



## An Open Letter to Abigail Spanberger

Dear Governor **Abigail Spanberger**,

We write to you to bring attention to the adverse impact of the phone policy recently implemented in our Commonwealth. As we believe, there is a disconnect between the students of Virginia and our political figures. We address you not as angered, capricious, phone-obsessed teenagers, but as students who have experienced and seen the policy firsthand.

Although we recognize that this state law aims to promote personal connection and academic growth, we feel that it targets our personal liberties by imposing on our free time, creates a difficulty for staff in their ability to be confident educators, and, as student-journalists, hinders our ability to properly execute our journalistic passions in our school community.

Prior to this change in policy, the expectation was that we put away our personal devices during class, but we had freedom to use our phones during non-educational periods of school. This policy promoted student well-being and class participation, but still allowed us to engage with our community, and was overall beneficial to building healthy habits—an idea that we feel most students can agree on.

Until January 1, our district allowed teachers the freedom to direct students to use phones under supervised conditions for academic purposes. This included students using phones to film videos for school projects, and for us, it enabled the use of phones to record interviews for journalism, access social media for research purposes (most organizations at our school post their updates on social media), and create our own posts for social media.

As individuals who recognize the sheer importance of education in our lives, we understand the value that comes with responsible phone usage, a habit we each learn on our own. With the school enforcing policies such as this one, even students who have healthy routines with their personal devices are having to comply.

For example, during lunch, many of us choose to shut off our phones and interact with those we sit with. But, what truly stimulates student interaction and communication during lunch and the passing moments between classes are phones, especially when there are big school events coming up, like homecoming or prom. Certain clubs (which, might we add, already foster interaction), our own student government, and communication from administrators stems from technology. The school has already created a community online, and it's not necessarily one that can be taken away.

There are also students who turn to their phones as a safe space, including introverts who aren't necessarily comfortable with or don't know how to foster those connections. Taking away students' phones is taking away this very essential safe space that many rely on.

Students not being permitted to have their phones during lunch or even during the five minute transition periods before classes effectively prohibits us access to our parents (especially in cases of transportation arrangements or illness), siblings, and even employers. In the case that we need to get in contact with any of these aforementioned individuals, we don't even have the freedom to do so. That's a violation of our rights.

"Friends aren't going to manifest in the absence of phones," said past County Chronicle editor and current University of Virginia student **Evelyn Kuzminski**. "The state officials, the state legislatures, and the educational administrators have put so much thought into this, but that's just not how it works. Phones aren't the obstacle that they think they are to the connection [between students and administration]."

The state law, forcing us to follow their policy with this usage, completely pauses the establishment of healthy habits, which stand tall throughout the rest of our lives and support us in becoming responsible adults. A palace without pillars has the danger of falling apart; hindering students' ability to create meaningful phone habits and routines on their own dangerously impacts their futures.

On the other hand, we students are not the only ones having to comply with this concerning policy; teachers have also expressed their anxieties.

Teachers have enough responsibilities, with little time in between classes, grading, and planning to enforce phone laws or manage behavior. While we have other staff, such as school resource officers, to monitor behavior, there is simply no real way (or time) to effectively enforce a law as extensive and controlling as this one.

While they already do not get paid enough, teachers are now also having to adhere to such policies by supervising students during class transition periods and lunch (times of the day where they should have time to run to the bathroom, eat, and prepare for their next class), which not only creates a much greater workload for them, but also hinders their ability to provide feedback to students in a timely manner by imposing on time they can use to grade our assignments.

Additionally, our core classes have the technology to support their curriculums. Our elective classes often do not. For example, at our school, journalism is offered as an English elective class, through which a group of student-journalists work hard each quarter to put together a print issue of our school newspaper. All of our staff would agree that our phones assist in our lives as student-journalists in a profound and highly meaningful way.

Saying that we use our phones for everything would be an understatement. These devices are with us when we brainstorm ideas for articles and stories that need to be covered, taking notes, recording and transcribing interviews, and doing background research using apps such as Instagram and X—both of which are blocked on our school computers—to assist in this process.

Most importantly, our phones' easily accessible voice recording apps make it almost no work to conduct interviews and upload them to our Google Drives.

When identifying people in photos, social media is often our primary source of information; we are able to use our phones to support our schoolwork and promote the integrity of our school newspaper. Social media and our phones are the easiest way to get in contact with people.

In short, phones have become a tool that allow us to be productive. We have in our pockets the power of a recording studio, a photography studio, and a library, and because our phones are usually fairly upgraded, we always have access to the latest technology to help us stay current with trends in productivity.

Or, at least, we did.

To combat the disappearance of our phones in class, the journalism classes in Loudoun County are being provided ten voice recorders each, which cost an estimated \$100 each, costing the district upwards of \$20,000. Where this budget comes from, we do not know. But, as student-journalists who have already asked our administration and school board for additional technology and been told that funds did not exist, it feels absurd to learn the district was forced to find money for these voice recorders which can barely replace the technology we already own.

As journalists who have interviewed members of and been involved in our school community, we fully believe in promoting social interaction and communication between students, but such things can be done without completely limiting our access to phones. Phones are a reality of life, and teaching students how to use them responsibly is essential. In the workplace, employees need to know when they can and cannot access their phones. They need to know when phones can be a tool and when they will be a distraction. We cannot learn this when our phones are prohibited at all times.

We want to emphasize that creating a focused and distraction-free learning environment was already underway with the previous phone policy adopted by our district, when our phones were only put away during class. Students and teachers alike applauded this policy. Enforced at the school level, it provided students with a distraction-free academic environment while allowing them some freedom between classes and at lunch.

A good policy has implications that improve the lives of those it impacts. It is evident that this new policy does not do much to promote student interaction or educational growth, but rather hinders it in a way we did not even imagine possible.

As students who truly value our time at school, we humbly ask that our liberties not be taken away by putting an end to this state law banning our phones and returning to the system that was in place prior to it. Please give us the tools we need to be successful journalists in high school and beyond.

We hope to hear back from you. •

Sincerely,  
Taylor Helfer & Karan Singh, editors-in-chief

## America has an ignorance epidemic

*Taylor Helfer | editor-in-chief*

The most recent example of ignorance amongst media-consuming Americans has revolved around the 43-day long government shutdown. Failing to take into account the actual harm done to millions of Americans, partisan rhetoric has supported those who have continued the shutdown and has disparaged those who have acted against it.

For example, the media called for Democrat **Tim Kaine**'s resignation shortly after voting with Republicans to end the shutdown. Several commenters called for his resignation, touched on his lack of loyalty to the Democratic Party, or simply made the claim that he "gave into fascism" after months of failed attempts by Democrats to fight the current administration's actions and effort to cut medical care provisions and spending. What they fail to understand is that this same shutdown notably prohibited 850,000 Virginians from getting SNAP benefits on November 1, forced delays or cancellations in a majority of Virginia's airports, and furloughed an estimated 38,100 federal workers living in Virginia.

Like any teenager, I've enjoyed scrolling through my favorite social media sites, especially to follow the complex world of politics. But what used to entertain me for hours on end now leaves me hateful and frustrated. Instead of being able to enjoy social media, I've grown to resent the ignorance it has instilled in Americans.

As a true legislator, Kaine worked for the people. Rather than letting his constituents work without pay or live without the very benefits they need to survive, he did something about it—something that all Americans, regardless of party affiliation, have wanted since the beginning of the shutdown.

Similarly, several X users spread rumors, for the purpose of showcasing users' ignorance, about New York City mayor-elect **Zohran Mamdani**, claiming that he will be requiring public schools to teach Arabic numerals. However, the provocative statement is pointless: we always have and always will teach the same system of numbers that Arab scholars spread centuries ago. We recognize them as the numbers one, two, three, and so forth.

Comments and behaviors such as those online only display the growing ignorance plaguing the American public.

While there is no way to tell when ignorance began to be such a problem amongst the public, weaponized incompetence in elected officials could certainly have been a model. The earliest trend of ignorance began in the 1970s with the Republican Party using it as a political tool to spread misinformation towards the other side. This trend was then exacerbated in the 2016 election by both **Hillary Clinton** and **Donald Trump**, taking to social media to say petty and provocative things about each other's character and policy.

Even in Congress, elected officials shift blame onto the other party, further separating the two parties in an already extremely divided country. They may even exploit procedures, like forcing a rereading of a long bill. In many cases, and in many of the clips seen online, legislators seem unprepared, making unreasonable arguments that prohibit any real legislation from happening.

Simply put, it's bad politics. It's embarrassing. How can one call themselves a politician if they cannot care enough to educate or compose themselves in a professional manner? How should we as the public be able to trust them?

Other times Americans will selectively choose which facts and which media outlets they get their information from. Confirming your own biases and dismissing others only exhibits your own ignorance.

While we cannot control others, we can control our reactions and the way we handle provocative media.

If you see a headline and it catches your attention, the news outlet did their job. They are trying to evoke emotion. Look for other media outlets, ideally ones on either side of the political spectrum, to search for an objective truth. Especially if you feel anger towards a topic that you do not know much about, it's important to take the time and research it.

Then, especially after taking the time to cool off and educate yourself, make an informed, researched comment. •

## Samantha Fulnecky's atrociously written essay completely lacked critical thinking

*Karan Singh | editor-in-chief*

Oklahoma University junior **Samantha Fulnecky** wrote a paper for her psychology class attempting to answer a prompt that asked students to compare gender capacity and its impact on behaviors and norms. In her essay, Fulnecky spoke on the Bible's interpretations of genders, stating that men and women were created differently for a reason and that teasing as a result of low gender capacity is totally normal.

Fulnecky received a grade of zero on this essay. Her professor's comment stated that she was deducting points because the essay "does not answer the

questions for the assignment, contradicts itself, heavily uses personal ideology over empirical evidence in a scientific class, and is at times offensive."

Due to the bad grade, Fulnecky filed claims of illegal discrimination and even took to organizations such as Turning Point USA to express her concerns, and the professor was eventually fired. A very politicized issue, Fulnecky's grade was not a matter of science versus the Bible, but rather poor writing. Although her opinion completely contradicts my own personal beliefs, I think with support she could have made valid arguments for her cause.

According to **Sara Pequeño**

of USA TODAY, "It shouldn't be controversial to say that a poorly argued paper with no scientific reasoning behind it should receive a bad grade."

So for her and other conservative "officials" to label this (highly normal) incident of an essay receiving a failing grade a case of "discrimination" is absurd, especially following Oklahoma University's suspension of the professor who graded the essay.

As a senior who has taken advanced placement English-level courses for the past two years, I have learned how to write a sophisticated and complex essay and the importance of doing so. Fulnecky's paper lacked both

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### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The staff of The County Chronicle welcomes guest opinion pieces and letters to the editor. Pieces should be less than 400 words and must be founded on researched fact. Any student, faculty, staff, or alumni interested in contributing to the newspaper should contact the adviser, Valerie Egger, at [valerie.egger@lcps.org](mailto:valerie.egger@lcps.org).

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as not only did the essay lack sources to support her claim, no specific evidence was provided. In short, the entire essay was one poorly-written opinion.

The professor provided three guidelines that the assignment was required to follow, and overall, the essay was graded out of 25 points: ten points for “a clear tie-in to the assigned article” that accompanied the prompt, ten points for presenting “a thoughtful reaction or response to the article, rather than a summary,” and five points for being “clearly written.”

Fulnecky begins by writing: “This article was very thought provoking and caused me to thoroughly evaluate the idea of gender and the role it plays in our society.”

For the rest of her introduction paragraph, Fulnecky highlights the idea that “God made male and female and made us differently from each other on purpose and for a purpose.”

Similar mistakes such as these, along with ridiculous sentences like, “Women naturally want to do womanly things because God created us with those womanly desires in our hearts,” are evident in pretty much Fulnecky’s entire essay; the whole piece of writing seems to come from the hands of a middle schooler in their very first English class.

Yes, these sentences were written by a junior in college. No,

they are not easy to read. Yes, the entire essay is constructed of sentences such as those above. No, Fulnecky did not receive the five points that were only given to clearly written essays.

The wording of Fulnecky’s paragraph insults those who do not share her beliefs while at the same time fails to provide supporting evidence. When her professor said that the paper was at times offensive, this is likely what she meant. A better argument would acknowledge opposing viewpoints and use factual evidence to support the claim while acknowledging counter claims.

Overall, Fulnecky’s essay doesn’t even mention the article that was to be discussed along with the prompt. Here, ten points can be deducted due to a clear straying away from the rubric’s first requirement.

As Fulnecky’s essay progresses, it is evident that aside from the Bible (which also was not properly cited in her essay), little to no research was conducted that led to her conclusions.

The second set of points from the rubric could have been obtained had the writer considered providing a thoughtful response to the article that was to be read with the prompt, and supported those arguments with reliable and scientific sources. The sheer lack of credibility in Fulnecky’s essay alone could be the reason why these ten points were not given

to her; however, upon further glance, one can also notice that there is also a total lack of critical thinking in her writing.

Her simple claims, while presenting an argument that could have been backed by many significant resources, were scarce of any sort of critical thought.

In order to gain the final five points, the essay must be “clearly written.” An essay that is clearly written is built not only on varying syntax and professional diction, but also support. Due to the fact that Fulnecky’s essay contains almost no support for her argument, her claims do not come off as “clear,” as it may be hard to understand what she is saying. Again, had Fulnecky researched her topic and provided evidence from reliable sources, she would have received these five points.

All in all, Fulnecky’s article contained a total lack of critical thinking, was a general reaction to the topic instead of an actual compelling argument that addressed the prompt, and did not tie in the article that was a requirement to read alongside the prompt. It seemed as if Fulnecky simply did not want to address or discuss facts that contradicted herself.

I heard about a student who did not want to read a text that contradicted their religion, and a teacher at my school had a fantastic response. She said that one’s belief in their faith should be

strong enough to be tested.

Fulnecky’s arguments, with references to the Bible, should have included at least a counter-argument, acknowledging evidence that refuted her beliefs. In an attempt to gain complexity, it would have been in her best interest to then consider these refutes and provide rebuttals that further shaped her opinions and views, maybe even including more than just one source to support her ideas.

One could sit all day and point out flaws in just Fulnecky’s writing style alone that led to the zero she received.

Fulnecky claimed that her main motive behind writing the essay was to “encourage other Christians to stand up for their beliefs,” an idea that wasn’t even asked about in the essay’s prompt.

Fulnecky cannot write a terrible essay, and then blame her transgender professor for being discriminatory after giving her a failing grade. Had she adhered to the assignments rubric, provided more than one source for her evidence, and actually created an argument worth debating, it is guaranteed she would have received a better score.

It seems as if it’s in the best interest of Oklahoma University to move their attention to teaching grammar rules and essay writing techniques, rather than firing their staff for simply doing their jobs. •

## Suspending vaccine mandates threatens public health

*Taylor Helfer | editor-in-chief*

According to Florida Surgeon General **Joseph Ladapo**, Florida plans to be the first state in the nation to cancel all of their vaccine mandates for all public school students K-12. His beliefs gained support from Health and Human Services Secretary **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.**’s who questions the necessity of vaccines, and their impact on other issues, such as rising autism rates, mental health issues, or chronic health issues.

But as a doctor, who took an oath to “solemnly pledge to consecrate [his] life to the service of humanity,” Ladapo is actively endangering America’s children and setting a precedent for other state governments to put their own convictions before the lives of the people they serve. While his statement does not disallow students from getting vaccines, it strongly encourages that they are not necessary, in turn making schools more unsafe.

Most recently, CDC officials changed the childhood vaccination schedule, recommending that chil-

dren do not have to be treated for rotavirus, hepatitis A and B, and the seasonal flu.

According to the CDC, as of January 6, the most easily transmissible, yet preventable disease, influenza (the seasonal flu), has had a 7.1% increase in cases just this week. There has also been a spike in patients admitted to the hospital in the 2025-2026 flu season.

As early as 1796, doctors and scientists have created vaccines that introduce weakened bacteria into the human immune system to allow the body to build antibodies. According to the CDC, if one gets treated with a vaccine, there is less of a chance that they get that disease. If one chooses not to, they open themselves up to a variety of illnesses.

As an example, in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, smallpox was spread throughout the Americas, with around 300 million deaths in the 20th century alone. However, in the 1850s and into the 1900s, the smallpox vaccine spread and became mandatory in England, Wales, and the United States. On May 8, 1980, because of the wide-

spread availability of vaccines as well as the enforcement of vaccine mandates, smallpox was declared eradicated.

Although the World Health Organization (WHO) was mainly responsible for delivering mass vaccinations, it was only truly eradicated because national governments complied. In areas without a vaccine mandate, rates often drop well below the 95% “herd immunity rate,” meaning that fewer people are protected, and a disease is easier to spread, in the process infiltrating schools, leading to public health emergencies.

Given CDC guidelines, more and more parents have chosen not to vaccinate their children, who are considered “at risk.” According to the CDC, the percentage of vaccinated flu-related pediatric deaths is 11%, while the death rate for unvaccinated children is 89%.

In Boston, which, according to the Boston Public Health Commission, has a 135% surge in hospitalizations, there have been a total of four pediatric deaths just this season. Doctors in the commission have reiterated that vaccinations

decrease the risk of severe complications and should limit hospitalizations altogether.

However, a big focus of the commission is on the schools in the city. As a result of the rise in cases, school attendance has been low. But, it isn’t just children affected.

It’s their siblings, their parents, and it targets their teachers, too, especially those who are older. It creates a domino effect: low attendance leads to academic setbacks which can harm children long term. For siblings and parents, that could mean a week off of school and work, too. For teachers, this could mean a struggle to find a substitute and adequately teach their students.

So, meet with your doctors. Only they can make informed decisions on your health. Many doctors may suggest that you get vaccinated, and you must know that they are well-informed in science and medicine. Under the oath that they took, they will never intentionally put you or your health in danger.

Please consider the consequences of foregoing vaccines and of ignoring the recommendations of your doctor. •

# Students walk out in protest against ICE

Scarlett Ashford | managing editor

On January 20, around 100 students partook in a demonstration in protest against the actions being taken by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Several students voiced their opinions surrounding ICE's recent actions.

"I don't think that they should be authorized to attack people and harass them out of their homes to the deportation centers," senior **Kaumbi Mulwanda** said.

One example of this is when **ChongLy "Scott" Thao** was held at gunpoint by ICE in St Paul, Minnesota, and then forced into subfreezing temperatures without adequate clothing.

Although the demonstration was originally planned to take place outside, principal **Michelle Luttrell** announced that morning that the walkout would be moved inside due to weather circumstances in alignment with school policy. "We were in the single digits with the wind chill, so we followed what the policy was," Luttrell said.

Students were disappointed with

this decision, since the protest being held indoors would limit visibility.

"I think that it's stupid that the reason why they won't let us go outside as well is because it's too cold," junior **Lily Kingsolver** said. "It's cold, but if you believe in something or truly want something to happen, you don't care whether it's cold or whether there's something else going on that impacts it, you just do it anyway."

Students were also frustrated with other restrictions imposed by the policy.

"We're showing to each other that we care about the cause, but it's also not showing anything to society," senior **Nate Wolf** said. "No one's going to get the bigger message if we're not actively disrupting anything."

In accordance with Loudoun County Public School Policy 8273, student demonstrations must be held "during noninstructional time and in a manner that does not or is not likely to create a substantial disruption to school operations," and states the demonstration must be held in "designated area inside of the school or an area outside of the school that is not in public view." Furthermore, "signs,

flags, pictures, banners, and all other visual props will not be permitted."

According to Chief Communications and Community Engagement Officer **Natalie Allen**, noninstructional time is "any time where a student is not scheduled to be in a classroom receiving instruction from a teacher such as lunch or an advisory period."

At our school, student organizers and school administration agreed that the demonstration could take place during the last 15 minutes of first block. "We had more staff in the morning available to help us if we needed it," Luttrell said. "And it was at a time that was of lesser disruption than at two o'clock, which tails into early release."

Student frustrations about this walkout are not new. *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), a case about high school students and freedom of expression, made it all the way to the Supreme Court. Several students were suspended for wearing black armbands in silent protest against the Vietnam War. Parents sued the school, stating that the suspensions were violating the students' freedom of speech. The Supreme Court ruled that

school administration could not limit freedom of human expression if it did not disrupt the learning environment.

However, in *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988), the Supreme Court ruled that school newspapers could not publish articles that were deemed inappropriate and were not sanctioned by the school administration. Arguments included the fact that the newspaper was an educational tool rather than a public forum of opinions.

Discourse surrounding how limited freedom of speech is for students has existed for decades. Regardless, both cases highlight the fact that school is primarily for education, not personal expression. In addition, students should conduct their demonstration in a peaceful manner that does not threaten or create confrontation with other students.

"You have a voice," Luttrell said. "We want you to honor your voice. We want to encourage you to find your voice, and to figure out what you believe in and to voice it. But we've got to do it in the right way. In a way that's not going to be disruptive or unsafe." •

# AI, babies, IQ optimization, controversy and blame: Will the next generation live up to grave expectations?

Abigail Cunningham | copy editor

AI is a prevalent but often foreboding topic given its tendency to spark contentious debate. In recent years, AI on the whole has received its fair share of condemnation and praise as it expands to provide virtual companionship and therapy in addition to various tactical tools such as summarizing and calculating.

But this is common knowledge. What many people don't know is that AI is also the catalyst for a new endeavour to screen for IQ in embryos in order to maximize the next generation's intelligence. This future generation's assignment? To rescue the rest of humanity from the AI their parents and grandparents created and indulged.

Pioneering this effort is nonprofit Berkeley Genomics Project and startups Nucleus Genomics and Herasight, among others. **Tsvi Benson-Tilsen**, founder of the Berkeley Genomics Project, is a big name in this fledgling industry. A renowned mathematician, he devoted years of his earlier career to conducting research in an effort to discover what, if anything, could keep AI in check as it continues its rapid development. His conclusion was that curbing AI's power and scope was simply not possible. Since then, he's directed his efforts toward making IQ screening more effective and widespread so that

20 years down the line, we can pass the buck on to the next generation.

The concept of breeding children to optimize IQ is still foreign to many. What does it really involve? Firstly, it's important to note that the process of screening for IQ, or any other genetic factor, is only possible in cases of in vitro fertilization. IVF is the process of removing an egg from a uterus and fertilizing it with sperm in a lab before implanting it back in the uterus to continue developing (in Latin, "in vitro" translates to "in glass"; hence, the embryo is fertilized in a petri dish rather than within the body). This is a common, although sometimes controversial practice among couples struggling with infertility due to health issues, biology, or age and it often involves the purchase of third-party sperm or eggs, and/or the hiring of a surrogate.

After the embryo is formed, the new technology allows prospective parents to "dig deep into the full genetic blueprint of their embryos before choosing which one to implant," in the words of the *New York Post*. These screenings yield information about the embryos' hair and eye color, their potential mental and physical health conditions, and estimated IQ, all of which is summarized in a "polygenic score." This process is repeated on approximately 10-20 embryos for each IVF cycle.

With this new information, pro-

spective parents then weigh the subjective pros and cons of each embryo in a given cycle, choosing one or two who fulfill their ideal qualities to actually implant. The remaining embryos are either frozen (often for decades), given up for adoption to a different couple, donated to scientific research and experimentation, or destroyed.

The hub of such startups is Silicon Valley, where technical advancements are often met with more acceptance than other less savvy locales and where the median household income is approximately \$138,000, way exceeding the national average which sits at \$83,730. This is significant, since companies like Herasight can charge up to \$50,000 for these screenings. Nucleus Genomics charges a modest \$6,000 starting price.

Tilsen asserts that the mainstream use of genetic engineering technology will result in exciting benefits: "Our children will be long-lived, will have strong and diverse capacities, and will be halfway to the end of all illness." The founder of Nucleus Genomics, **Kian Sadeghi**, stands by his company's mission, saying his ultimate hope is to "[empower] people with information that they can use to give their child the best start in life," according to *CBS Morning News*.

Critics, bioethicists among them, raise concerns about the ethics of such invasive screening, saying it shares eerie similarities with eugenics ideol-

ogy. Some posit that the cost alone could naturally result in a disproportionate "elite" class of wealthy, intelligent babies. Still others have qualms about its entanglement with IVF.

But is IQ screening even reliable? **Shai Carmi**, an associate professor for Statistical and Medical Genetics at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a developer for the prediction models themselves, conducted data-driven simulations to ascertain if the IQ predictions given by the models was indicative of real-life outcomes. He determined that the reliability of IQ screening, at the moment, is questionable. One Herasight customer, **Simone Collins**, reinforces the desire for a higher level of certainty in embryo testing, saying, "If grit and ambition and curiosity—if we had polygenic scores for those things we'd be much more interested."

Genetic screening has been around since the 1950s, but the introduction of IQ screenings and genetic modification technology into the mix has people asking questions. Tilsen emphasizes that for IQ screening and genetic modification in embryos to take off, it must be "a world that is beneficial, or at least acceptable, to a great majority of people." Only time will tell whether salvation from AI will prove a strong enough incentive for humanity to normalize this scientific venture. •

# Making history: football secures path to state championship after 71-year wait

Charlie Pizzarello | staff writer

The football team went to states for the first time in the school's 71-year history. The season was not as picture-perfect as it may appear. The team faced challenges of injuries and illnesses but ultimately pushed through to states. They showed the school that they could do something great.

The season was challenging. The team only has so many players to use, so when someone was down, it affected the whole team. Rather than giving up, they powered through and encouraged fellow players, so the morale would stay high.

"Do not underestimate your players," head coach **Matthew Reidenbaugh** said. This is one of the big things that Reidenbaugh learned from coaching this year's season.

The game that Reidenbaugh realized that they might actually have a chance of going to state was the game at Sherando High School. According to Reidenbaugh, the players trained for speed. This would be something that they would often work on, and even when they were going to the championship game, they still practiced the same.

Reidenbaugh says that the team worked really well together. That was a big part of why they succeeded this season. A lot of the players have been playing since their freshman year and they have

become a big family with all of the adults helping to provide per-game meals. They really care about each other.

The team went nearly undefeated for the season, going 9-1, defeating Tuscarora for the first time in two years, breaking Loudoun Valley's winning streak, and winning a nail-biter against Woodgrove ending 21-20 leading them to the Catoctin District Championship title.

After being featured in a segment on Fox News and being recognized as a Top 20 by The Washington Post's High School Football Rankings, the team made history, defeating Lafayette 25-23 on December 6 and heading to states.

Reidenbaugh, who was named All Catoctin District Coach of the Year, spoke about the team's dedication when things got tough. He shared a story about a player this past season who dislocated his arm during the championship game. The player proceeded to pop it back in and continued playing, even though they were losing by 36 points. This shows how much they were willing to put on the line to try and win this game.

The chemistry on the team in no way goes unnoticed. One way that the coaches do this is with teamwork and leadership. They do a summer camp where they teach teamwork and leadership, which they apply on the field during each and every game. It means every-



Luke Morrison kicked a field goal in the state semifinals on December 6 against Lafayette High School in the first quarter of the game, bringing the score up to 16-0. Photo by John Klimavicz.

thing to the team and shows the teamwork that they were putting into this.

Reidenbaugh said that making it into states was the end goal, and then they actually did make it to states. He continued saying he feels really great about how they did in

the tournament and feels proud of the success of the players.

The team's bond is stronger than ever, but it's not the only community that has grown. It's going to foster the spirit of Loudoun County High School community, making it stronger. •

## The crossword: January edition

Charlie Pizzarello | staff writer

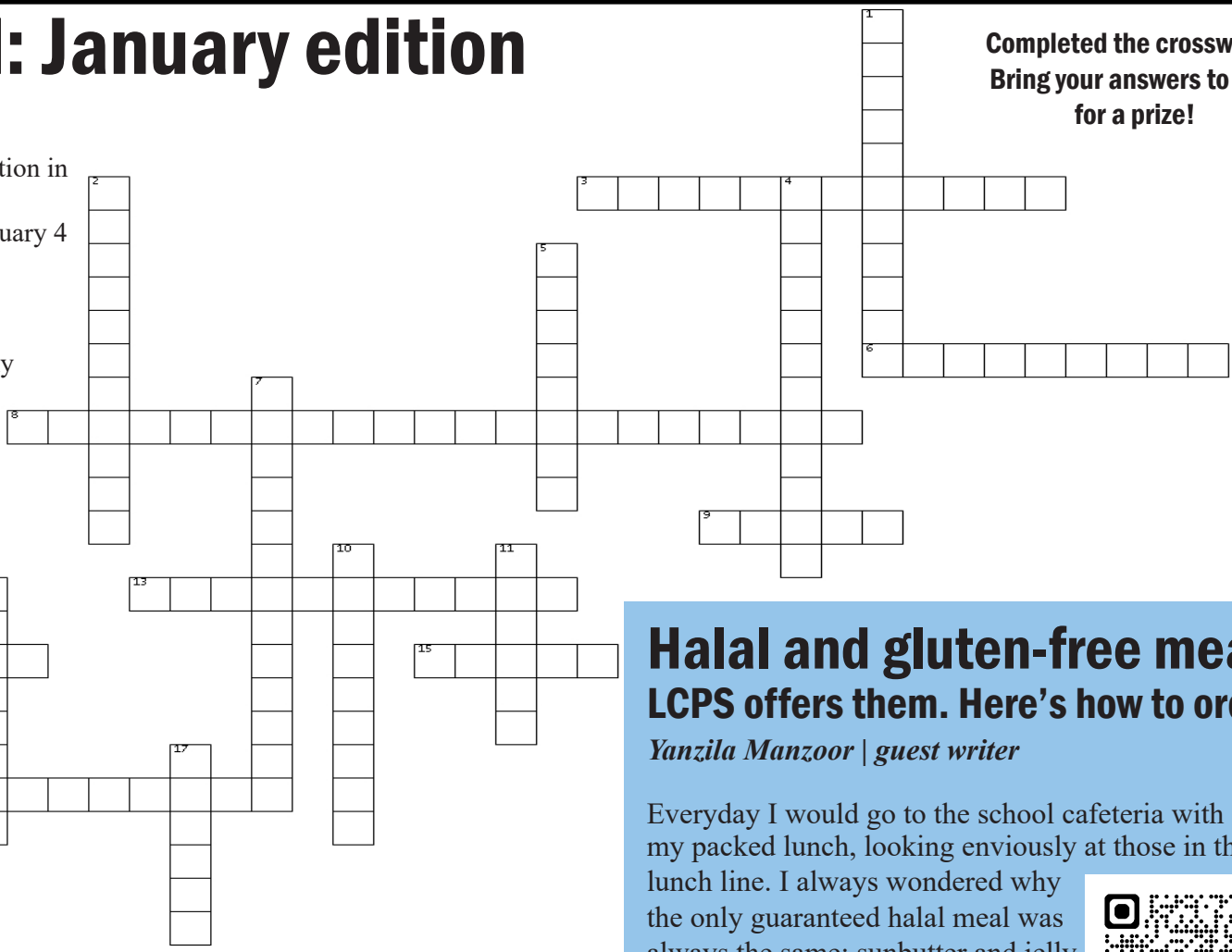
ACROSS

- 3. Abraham Lincoln issued this proclamation in January of 1863.
- 6. National \_\_\_\_ Day is celebrated on January 4
- 8. A federal holiday since 1983
- 9. Winter's icy grip
- 13. The first holiday in a calendar year
- 14. The full moon in January is commonly referred to as the \_\_\_\_ moon.
- 15. January is named after this Roman god of doorways and beginnings
- 18. What people make to better themselves, often at the start of the year
- 19. January was not included in the original Roman calendar, which had \_\_\_\_ months.

DOWN

- 1. The month of January is known for this display of meteors
- 2. King's most famous speech
- 4. Swearing-in ceremony
- 5. Zodiac sign for those born from January 20 to February 18
- 7. Said to bring good luck in the American South when eaten on New Year's
- 10. Zodiac sign for those born from December 22 to January 19
- 11. The birthstone of those born in January
- 12. A symbolic tradition in which a slow descent counts down the last of the year
- 16. A time for reflection and new beginnings
- 17. F. Scott Fitzgerald called January the \_\_\_\_ of months

Completed the crossword?  
Bring your answers to 203  
for a prize!



## Halal and gluten-free meals LCPS offers them. Here's how to order.

Yanzila Manzoor | guest writer

Everyday I would go to the school cafeteria with my packed lunch, looking enviously at those in the lunch line. I always wondered why the only guaranteed halal meal was always the same: sunbutter and jelly. I was furious to think that Loudoun County Public Schools does not provide halal meals to students who need them. **READ IT ONLINE**



## STUDENT LIFE

# A place to SimplyBe: Local business opens doors for those with disabilities

Abigail Cunnington | copy editor

If you've ever wandered around downtown Leesburg, you've almost definitely stopped by Gruto's Soft Serve, Sunflower Shack, or Second Nature Coffee. If not, I would just say the visit is worth it. Only recently did I discover yet another local gem. Snuggled next to The Chocolate Palette and The Clothing Closet thrift store is a pristine, unassuming coffee shop called SimplyBe.

SimplyBe Coffee got its start in December of 2020 with the aim to provide employment opportunities to those with dis-

abilities. In 2023, the nonprofit changed their location from the Shenandoah Square shopping plaza to Church Street in downtown Leesburg, a fitting address given the coffee shop's roots as a Gospel Enterprise of Tree of Life Ministries.

Tree of Life Ministries describes itself as a "Christian non-profit that works with local churches and the wider community to impact the poor and needy." Other initiatives they've headed since their founding in 2012 include Financial Coaching, Mentoring, Food Pantries, and Housing Ministry programs. Coincidentally enough, The Clothing Closet thrift store is

another Tree of Life branch that offers free clothing to families in need through the use of vouchers.

SimplyBe's stated goal aside from offering employment for those with disabilities is "to share the love of **Jesus Christ** with everyone who walks through [their] doors." With this effort in mind, they provide services beyond coffee and baked goods. They rent out their conference room for different occasions, provide a play area for kids to enjoy alongside the adults and are intentional about engaging in different fundraisers. Their website presents the option to donate to support their mission and help them expand beyond their

Leesburg and pending Purcellville locations.

The Leesburg location's manager, **Cheryl June**, shared that SimplyBe's mission resonated with her in particular since she has an Aunt with special needs. She says that working alongside individuals with similar challenges has given her a greater sensitivity towards them and their families. Moreover, she's proud to report that SimplyBe's "staff and volunteers find purpose, feel valued, and have become an integral part of the community."

June states that the employees at SimplyBe view "Each cup of coffee [as] an opportunity to encourage and uplift." •

# Winter pep rally offers exhilarating games

Karan Singh | editor-in-chief



SCA members, sophomore Megan Jolly (front) and senior vice president Caitlyn Kozowyk (back) prepare for a game of "hungry, hungry hippos" by placing balls on the ground. During the game, students will work in duos to act as "hippos" and put as many balls in their basket as they can. Photo by Karan Singh.



Freshman Shayaan Ashraf drags Freshman Nathan Fish, who is on a scooter, acting as the legs of their "hippo." In an attempt to win the game, the duo uses their basket to grab the most amount of balls. Photo by Karan Singh.



The Grinch claps in front of senior David Allen's face, making fun of Allen's defeat during a snowball fight. The game itself was a winter-themed version of the classic dodgeball game, where two opposing teams try to get opponents out by hitting them with a dodgeball. Photo by Karan Singh.

# NJROTC celebrates the U.S. Navy's 250th anniversary with the annual military ball

Ashleigh Whitlock | business manager



*(Top Left) (From left to right) Cadets Justin Johnston, Micah Wollam, Erik Buer, and Logan Deladurantaye present the colors of the flag for the pledge and national anthem.*

*(Middle Right) Guest speaker Vice Admiral Joseph D. Kernan, USN (Ret.), gives a motivational speech to the attending audience after being presented by cadets Evie Calvert and Kellan Boehret at the Lansdowne Resort.*

*(Bottom Right) Cadet Sydney Pugh announces the Naval Science 3 class as the winning decorative classroom. Every year, each NJROTC class decorates their room with inspiration from the Christmas holiday. The best decorated room receives honor and recognition during the military ball.*

*Photos by Ashleigh Whitlock.*



*Cadets freshman Hayden Kollma and senior Nik Scuric cut the cake in celebration of the Navy's 250th anniversary at the NJROTC's military ball, hosted on December 19, 2025. The NJROTC traditionally has the youngest and oldest members cut the cake. Photo by Ashleigh Whitlock.*



# ATHLETICS

## Question & answer with winter track seniors

Abigail Cunnington | copy editor

Q: Is winter track a means for you to condition for another sport?

A: "Winter track is one way I condition for crew...I don't care much about my distance as long as I'm getting stronger throughout the season." –**Kate DePrado**, shot put

"Winter is primarily used to build base fitness for a strong spring season." –**Gabe Cunnington**, long distance runner

"Speed is an important part of [softball], so in an effort to maintain that and stay in shape I've found that doing winter track is extremely helpful!" –**Abby Williams**, sprinter & long jumper

Q: What's your goal for this season?

A: "I really hope to break 5.20 [in the 1600] by the end of spring track." –**Fallon Murphy**, long distance runner

"[My] goal is to make states for some events." –**Grayson Shaner**, sprinter

"My goal is to get a personal record in the events I run." –**Connor Doherty**, long distance runner

"My goal for this season is to get all state: both individually and as a team in our 4x800 relay. Beyond this season would be to prepare well for college athletics." –**Carter Williams**, long distance runner

Q: What is the culture of the team?

A: "There's a great commu-

nity...It's a great way to try out the sport before committing to the spring season, which has a larger time commitment, and allows you to try out all aspects of the sport." –**Abby**, sprinter & long jumper

"It's a fun environment since the team is so small." –**Murphy**, long distance runner

"Everyone is supportive of each other, no matter what their skill level is." –**Doherty**, long distance runner

"The winter track team is an incredibly supportive and uplifting environment. I've met some of the kindest, most encouraging, and truly caring people through this team and I am very grateful for the time I get to spend with them." –**Mary Homa**, long distance runner

Q: Would you recommend it to other students?

A: "I would recommend it to people who don't care about the cold and want to stay in shape. If you can't handle cold don't do it." –**Matthew Berkey**, long distance runner

"Yeah I recommend winter track. Yes it's cold, but once you're warmed up and running under the lights, the vibe is unparalleled. Running during the winter, especially at night, is a totally different feel from other sports." –**Cunnington**, long distance runner

"I would definitely recommend joining the team. Most people on the team really want to improve and are committed to the team." –**Carter**, long distance runner •

## SPORTS BRIEFS

### VARSITY SWIM

Rand Harrison | staff writer

- 48 out of 54 swimmers had season best times on January 10 during an invitational at Claude Moore Recreation Center.
- Swim has six recorded wins and only one recorded loss so far.
- Sophomore **Fritz Lechelt** finished first in the 200 yard freestyle during the Briar Woods Invite, earning a state qualifying time of 1:46.84.
- During the January 17 meet against Woodgrove, the girls won 199-85, with a combined score of 314 (County) to 254 (Woodgrove).



Lechelt's favorite part of swimming is cheering on his team, and his favorite moment this year was winning the 200 yard freestyle at Briar Woods High School. Photos courtesy of @County\_Swim on Instagram.

### BASKETBALL

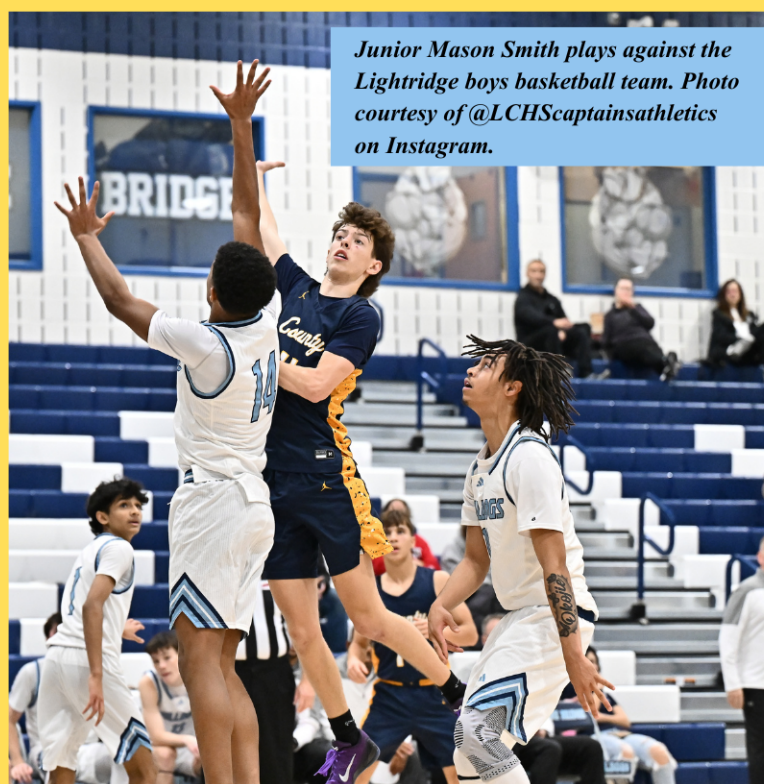
Matthew O'Hara and Rand Harrison | staff writers

#### GIRLS

Dec. 1 at Independence 59-19 W  
Dec. 2 vs Stone Bridge 57-25 W  
Dec. 5 at Forest Park 62-32 W  
Dec. 8 at Briar Woods 42-37 L  
Dec. 9 at Handley 53-36 W  
Dec. 15 at North Stafford 54-28 W  
Dec. 17 vs Lightridge 61-50 W  
Dec. 18 at South Lakes 58-34 W  
Jan. 6 vs Freedom 49-23 W  
Jan. 9 at Riverside 53-49 L  
Jan. 14 at John Champe 48-28 W  
Jan. 15 vs Heritage 36-30 L  
Jan. 21 at Loudoun Valley 55-52 W  
Jan. 23 at Rock Ridge 45-38 W  
Feb. 2 at Woodgrove 40-53 L  
Feb. 4 vs Broad Run 58-44 W  
Feb. 6 vs Herndon - 7:00 p.m.  
Feb. 10 vs Woodgrove - 7:15 p.m.  
Feb. 13 at Woodgrove - 7:15 p.m.  
Feb. 16 vs Rock Ridge - 7:15 p.m.

#### BOYS

Dec. 1 vs Independence 45-73 L  
Dec. 2 vs Stone Bridge 44-70 L  
Dec. 4 vs MacArthur 56-46 W  
Dec. 6 vs Justice 47-65 L  
Dec. 8 vs Briar Woods 36-62 L  
Dec. 17 vs Lightridge 32-53 L  
Dec. 26 vs Lake Braddock 43-66 L  
Dec. 29 vs Mountain View 67-72 L  
Dec. 30 vs Brooke Point 53-59 L  
Jan. 6 vs Freedom 43-70 L  
Jan. 8 vs Riverside 52-64 L  
Jan. 14 vs John Champe 46-52 L  
Jan. 15 vs Heritage 25-65 L  
Jan. 21 vs Loudoun Valley 64-62 W  
Jan. 23 vs Rock Ridge 55-45 W  
Feb. 2 vs Woodgrove 46-66 L  
Feb. 4 at Broad Run 44-75 L  
Feb. 6 at Park View - 7:15 p.m.  
Feb. 10 at Woodgrove - 7:15 p.m.  
Feb. 13 vs Broad Run - 7:15 p.m.  
Feb. 17 vs Park View - 7:15 p.m.



Junior Mason Smith plays against the Lightridge boys basketball team. Photo courtesy of @LCHScaptainsathletics on Instagram.

# Wrestling team duels against long-time rivals



Junior Rocco Zagorites mat returns his Woodgrove opponent. Zagorites came in first place at regionals last year. Photo by John Klimavicz.

Scarlett Ashford | managing editor

Upon entering the gym, the air is thick with tension, and the bustling energy threatens to explode as the two students battle it out on the mat. January 13 is wrestling senior night, and the varsity wrestling team is duelling against the rival Woodgrove varsity team.

The team boasted several wins,

including pins by freshman Bobby Wilson and junior **Rocco Zagorites**, wins by senior **Bryce Schnelzer** (9-1), senior **Lincoln Kelley** (18-2), and senior **Nizar Awad** (3-1).

They also recognized each of the senior wrestlers: **Nizar Awad, Andrew Dalkin, Griffin David, Eli Eastlake, Lincoln Kelley, Payton Politz, Will Ray, Bryce Schnelzer, and Randall Thompson.**

Three of the wrestling seniors will be wrestling in college. **Bryce Schnelzer** (Clarion University in Pennsylvania), **Justin Lowery** (United States Air Force Academy), and **Lincoln Kelley** (Virginia Military Institute).

Kelley became the first Captain to ever place at the Beast of the East tournament by placing eighth in December 2025.

“I’m not focused too much on winning rather than just scoring points,” Kelley said. “I imagine I’m in practice so I don’t put too much stress on myself.” He also placed eighth at the Escape the Rock tournament on January 17.

In February, the team will be traveling to Virginia Beach to compete at the VHSL State Wrestling Championship. •

Sports briefs, continued

## POST SEASON VOLLEYBALL

Ashleigh Whitlock | business manager

After a victorious three-month-long season, varsity volleyball played their final game of 2025 against the James Wood Colonels, earning the state runner-up title. For the first time since their decade-long streak of championship titles between 2011-2021, the team made an appearance at the state finals, indicating that varsity volleyball is back on the road to success.

The team’s head coach, **Sarah Mozeyko**, was awarded the region’s Coach of the Year. Mozeyko, however, credits her success to her supporting coaches—**Rachel Potts, Jamie Wiger, Aliyah Ramey, Rebecca Frey, Anita Serna, and Michaela Nameth**—stating, “these women truly help me be a better coach day in [and] day out.” The coaching staff encourages open communication between the coaches and athletes as well as rigorous training, aspiring to create a program that upholds a “high level of competition and standard of play.” Mozeyko expressed her deep appreciation and pride for the hardworking girls, particularly after witnessing them persevere through the strenuous season.

Senior **Isabella DeWan**, a libero and defensive specialist, broke a whopping four school records this season. She succeeded in the most career digs (1163), most digs for one season (478), most career digs per set (4.65%), and most digs per set for one season (5.9%).

DeWan takes pride in her achievements and appreciates that her hard work is being recognized during her final year of high school. She reflected on the collaboration and closeness of the team, saying, “All of these girls became family to me so quickly... I have never clicked so well with a team before.”



Charlotte Arlington diving in to save the ball with Isabella DeWan supporting her from behind. Photo by John Klimavicz.

# 'I have been changed for good.'

## 'Wicked: For Good's' emotional plot brings tears

**Karan Singh** | editor-in-chief  
**Scarlett Ashford** | managing editor

In "Wicked: For Good," animals, who have already lost their ability to speak, are being oppressed, and those in power are dictating the lives of their constituents. Although a fictitious movie, the themes echo unpleasant parts of our history and even conjure parallels of modern society and government.

With the return of the Wicked Witch of the West, **Elphaba Thropp**, played by **Cynthia Erivo**, Oz is in upheaval and "danger," as claimed by the powerful. **The Wizard** and **Madame Morrible** have obtained significant power, and with **Glinda Upland**, played by **Ariana Grande**, they are able to manipulate the public to view Elphaba as a source of evil.

Wicked is not just a story of an endearing friendship, but also a message on public oppression and government dictatorship. In "Thank Goodness," Glinda presents news of her and **Prince Fiyero's** wedding. She claims, "I couldn't be happier." Her lying throughout the majority of this song points towards the calculative nature of the powerful, and how those in charge often lie to get their way.

As a whole, part two lacked the melodic buoyancy and joy of its predecessor, which was anticipated: this movie covers a darker time in both Elphaba and Glinda's lives. Vocally, this film is greater and more developed, perfecting the delivery of its songs and also increasing the emotional impact of the musical.

For example, it's safe to say that during "No Good Deed," Erivo's portrayal of sheer regret and guilt, through song, was truly awe-inspiring.

During "For Good," the switch in melodic tendencies for Grande and Erivo provided another significant moment, as Grande usually sings the higher parts. In the franchise, it is said that the higher Glinda sings, the less truthful she is being. Here, one can take note of Grande's extraordinary illustration of Glinda's truth and honesty through her singing in her lower register, as she speaks to her best friend and finally confesses her feelings: "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good."

All in all, the soundtrack provides the deepest view into both character's increased maturity but would be easier to adapt if listened to all at once. To better un-

derstand and balance the emotions of the movies, we recommend watching both back-to-back.

Since the release of the franchise, its biggest criticism has been its length. While movie one runs over three hours, its successor is just longer than two hours; the movies are significantly longer than the Broadway production of the same musical.

As viewers who enjoyed the movies thoroughly, we did not notice the length, nor do we find it to be a negative. For those who are new to the franchise or are used to the shorter Broadway musical, which runs at about two hours for the entire story, the run time of over five hours may feel tedious. The filmmakers seem to prioritize plot, connections to the storyline throughout both movies, and elements of foreshadowing over viewers' time, and that decision may harm them in terms of finding new fans. However, we felt the film was overall enjoyable even considering its run time.

This movie focuses on Glinda's path to truly becoming "the good," a significant change for the character. During "Wonderful," Glinda still has hope in the wizard, as seen in her reprise of the "unlimited" theme and urges Elphaba to ally with them. But once her wedding day doesn't necessarily go to plan, a switch begins to occur in the character's behavior.

From minor details, such as perfecting the mannerisms of her character's day-to-day interactions with others, to her vocal performance during "The Girl in the Bubble," to her somber and melancholic overturn during the horse ride to Kiomo Ko, Grande's version of Glinda encapsulated everything necessary to bring her character to life.

Easily manipulated by the Wizard and Madame Morrible, however, Glinda's naivety and innocent disposition may have delivered a deeper message on the heavy influence of government propaganda. The green, ugly posters of Elphaba labeled as "wicked" and the bright, pink posters of Glinda as "the good" looked oddly familiar to those created by many in our government today.

Often, we become trapped in the biased advertisements and media online, a huge threat to our understanding of the world around us. If the information we consume is deceptive and unreliable, then those we vote into power will be, too.

Returning to Munchkinland



*A scene from "Wicked: For Good" featuring Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba Thropp (left) and Ariana Grande as Glinda Upland (right), sitting in a field after having become best friends. The movie continues Elphaba's transformation into becoming "wicked," but also highlighting Glinda's journey to becoming "the good." Photo courtesy of People.com.*

during the final moments of the film, all of Oz sings in unison: "No one mourns the wicked." Glinda, saddened by the death of her best friend, delivers a powerful message to those gathered around her. Now a renowned public figure and on the road to changing for the better, she vows to ensure that the elite will end their discrimination. Their steady corruption is halted by the re-entry of animals into the Emerald City, an integration similar to that of the late 1950s. The message here is clear, true, and applaudable: everyone is made equal.

Director **Jon M. Chu's** homage to the original Broadway production of "Wicked" ends the movie when Glinda is seen whispering into Elphaba's ear as the sun sets behind the duo. This visual is a direct nod to the cover of the playbill created in 2003 for Broadway.

In an interview with "Variety," Chu revealed that "the girls got to choose what they are actually saying in the scene. I don't even know what they said." Keeping the whisper a secret between Grande and Erivo, between Glinda and Elphaba, strengthens their bond and promotes their sacred connection.

Overall, we gave part two a four out of five stars. Since Elphaba knew that poppy flowers have the power to put anyone to sleep, why couldn't she have just used those to her benefit? Madame Morrible is able to control the weather, so why didn't she apply these powers against her enemy? Though some of our questions were left unanswered, the sheer beauty of this movie cannot be denied.

This movie's lack of the certain sense of joy and youthfulness that part one contained was expected

due to the maturity in the main characters' lives and minds. Portrayed visually and cinematically darker than the first, movie two contained scenes of colorful splendor during its happier moments, while its angered and frustrated scenes were much more obscure.

For example, during the dark "No Good Deed" ending scene, Elphaba's rage and wrath is portrayed by fire and flames.

"We first see it when she starts the fire and the monkeys start flying around and lighting all the torches," cinematographer **Alice Brooks** said. "She's about to transform into the Wicked Witch of the West."

In a similar fashion, the color blue represented Elphaba and Glinda's friendship throughout the movies; the shade of blue of the moon during "For Good" is the same color used for the lighting in the first movie during the Ozdust Ball, when both girls first became friends.

Minor details such as this one, but also **Dorothy's** kicking legs as she is taken by the flying monkeys, or the slowing down of the confetti around Glinda as she sings "Thank Goodness" and comes to important realizations in her own personal life, are what make this movie so well put together and presented.

Nearing perfection, "Wicked: For Good" has it all: true love, hateful loathing, beautiful vocals, serene visuals, and unexpected plot twists. But most importantly, it leads to the conclusion of a true and grand friendship, capturing the essence of connections full of reverence and interdependence while delivering powerful messages that simply can't be ignored. •

# Captains Playhouse performs ‘Macbeth’

Taylor Helfer | editor-in-chief

From December 5 through December 7, Captains Playhouse put on the Shakespearean tragedy “Macbeth,” following the tragic hero’s spiral after receiving a prophecy from three witches. The play was directed by Nathan McGraw, Ashley McGee, Matthew Pepper, and Jessica Carrington. The play followed the structure of Shakespeare’s original, but with a fashionable twist, defying the original costume choices.



*Top: Lady Macbeth (junior Emma Nicholson) reads the letter from her husband which details the prophecy that Macbeth will be king, sparking excitement from her. Lady Macbeth was a source of manipulation in fulfilling the prophecy, as demonstrated in her plan to kill King Duncan. “It was unlike any role I’ve ever played,” said Nicholson. “Lady Macbeth is so intricate and nuanced. Trying to convey that nuance while also speaking in Shakespearean language was difficult to say the least, but a welcome challenge.”*

*Left Middle: Malcolm’s forces, disguised as trees, attack Macbeth (junior Elias Kaywork). “It was really fun going over that scene,” junior Jaxon Brown said.*

*Photos by Taylor Helfer.*



*Right Middle: Macduff (senior Carson Phillips) is held up by Lennox (freshman Isabella Soto-Diaz) after receiving news that his wife, Lady Macduff (freshman Ali Owens), and his son (freshman Ronan Karhuse), have been murdered following Macbeth’s orders. Macduff was portrayed as a loyal Thane who later grew weary of Macbeth and his actions.*

*Bottom: “Double, double toil and trouble.” The “Weird Sisters,” (senior Hannah Blazier, sophomore Milania Ruparelia, and sophomore Mina Sulaiman) conjure three visions for Macbeth: a warning about Macduff, a vision that he cannot be killed, and a prophecy that he will not be conquered until Birnam Wood meets Dunsinane Hill. Throughout the play, the witches deliver Macbeth’s prophecies which lead him to madness and push the audience to consider the theme of fate versus free will.*



*Photos by Taylor Helfer.*

# 'Speak up, I know you hate me.'

## Conan Gray unveils all his vulnerabilities on 'Wishbone'

Karan Singh | editor-in-chief

On a personal and true-to-self record, **Conan Gray** has come face to face with his magnum opus: *Wishbone*, an album that feels natural and well-formed, sewn together by threads of raw honesty and unapologetic desperation. It is evident that Gray has matured in both his life and his songwriting.

Taking on the persona of a sailor boy, this album follows a theme of luck and happenstance, weaving serendipity with layers of melancholy in each of its tracks.

"I think the album is more me than any I've ever made before," Gray said in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*. "I think that was mostly a result of growing up a bit...each year you're truly a completely, immeasurably different person."

Though personal growth and development are inevitable, how they impact relationships depends on the person themselves. On an album sparked by love, how this growth impacted Gray's relationship is put on full display.

Gray's wishbone has broken into two, and it's clear that he holds the short end of the stick.

### ACTOR

A steady and simple guitar brings this world to life as Gray recalls a summer spent "in a coat check." Gray is reminiscing on shared memories with his significant other that clearly held value for him. Upon hearing the chorus, however, it is clear that this relationship no longer exists.

"You've spent the summer drinking," Gray cries, "while I spent it being erased." He reveals how difficult life has become for him as he attempts to forget all the complex feelings attached to his lover's departure: "Let's pretend nothing happened... but you're a much better actor than me."

I first heard a snippet of this song on Instagram, when Gray was promoting his album before its release. To say that I was in awe would be an understatement; I'd never heard Gray sound so vulnerable and clear. It's something about the way the chorus builds and then immediately fades, mirroring the relationship Gray is referring to in the song, that is just so satisfying to hear.

### THIS SONG

The orchestra plays as a nostalgic guitar flows through this track; Gray is living in the past, a time that is utterly different from his present. Again, such a different production for a Conan Gray song, and I can't say I hate it.

"You know that I love you," Gray begins. "I have a feeling that you love me back."

Two simple sentences. That's all it takes to understand the purpose of this song. Gray is lost in the endlessly beautiful corridors of this love, a maze that has fully captured his whole being.

"I wrote this song about you," Gray admits as he lists casual things they did: driving around neighborhoods, listening to music that evokes certain emotions, and

"the smell of perfume," things that, as normal as they seem, defined this relationship for Gray and created an atmosphere of belonging and safety for him.

### ROMEO

"Romeo" is a nod to Shakespeare's play, "Romeo and Juliet." With drums and vocals that seem almost happy, upon further glance, the lyrics on this track are actually very dark. Gray admits that he waited for his lover (possibly to love him back) for a long time.

The song's theme of impatience takes inspiration from the play, as **Juliet** waited for **Romeo** in a similar way.

In this track, though still sour and sad, Gray says, "you're no Romeo," signifying that his lover did not mean nearly as much to him as he thought he did. Paying homage to the play yet again, Gray asks "where art thou?" As the song comes to an end, Gray confesses that he simply did not care enough about this relationship (maybe in a satirical way because he did end up writing a whole album about it), and says: "I can't fix you."

### MY WORLD

For me, this is one of the most important songs on the album, as it directly follows the storyline of the previous track and explores some very valuable themes. This track feels like a breakthrough moment, freedom that is found once we stop placing prestige on things that no longer matter. Gray states: "It's my world and it's my life. I'll waste it how I might like."

Along with lessons of letting go, this song explores a deeper message: "It's my girl and it's my guy. I'll kiss 'em if I might like."

As an LGBTQ+ artist, Gray uses this song to advocate for the equality everyone deserves, regardless of their race, sexuality, background, or religion.

In regard to the album, it seems as if Gray has shifted from longing for something that should be left in the past and grown into a more mature and newer version of himself. When reflecting on these past events, he makes it clear that they don't matter to him: "I don't care anymore."

### CARAMEL

This record pivots the album once again in a new way. The heavy production, drums, and rock star energy returns in a surprising manner, a shocker the first time I heard this album.

"Caramel" is part of the "Wishbone trilogy" of singles (including "This Song"). All three songs in the trilogy are accompanied by a music

video, which, once put together, tell the story of two characters named **Wilson** and **Brando** and their summer romance.

In "This Song," the boys spend the summer together, exploring their relationship and ultimately falling in love. A subsequent song illustrates the growing conflicts the couple face, prompting Wilson to leave Brando in the middle of the night and seemingly ending the relationship. "Caramel" concludes the trilogy by highlighting Wilson's life following the breakup and his resulting attachment issues.

### ELEVEN ELEVEN

Though this album does not have one of its own, I view this song as the "acting title track." For me, this track is a culmination of all the ideas, metaphors, and concepts of the album. Throughout the song, Gray references shooting stars, signs, clovers, "numbers from Heaven," horoscopes, "salt spilling over," black cats, broken glass, and cracks on the pavement. These are all common superstitions, and their interpretations vary from person to person.

On an album titled "wishbone," I think this song plays a huge role in delivering the idea of happenstance and luck, but also the heart break that Gray feels upon understanding that just like these superstitions, the love he felt toward his significant other may have also just been an idea of the mind.

For me, this song is one last "push," a final attempt to salvage what once existed of this relationship before Gray ends the album.

### CARE

On any album, the last track is just as important, if not more important, than the first. This is the final thing listeners hear before they've heard the record as a whole work of art.

On "Care," Gray makes a final confession: "There will always be parts of me that are yours." As hard as he's tried to forget and move on, he simply can't let go of everything that once consisted of this relationship.

Most importantly, Gray is reminiscing on the times before the relationship even began; he states that he won't miss being a lover, but he is "still losing a friend." He no longer wants to linger in the past, but it's really hard to bury his memories of the person he is singing about.

As the album comes to a close, Gray ends on a bittersweet note: "I tell myself that I'm over you, but I care." •

*Read the full album review on our website.*



On the cover for the album, "Wishbone," singer Conan Gray is seen leaping through the air with a wishbone over his shoulder. This symbol of luck provides fortunes to whoever breaks the wishbone and gets the longer end of the stick, ideas that are weaved through the album.