball, which is tough considering she has practice or a game almost everyday. On top of that, she also has to maintain friendships with

her busy schedule.

“I think maintaining friendships can be stressful at times because I’m never free, but I find time on weekends and days I don’t have practice to hang out with my friends,” Ward said.

Ward doesn’t necessarily have a diet but tries not to eat a bunch of sweets and carbs.

“I think for the most part I stick to things on game days that won’t sit in my gut while I’m running, like dairy products and fried food,” Ward said. “Game days, I typically skip breakfast and have something light for lunch. If I know I have a lot of games coming up, I’ll try to drink a bunch of water the days leading up.”

Before games, Ward says she will “typically just listen to music and either watch some film on the team or read scouting reports.”

This season, Ward has some personal goals she wants to try and accomplish, like gaining back trust in her knee after her injury and always pushing to improve and be better.

“My goals as a teammate and

for the team are to have a winning record, and be the best I can be for my team,” Ward said.

Over the years, Ward’s plethora of accomplishments has allowed her to gain confidence in her abilities. Ward has won numerous basketball tournaments and has been invited to summer showcases for many schools. As just a freshman, Ward made varsity for the basketball team.

Ward believes basketball as a career would be something she’s interested in.

“Playing basketball as a full-time career would be the greatest thing in the entire world,” Ward said. She intends to play for as long as she can, stating that if she can’t play for a team, she will “play for fun.”

As she continues her career, Ward credits her coaches for giving her the advice that pushed her to determination and success.

“My soccer coach helped me figure out that basketball is what I wanted to do,” Ward said. “She told me that no matter what I did, to put everything I had into it.” •



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Close-knit gymnastics team fosters supportive environment

Alexa Sterner | Staff Writer

Regardless of the team’s small size, gymnastics placed third in the district in 2024, with some girls even qualifying for regionals.

At every practice, the first thing the gymnastics team does is running, stretching, and warming up. Then, they practice their routines, making improvements along the way.

“Being on the team helps me improve my skills because I know that I have everyone there to help me out,” senior **Hidayyah Ishaq** said.

The girls on the team are bonded.

“We make jokes and play games,” freshman **Mina Sulaiman** said.

Sulaiman highlights talking on the bus while doing each other’s hair, stating that it was “the best moment so far.”

Meets typically follow the same pattern, beginning with the gymnasts warming up. Then, they

make appearances to the judges. Known as the March In, each team is introduced to the judges. Gymnastics offers a variety of events, such as vault, bars, beam, and floor.

During their meet at Tuscarora on January 14, **Valerie Lindquist** placed fourth on bars. Sulaiman and Ishaq also earned career high scores on beam.

The girls are constantly cheering on their teammates. According to them, one of the best things to see is their teammates’ improvement. Though not everything goes perfectly during every routine, the team’s support is constant.

“We encourage our teammates when one of us falls and give advice to each other to help us accomplish our goals,” Sulaiman said.

Senior **Ellie O’Brien** recalls having to come up with a new series for beam and ending for her floor routine, asking Lindquist for advice.

“It’s good to get other peoples’

input,” O’Brien said.

The coaches also help encourage the girls, especially when one of them falls and messes up. Sulaiman calls them “calm and supportive.”

O’Brien states that the team is able to work more closely with their coaches, as “there aren’t a lot of them.”

“If I have any questions about a move, I know my teammates will always have answers,” Ishaq said.

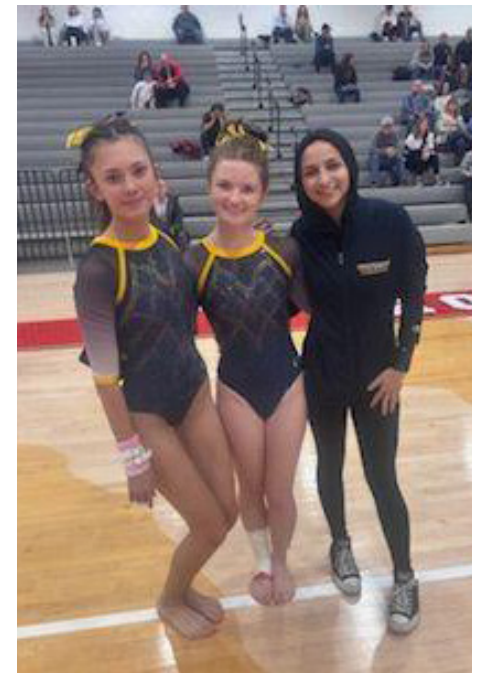
At the end of the meets, judges provide scores, giving out awards to those that scored well.

Closely bonded to the sport, the gymnasts highlight the impact of the sport on their lives, noting that the sport isn’t always about just winning, but also how it makes them feel.

“Ever since I was little, I’ve been energetic and found gymnastics a place where I could cool my mind and have fun,” Ishaq said. “Being able to throw myself around made me feel so free.”

Gymnastics is “its own little

world where every step you take matters,” Sulaiman said. “I feel like it is a part of me.” •



(Left to right) Valerie Lindquist (10), Ellie O’Brien (12), and Hidayyah Ishaq (12) pose together after their meet at Heritage on December 11, 2024. Lindquist placed third on vault and Ellie improved on her vault. Photo by Shannon Longendyke.

NJROTC orienteering places first in state tournament



Senior Andrew Wilson poses in front of one of the courses cadets will have to traverse in orienteering competitions. Wilson is one of several leaders on the NJROTC orienteering team. Photo by Octavian Ashford.

William Kluttz | Managing Editor

Earlier this school year, the NJROTC orienteering team achieved first place at the Area Four meet, similar to a state tournament for other sports. Orienteering had placed fifth at nationals in March of last year, after having placed in the top three the last three years. Nearly twenty cadets from the school compete in these meets.

The races consist of individual cadets being timed to navigate a forest with nothing but a topographic map and a compass. The courses range between 30 minutes and two hours, and can be more or less difficult depending on the terrain the cadets have to navigate.

There are a total of seven different course levels. If anyone gets lost, cadets have an app on their phone called What3Words to lead them to the finish line. They also have a whistle so that people can find them.

Preparing for these tournaments is a nearly all year round affair, with participants studying map routes and engaging in cardio to prepare for the timed events.

The cadets seem to enjoy the events. “I have a great time hanging out with the team and joking about past courses that we ran,” senior **Octavian Ashford** said.

Ashford recently committed to the Naval Academy, where he will continue to carry the skills he and his many teammates have learned through orienteering. •

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Captains Playhouse invites audience to determine the outcome of the fall play

Taylor Helfer | Editor-in-Chief



On November 15-17, Captains Playhouse performed “Murder’s in the Heir,” directed by faculty adviser Nathan McGraw, and additional directors Jessica Carington and Kyle Chua. In a classic “whodunit,” family members fight for fortune after the suspicious death of a wealthy family member. The play includes the character Gene (played by freshman Max Pepper), a fictional director who interrupts the play to address the actors.

(Top) Simon Starkweather, played by sophomore Eli Kaywork, delivers his humorous monologue surrounding his health and wealth as members of the family gather to listen. Starkweather’s family and staff of the Starkweather Estate become angered by a sudden switch in Starkweather’s heir.

(Middle left) Freshmen Eddie Moshrefi, Daniel Moore, Eli Poggi, and Jordi Mitchell discuss who they think the killer in the play is. Audience members were given a ballot which they use after Act I to determine who they think the killer is. After the ballots are

counted during intermission, the character with the most votes will play the part of the murderer.

(Bottom right) Sophomore Emma Barts, playing Rufus Jones, voted to be the killer on the first night, delivers a monologue describing Jones’ tactics. In the following performances, the killer was voted to be Nancy Pollard, played by junior Hannah Blazier, then Paula Thompson, played by senior Frey Williams, and Bensonhurst, played by senior Jamie-Faye McKnight.

(Bottom left) Cast members (left to right), including senior Frey Williams, sophomore Grace Allred, freshman Sami Pearson, junior Nate Wolf, sophomore Eli Kaywork, sophomore Emma Barts, junior Carson Phillips, senior Amaris Paranjattu, freshman Milania Ruparelia, junior Keira Pulley, and senior Jamie-Faye McKnight take a bow on the first night of the show in addition to commemorating crew members working behind the scenes. All photos by Taylor Helfer.

Student musicians perform at winter concerts and performing arts showcase

Berek Harrison | Editor-in-Chief



(Left to right) Junior Ryan Oates, senior William Pham, senior Kaya Banks join the guitar students in a semi circle on the stages part of the Performing Arts Showcase, which was attended by students and staff on December 17, featuring guitar, band, choir, and orchestra.



(Left to right) Sophomore Vish Venkateswaran, senior Maddie Jansen, sophomore Shannon Amos, freshman Brayden Gichini, junior James Sutter, freshman Alex Hernandez play saxophone. The band performed as the last group in the December 17 performing arts concert. The concert was held as part of the spirit activities before winter break.



Orchestra students perform Christmas themed songs with the conducting of orchestra teacher Matthew Trkula. Some students are wearing Santa hats to match the holiday vibe. During the concert they performed a number of songs including “Christmas Time is Here” by Lee Mendelson and Vince Guaraldi, “Last Christmas” by Georgia Michael, “A Mad Russian’s Christmas” by Paul O’Neill and Robert Kinkel, and more.



The chamber choir, each wearing a blue tie or dress, stands with former choir members from the audience while they perform Christmas and holiday songs. The chamber choir was one of a collection of choir groups that performed during the winter choir concert.



Junior Nilson Gomez performs cello during the orchestra winter concert. The orchestra features violins 1 and 2 and viola. All photos by Berek Harrison.

Seniors reflect on importance of music following involvement with North Central Senior Regional Orchestra



Seniors Felicity Banner and Pierson Lee perform on stage. Both Banner and Lee were asked to play music as part of the string quartet for the choir concert on December 12, 2024. Photo by Berek Harrison.

Karan Singh | Managing Editor

On November 8 and 9, 2024, seniors **Pierson Lee** and **Felicity Banner** participated in the North Central Senior Regional Orchestra (NCSRO), an audition based orchestra comprised of the top musicians from the region. The two-day event consisted of a rehearsal on day one, followed

by a concert the next day.

The audition process was made up of three components: excerpts from a prepared piece, scales, and sightreading. Seniors spent weeks preparing and perfecting their skills for this audition. Those accepted into the program highlighted its many benefits.

“It was a fantastic experience. I got to meet so many talented

musicians from across the region and play pieces I’d never encountered before,” Lee said. “Everyone in the orchestra was so passionate and dedicated, which made the experience even more enriching and exciting.”

Orchestra and Guitar teacher **Matt Trkula** emphasizes the skills necessary for NCSRO, and highlights how Banner and Lee both exhibit these qualities.

“They are always an example with their ability to play everything we work on, their demeanor in rehearsal, and their attitude towards music and teamwork,” Trkula said.

Banner and Lee both play violin, having harnessed the ability to play even the most difficult pieces through relentless practicing over many years.

Banner was just six years old when she picked up the instrument.

“I talked to my mother and she said that something resonated with me about it and that I just liked it,” Banner said.

Lee, on the other hand, recalled that initially, he chose to play the violin after being influenced by his friends, who also took a similar interest in the instrument; however, he did not like it.

“Everything was really squeaky and hard to get the right intonation,” Lee said. “But over time, I fell in love with the instrument, its tone and sound.”

The rewarding feeling of taking a challenging piece, practicing it, and then playing it and making it sound good is also something that Lee admires about the instrument.

With music taking up a sig-

nificant portion of their lives, the seniors highlight its importance in their day-to-day routines.

“My life is built around it,” Banner said. “Everything I do works around my lessons, performances, rehearsals, gigs, and studios. Everything revolves around music.”

Lee focuses on the relaxation playing music brings him.

“It has a way of centering me,” Lee said. “It’s also been a way to express myself, connect with others, and find moments of joy in my everyday life.”

As she continues her music career, Banner recalls the impact music has had on her life and others around her: “Music helps kids grow. It’s a great discipline.”

Lee encourages those interested to pick up an instrument, create music, and to come together as a community and make something positive out of it.

“People say music is a universal language and that it brings everyone together, and personally, I find that to be true,” Lee said.

Trkula also shares the importance of the arts: “Art makes life beautiful. Art makes buildings, movies, the songs we love, the books we read. It is all art. Some of the greatest achievements of humankind have been in the arts.”

An avid musician himself, Trkula spotlights the essence of music and the arts and their important role in shaping society and everyday life.

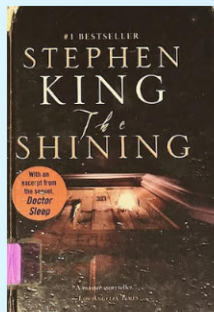
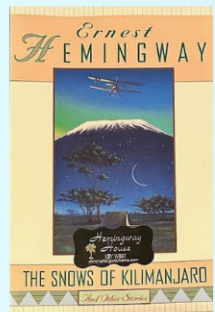
“Art is essential to our existence and our culture, and without it, we have nothing,” Trkula said. •

5 books to cozy up with this winter

Scarlett Ashford | Copy Editor

“Dash & Lily’s Book of Dares” by Rachel Cohn & David Levithan

If you are a fan of niche literature references and comedically pretentious writing, then this book is the one for you. Set in New York City during the height of the Christmas season, this book makes for an adorable romantic comedy with an intriguing concept to get you reading, and quirky characters that make you stay till the end. As a bonus, catch the show on Netflix.



“The Shining” by Stephen King

Horror books are some of my favorites, and this classic definitely does not disappoint. King sets up plenty of foreshadowing which leaves us on edge, eagerly waiting to see what happens next. The writing style is quite unique, and I had to read some sentences multiple times because of their structure, but the plot and characters are so elaborate you truly become engrossed in their encounters at the Overlook Hotel.

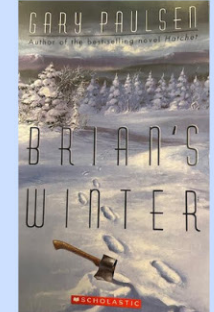
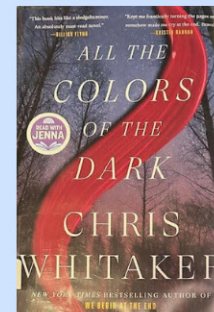
“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” by Ernest Hemingway

Although this 1930s short story has no relation to winter beyond the mention of snow in the title, it still acquires winter’s feelings of coldness and despair. This provocative telling of a man and his life provides the perfect opportunity to question our priorities and how we spend our time. Perfect for a read by the afternoon fire, this story will leave you pondering long after you have finished its 30 pages.

“Brian’s Winter” by Gary Paulsen

This book is the quintessential winter survival story. Full of vivid imagery, this book truly transports you to the picturesque, yet cruel Canadian winter.

It is perfect if you are looking for a quick read with plenty of twists and turns. Just know that this book is the sequel to “Hatchet,” so if you would like to read the original first, then go ahead. However, it is not necessary to read the original to understand or enjoy the sequel.



“All the Colors of the Dark” by Chris Whitaker:

This book is one where you have to sit, wait, and absorb all of the information you’re being given, even if you don’t quite understand it yet. Filled with gorgeously relatable metaphors and a touching relationship between two kids, you will slowly wade through a story of mystery and emotion. Available as a new book in our school library, I would make sure to check it out if you are looking for small-town suspense.