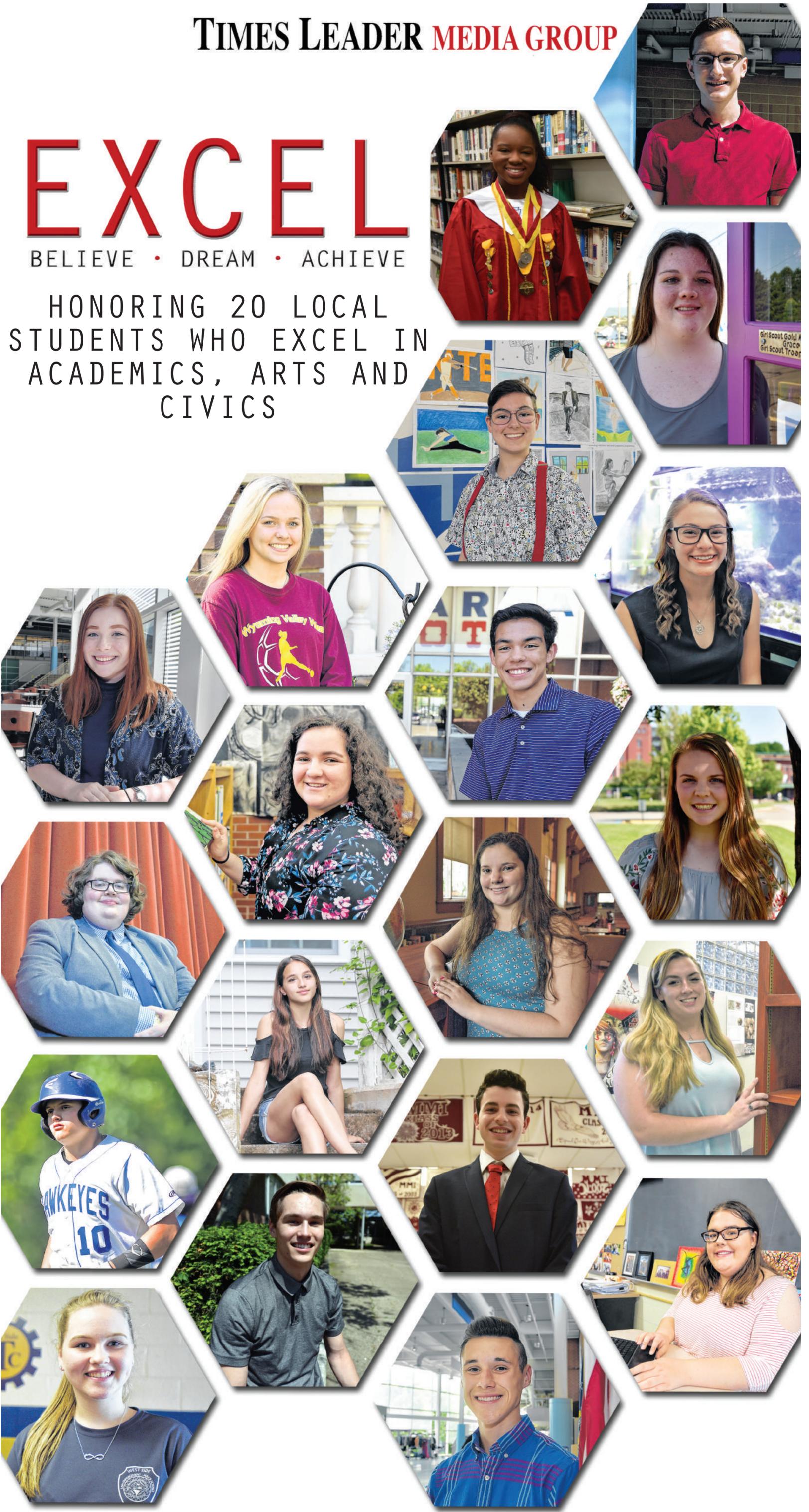


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20 local students who excel in academics, arts and civics
TIMES LEADER MEDIA GROUP

With so many local school districts in Luzerne County, and even more high schools, how could we not take the time to profile students that have achieved academic, community and athletic excellence?

Earlier this spring, we contacted each school district's faculty, administrators, guidance counselors and teachers to help find us the students we were looking for. That was the easy part. We are lucky to have so many bright young people in our area. The difficult part was narrowing down the selection to just 20 kids. It was tough! I hope you enjoy reading about the students we have selected for today's publication. This group of kids are going places, and we hope to catch up with them all in a few years to see what more they have accomplished! Congratulations to the students and their families!

By Kerry Miscavage, Advertising Director



THANK YOU
to all students who took the safe prom pledge to remain sober this prom season!



CONGRATS
to Dallas High School student Nikolus Gashi for another year of academic excellence!



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Audrey Aristeo

Age: 18 | School: Dallas High School | Hometown: Kingston Township

By Marcella Kester For Times Leader

KINGSTON TWP. — Despite being told otherwise, Audrey Aristeo is doing exactly what she wants.

In her case, that's pursuing a career in the art field.

The Dallas High School senior has an eye for the creative, and her talents — coupled with an impressive academic career evidenced by a 4.0 GPA — has landed her in the Excel special section.

"I deeply appreciate the recognition, and I am honored," she said of being selected.

The Kingston Township resident was nominated by her guidance counselor, whom the honoree says always encouraged her potential as a student.

After graduation, Audrey will attend Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Mass. She's planning on majoring in illustration and minoring in creative writing.

However, the student standout has faced her fair share of problems along the way, particularly regarding her health.

Audrey learned her lesson about maintaining good physical and mental health when she was in 10th grade. A months-long

bout of sleep deprivation sent her immune system spiraling. From there, she said she learned her limits and to take better care of herself, regardless if that meant laying off hours of studying or doing homework.

"I have learned to know my limits, and I have learned what happens when my limits are passed," she said, adding that students need to learn to get more sleep. "Education is important, but grades are just numbers, and we all get only one brain. Sleep is the most important thing in the world."

When she's not earning awards for her art, ability to speak German or the fact that she's managed to go her entire high school career earning cumulative A's, Audrey is busy spending her time in the Poetry Club and National Honor Society.

Another important honor Audrey has earned came in the form of two scholarships: one being the Fran Williams Head Start Scholarship Fund, the other the inaugural



Audrey Aristeo plans on pursuing a career in art.

Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Anna Jorda "Twenty Hands" Art & Creative Writing Scholarship.

While the honoree said she's had plenty of people attempt to sway her from her passion, Aristeo believes that fruitful careers can come in all forms. And that's a message she'd like to pass on to others.

"I've had lots of people tell me that art is not a steady profession, and art-related jobs are not gener-

ally high-income, so I should give it up. But it's what I love, so I'll make something out of it, if just by sheer, raw, passionate will," she said. "The world is big and your dreams aren't stupid. Make them happen."

She is the daughter of Abby Aristeo.

Reach the Times Leader newsroom at 570-829-7242 or on Twitter @TLnews.

Madalyn Arthur

Age: 18 | School: Dallas High School | Hometown: Dallas Township

By Eileen Godin | egodin@timesleader.com

DALLAS TWP. — Agriculture, horticulture and subsistence farming: Dallas High School senior Madalyn Arthur wants to do it all.

The 18-year-old has big dreams and has plenty of ambition to fertilize them, which is why she is one of 20 area students featured in the Times Leader's Excel special section.

"I want to leave behind a better world," Madalyn, of Dallas Township, said.

Arthur's interest in agriculture was an offshoot of her mother Susan's green thumb.

"I love to grow sunflowers," Madalyn said. "I would love to subsistence farm and have a colony of (honey) bees."

Subsistence farming is when a farmer grows all the food to meet his family's needs, Madalyn said.

"My mom is an avid gardener," she said. "That is one of the things that makes me want to study food science."

Food science is the study of food production and development. Madalyn will attend Penn State University in State College and plans to major in either food science, sustainable agriculture or horticulture.

However, gardening is not the only thing on her plate.

Madalyn is involved in a

variety of extracurricular activities at school, including being the captain of the Knowledge Bowl Team, which is a type of trivia group. She is also the president of the Diversity Club and was a witness for the Mock Trial Club.

She also is carrying two advanced placement classes, chemistry and English literature.

Madalyn also works as a tutor in math, biology and chemistry.

"I used to need a tutor, and I really appreciated others helping me out," she said. "I like to give back."

With all of those commitments, the teen still finds time to work part-time at Wegmans Supermarket in Wilkes-Barre and earn a spot on the Dallas High School honor roll.

"I've been at Wegmans Supermarket since 2015," Madalyn said, adding the work provides her with the opportunity to be exposed to a variety of foods.

"I tried a lot (of different foods)," she said. "Some I liked and some I didn't."

The experience inspired her to develop a fresh perspective on life.



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Dallas High School senior Madalyn Arthur, 18 of Dallas Township, plans to attend Penn State University in State College to study food science.

"I see something beautiful in everything in the world," Madalyn said. "I think if you try one new thing every day you will find out how many wonderful things there are in the world."

Madalyn is the youngest of nine children.

"I have a blended family," she said.

She has six sisters, Anna, 42;

Phoebe, 42; Nikki, 40; Erika, 39; and twins, Becky and Kate, 35. Madalyn also has two brothers, Matt, 38, and Damien, 36.

Madalyn said, jokingly, having all those older siblings makes it feel that she has nine parents.

Reach Eileen Godin at 570-991-6387 or on Twitter @TLNews.

Nicholas Barbieri

Age: 18 | School: Pittston Area | Hometown: Duryea

By Jimmy Fisher | jfisher@timesleader.com

YATESVILLE – Nick Barbieri Jr. is never one to sit back and watch life pass him by.

Rather, Nick takes life by the horns and gets involved with as much as he can.

The Pittston Area High School senior, and Duryea resident, has been involved with clubs and organizations such as Student Council, Zero Conflict Club, Pep Squad and more.

His biggest involvement was the National Honor Society, of which he served as president this past year.

“It’s really, really hands on with a lot of the things we do in the school,” said Nick, 18. “Whether it’d be behind the scenes where we do a lot of things as well as being the figure head for a lot of community service.”

Community service projects Barbieri mentioned were a Thanksgiving food drive, a luncheon for school board members and a children’s produce market at the middle school. All contributed to Nick being selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

He said his favorite project was the Thanksgiving food drive.

“The food drive is something we really like doing,” he said. “We’ve done that every year since I’ve been in National Honor Society.”

Nick was inducted his sophomore year, elected as representative his junior year and then elected president this year.

When he’s not doing community projects with his school’s clubs, Nick is competing on Pittston Area’s track and field and soccer teams.

He was named a captain of the soccer team his sophomore year, and maintained that status the rest of his high school career.

Nick admitted that he felt a little intimidated being named captain as a sophomore, when there were junior and seniors who played the game longer than he.

“I felt a little bit as though I had a target on my back being younger, and having people who have been on the team longer,” he said. “But, I didn’t see it as though I was above them. I always tried to play toward them and motivate them to be the best they can be. I took it as a chance for me to grow as a leader as well. I learned a lot from my teammates, and they learned a lot from me as well. I think it was a great experience for me to be captain at that age.”

Nick has excelled on the soc-



Nick Barbieri Jr. plans to pursue a medical degree.

Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

cer field, in the community and in the classroom, where he holds a 4.3 GPA. His schedule includes AP Psychology, AP Calculus, AP Chemistry, Biology II Honors and English IV Honors.

With graduation a few weeks away, he’ll be attending Drexel University in the fall to study to become a physician.

Nick said going into medicine goes back to his desire to help

people.

“Helping people is something that’s very important to me,” he said. “I try to get involved with clubs that are orientated to helping people, and I really think as a physician you have a special way of helping people, and that will make me feel good.”

Reach Jimmy Fisher at 570-704-3972 or on Twitter @SD_JimmyFisher

Olivia Burkhardt

Age: 16 | School: Wyoming Valley West | Hometown: Kingston

By Joe Soprano | jsoprano@timesleader.com



Olivia Burkhardt plans to pursue a science degree in college.

Tony Callaio | For Times Leader

KINGSTON – Like most 16-year-olds, Olivia Burkhardt is excited about learning to drive and earning her driver’s license.

Unlike most high school sophomores, however, Olivia had to put her driving lessons on hold while she recovered from a knee injury.

But considering the Wyoming Valley West student’s impressive resume, that’s one of the few things that’s been put on hold.

Olivia can list a host of accomplishments on the soccer field, in the classroom and elsewhere.

It’s those accomplishments that led Olivia to be selected as one of 20 area high school students to be featured in the Times Leader’s Excel special section.

The nomination form for Olivia stated her case simply, yet emphatically.

“Olivia is a hard-working, highly achieving, driven young woman,” it reads. “She is intelligent, an athlete, a leader, community minded and, in addition, has a sparkling personality.”

“I’ve watched her overcome adversity with grace and composure beyond her years.”

Her list of activities is impressive.

In addition to being her class’s vice president, Olivia is a member of student council, the Key Club, National Honor Society, National Spanish Honor Society, indoor and outdoor track team and Class of 2020 club.

“It’s really hard,” Olivia admitted when asked how she manages to participate in so many activities. “I do barely have time for myself.”

Still Olivia managed to squeeze time in to participate in the Marywood orchestra from 2014 to 2017, serving as first chair principal for violin two section.

She lives in Kingston and is the daughter of Brian and Rayleen Burkhardt. She has an older sister, Elizabeth.

Olivia said playing the violin and hanging out with “hanging out with friends” are two of her favorite things to do.

She hopes to pursue a science degree in college, perhaps in either radiology or physical therapy. She listed Bloomsburg, Misericordia and John’s Hopkins as colleges she would like to attend.

But still she is really an athlete at heart.

“I like to run a lot and just go to the gym,” Olivia said.

She had to put those pursuits on hold while she rehabbed her knee injury, which occurred during a winter soccer tournament.

However, she is no longer on crutches and working with a physical therapist to get back on the field.

“It’s really hard,” Olivia said of coming back from the injury. “I’ve had ups and downs, but my friends and family are really helping me.”

And with the crutches finally put away, that driver’s license can’t be that far off either.

Reach the Times Leader newsroom at 570-829-7242 or on Twitter @TLnews.

Atty. Lou Sciandra

Congratulates

Nicholas Barbieri and all of the Excel Award Recipients.

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Thalia Charles

Age: 18 | School: Holy Redeemer

By Patrick Kernan | pkernan@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE TWP. — For Thalia Charles, debating runs through her veins.

The 18-year-old Holy Redeemer graduating senior has been the co-president of her school's Speech and Debate Team since her junior year of high school, and she said it's opened up numerous opportunities for her.

"I think it's really interesting; you learn so much about how to communicate with people," she said. "I really value having good conversations with people."

Thalia said she first became involved with things similar to speech and debate when she did forensics in middle school, and figured speech and debate was a logical path from there.

It's a path that's been marked with success, as the Holy Redeemer team has participated in national competitions in New Jersey, Florida and California during her time with it, and will be traveling this year to a competition in Washington, D.C.

That's just one of the reasons Thalia was selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

Thalia said her role on the team has been an important one in her life.

"One thing I learned from being the president of the speech team is that there are always people who look up to you, seeking to emulate what you're doing," she said. "I want people to

be as passionate and articulate as I am; I'm trying to coach and mentor in everything they need."

Thalia will surely be using her speech and debate skills in her college studies — she will be attending Lafayette College in Easton in the fall to study two majors: psychology and government in law.

Saying that she was inspired by her teacher Mrs. Beviglia, who taught both AP psychology and AP government, Thalia said she hopes to blend the two majors to either work in criminal justice or as a civil rights lawyer.

When she's not working with her team, she's working as a content designer for Peer Lift, a nonprofit organization run by high school and college students seeking to help low-income kids get into college.

She said she's done everything with the nonprofit, from helping to redesign parts of the website to offering advice to prospective students on essays.

On top of all that, Thalia is



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Thalia Charles plans on attending Lafayette College in Easton in the fall to study two majors: psychology and government in law.

involved in her school's dance team, its chapter of the National Honor Society and Junior Leadership Wilkes-Barre. She's even both a National Latin Scholar and a National Spanish Scholar, and is the salutatorian of Redeemer's class of 2018.

She said her devotion to organization comes from her parents, Stephanie and Leroy.

"My parents raised me in an environment where I'm very struc-

ured," she said. "And speech and debate helped me organize too."

After what seemed like a laundry list of accomplishments, Thalia was asked if there was anything else people should know about her.

"People should know that my favorite color is yellow," she laughed.

Reach Patrick Kernan at 570-991-6386 or on Twitter @PatKernan

Grace E. Conner

Age: 17 | School: Wyoming Valley West | Hometown: Swoyersville

By Patrick Kernan | pkernan@timesleader.com



Sean McKeag | Times Leader

Wyoming Valley West junior Grace Conner started a Little Library at the Swoyersville Borough Building.

SWOYERSVILLE — Wyoming Valley West junior Grace Conner had a mission: She was looking to make sure people had the same love of reading that she did.

The 17-year-old from Swoyersville said that reading has always been a part of her life, but she knew it wasn't part of everyone's.

"I realized not all kids growing up around here had the same opportunities that I did," she said, citing the cost of books as a prohibiting factor. "I grew up reading books, but not everyone has that."

The lifelong Girl Scout decided to swing this idea into her Gold Award project. So now, if you head to the Swoyersville Borough Building, you'll find the Little Library of Swoyersville. It's one of the reasons Grace was selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

The Little Library is a box outside of the building, stuffed with books. And, according to Grace, they're free for the taking.

"Keep the books if you want, take as many as you want, or leave them," she said. "There are no rules for it."

The donations came in from members of the community after she sent out requests to local businesses and her mom submitted an ad to a local newspaper.

"A lot of people called and left a lot of books," she said.

Since then, she said the Little Library has been consistently full.

"It's cool to see that other people are happy with it," she said. "My friends say they see people there all the time."

Grace has been involved with the Girl Scouts since she was in kindergarten, and this is her last year with the organization. She said it leaves an indelible mark.

"You're always a Girl Scout afterward," she said.

Grace thinks she might get involved with the organization again later in life, perhaps becoming a troop leader if she has daughters who get involved themselves.

But for right now, Grace is involved with other things. She and her chocolate lab Sydnie are a registered therapy dog team. She and Sydnie travel to local nursing homes and they also go to special needs classes at Dallas Middle School.

"I get a tag that I have to wear and Sydnie gets a bandanna," she said. "When she sees me getting the bandanna, she kind of changes a little bit. She gets serious, she goes to work."

Grace also teaches CCD for fifth-graders at her church, Holy Family Parish in Luzerne. She's a member of her school's chapter of the National Honor Society along with other on-campus clubs.

In her future, she's thinking of studying criminal psychology.

"I want to talk to criminals, see what happened, what was going through their head," she said, adding that she wants to know the "why" behind what happened.

According to Grace, her interest in the career path started after she took a psychology class at King's College through its Young Scholar program. She'll be taking more classes at the college throughout the remainder of her time in high school.

Reach Patrick Kernan at 570-991-6386 or on Twitter @PatKernan

Congratulations to these students and all area graduates on their accomplishments!



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Andrew Decker

School: MMI Preparatory School | Hometown: Sugarloaf Township

By Geri Gibbons For Times Leader



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader
Andrew Decker has maintained a 4.0 average throughout his high school career.

FREELAND – Andrew Decker is heading into his senior year at MMI Preparatory School not only with a spirit of academic excellence, but of service.

Andrew, of Sugarloaf Township, has maintained a 4.0 average throughout his high school career and will spend his summer volunteering in the community at his home church, Volunteers of America and Reaching Beyond Limits, an organization for intellectually and physically disabled adults.

Andrew's accolades range from his service as a volunteer to being a member of the drama club to membership on several honor societies. Those are just some of the reasons Andrew was selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

Musically, he has played the cello, but now plays the bass guitar.

"The guitar is something I really enjoy," he said.

He believes that his high school experience is preparing him both for a career and for life.

Both teachers and fellow students

have recognized his willingness to lend a hand wherever and whenever needed, whether that be in the classroom or on stage.

"Whenever I need a student volunteer for a speaking program, such as the Memorial Day hosted by the Freeland American Legion, Andrew is my go-to student. He is the type of teenager who easily gets along with individuals of all backgrounds and ages," said guidance counselor Stephanie Shandra.

Andrew looks forward to his senior year and his future equipped both academically and socially.

"One of my favorite memories is the fun I had playing Shrek, yes Shrek, in my sophomore year," he said. "I like to both work hard and have fun."

He is the son of Elizabeth Topolski and Aaron Decker.

Mykenna Dekin

Age: 16 | School: West Side Career and Technical Center | Hometown: Larksville

By Mark Guydish | mguydish@timesleader.com



Mykenna Dekin envisions a career in law enforcement for herself.

Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

LARKSVILLE - First she wanted to be an oceanographer, but Mykenna Dekin can't give you a definitive explanation why.

Then she wanted to be a teacher, though she was never sure what she wanted to teach. Then her eighth-grade class toured West Side Career and Technical Center where she saw a sampling of the law enforcement program, and her future grew as solid as the baton and handcuffs she's learning to wield.

"I shadowed one of the students and thought "I can really see myself doing this."

So the 16-year-old from Larksville is finishing the second of four years in the center's law enforcement program and is already eager to move onto college and get into the gritty world of forensics, criminal investigations and serving justice.

"I'm a fan of Law & Order SVU, all the way," she smiled. "I want to do that."

Not that she gets a lot of time to loll in front of the TV set. Mykenna notes most of her time is spent either in school, studying what she's learning in school, or applying what she's learned in community service activities when CTC students go out and help provide security at events like an annual run and parade in Forty Fort — to name some most recent outings.

Her schedule is about to get busier. She was nominated, applied and was selected to be part of the Junior Leadership program next year, meaning more free time sacrificed for more community service. But that's OK. She cites two forces behind her motivation to keep at these things.

First, "I grew up with my grandmother, and she wouldn't let me miss any days of school." The rule, she said, became habit.

Second, "I like learning hands-on." Which, she added, makes going to the CTC a good fit for anyone who finds book learning a bit boring.

In law enforcement, she gets to learn how to apply handcuffs, how to take fingerprints from a person and lift them from an object, self defense — including guns, batons and boxing — and a lot of other skills requiring that "hands on" experience.

She not only sees college in her future, she's already been offered

annual scholarships of \$1,500 if she decides to go to Penn College. She hasn't made any decision yet, but she is looking to stay in the state, if not in the area. Maybe the urge to roam comes from being in the middle of a fairly large blended family with eight siblings.

And the urge to serve, preferably in some federal agencies with a job that gets her out in the field helping others?

"I grew up and saw a bunch of people go down the wrong path."

Reach Mark Guydish at 570-991-6112 or on Twitter @TLMarkGuydish

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Tess Edwards

Age: 16 | School: Northwest Area | Hometown: Fairmount Township

By Marcella Kester For Times Leader

FAIRVIEW TWP. – Environmental activist. Science and math whiz. Musician. Charitable giver. Sports enthusiast.

Is there anything Tess Edwards can't do?

It should also be mentioned that on top of it all, the 16-year-old Fairmount Township resident has managed to attain a near-perfect GPA.

Because of her extensive extracurricular activities and educational devotion, Tess has been selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

She was nominated for the honor by Northwest Area Middle and High School Principal Ryan Miner.

"With as many accomplished students as there at Northwest, I was astonished to have been selected for this award," she said of the honor. "I was extremely excited. I was so surprised to be chosen for this award."

Admitting a love for science, Tess said she was drawn to the field of environmental science in the 4th grade through a recycling project. By following a love for the outdoors and protecting nature, Tess said it was her environmental science teacher, Mr. Lukashefski, who helped develop that passion into a possible career path.

"I plan to attend college, earn an environmental engineering degree and start a career in the environmental engineering field," Tess said of her plans following a 2020 graduation. "In addition, I plan to help protect the environment, possibly through the use of alternative energy sources."

If environmental engineering is her goal, it's good that Tess also enjoys calculus, although it didn't come as naturally as science.

In fact, the upcoming Junior Leadership Wilkes-Barre member said at first she didn't believe she would be able to get through a year of the class. But with some hard work, determination and questioning, Tess blossomed.

It's no wonder that Tess used those same morals to excel in anything she sets her mind to, including earning varsity spots on the school's basketball, track and field and cross country teams. Aside from her athleticism, Tess is also a member of the Northwest marching band, where she played flute and acted as the group's section leader.



Bill Tarutis | For Times Leader

Tess Edwards plans on pursuing a degree and career in environmental engineering.

Tess is an active member in a variety of student groups, including the National Honor Society, Student Council, Yearbook Club and Concert Choir. She has attained numerous awards during her schooling, including multiple "Student of the Month" awards, a "Student of the Quarter" award in biology and a spot in the National Honor Society.

Outside of the classroom, Tess utilizes her talents for the betterment of the community. She regularly participates in 5K runs for local organizations and has assisted her own family in running a greener home through recycling and installing more environmentally friendly appliances.

Reach the Times Leader newsroom at 570-829-7242 or on Twitter @TLnews.

Collin Gleco

Age: 18 | School: Dallas | Hometown: Shavertown

By Eileen Godin | egodin@timesleader.com



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Dallas High School senior Collin Gleco, 18, plans to become a U.S. Navy aviator after attending The Citadel, a military college in South Carolina.

DALLAS TWP. – Collin Gleco puts 100 percent effort into everything he does, whether he is on the track, in the classroom or community.

And it shows.

The Dallas High School senior's drive, time management skills and academics are the reasons he was selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

"I know what I do today will help me later," Collin, 18, of Shavertown said.

Collin will attend The Citadel, a military college in South Carolina. He plans to major in political science and minor in intelligence and homeland security.

He wants to become a U.S. Navy aviator, but before he can soar in the sky, he needs to navigate through high school.

He charted a course four years ago when he joined the Dallas Senior High School track and field team.

Then he added various clubs such as Economics Club, Mock Trial Club and the Military Interest Club. Collin was one of the founding members of the school's Model United Nations Club, which assigns students a county to represent.

"One year, I represented Spain," he said, noting he had to learn about the country's economics and develop mock resolutions to get other students, who represent different countries, to accept.

The teen also has a list of community involvement, including being an altar server at St. Therese's Church in Shavertown, participating in the Run for the Fallen, and assisting veterans at The Gardens at Millville, which is a nursing home in Millville.

He does it all while maintaining a 3.7 GPA.

Collin keeps himself on task starting with a 5:15 a.m. wake-up.

"I either work out or study for a test I may have that day," he said.

Then it is off to school, where he is enrolled in four advanced placement courses that include history, government and politics and two economic-based classes. Extracurricular activities are sprinkled through the week.

Once home, Collin gives himself a 45-minute break before hitting the books.

"I am very organized," he said. "I like to get things done."

Then it is lights out around 11:30 p.m., he said.

Collin believes his drive and ambition are reflective of his great-grandfather, Robert Gleco Sr., and his grandfather, Robert Gleco Jr.

"My great-grandfather was a private first class in the Army," he said. "He served in the Korean War."

His grandfather wanted to serve but could not because of a "requirement," Collin said.

Collin's mother, Stephanie, also wanted to enter military service but could not pass a "visual requirement," he said.

"I can see that I have similar values as my grandfathers," Collin said. "I want to be part of something bigger."

Gleco has a brother, Max Nelson, 22, and a sister, Kayla Gleco, 21.

Reach Eileen Godin at 570-991-6387 or on Twitter @TLNews.



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Hunter Jones

Age: 18 | School: James M. Coughlin High School | Hometown: Bear Creek

By Marcella Kester For Times Leader

BEAR CREEK — Those who frequent the local arts scene may recognize the name Hunter Jones.

The 18-year-old Coughlin senior co-wrote and directed “The Meaning of Love” last fall. His short film, which was featured by #NEPACoalCreative, amassed numerous local awards while garnering tens of thousands of views.

His extraordinary talent with film and literature, coupled with an extensive academic and athletic accomplishments has led to Hunter being featured in the Excel special section.

Hunter admitted that his favorite class in school is Lisa McCabe’s literature and film class, and it’s not hard to see why.

“I enjoy this class because it further develops and feeds my passion for film and reading, and Mrs. McCabe does a fantastic job introducing me to new work all the time,” Hunter said.

Aside from having his film featured, Hunter has also been given a student spotlight by WVIA, where he was awarded 3rd place for Performing Artist of the Year. He also has received highest honors for his near-perfect GPA.

Hunter is also involved in numerous school activities and groups, and currently acts as the president of his senior class, Student Council vice president,

drama club member, key club member and National Honor Society inductee.

When Hunter isn’t busy writing and directing his next blockbuster or excelling in academia, he can likely be found on the field or in the ring. The Bear Creek resident has been on the school’s track and field team throughout high school, and has practiced the sport of boxing at World Class Boxing for the past four years.

“It feels great to get recognition for the time and hard work I’ve put into my academic career thus far as a student of both school and life,” he said.

After graduation Hunter plans on attending Temple University with a focus on film and psychology with a minor in business.

Jones said he’s happy to be someone who thinks outside of the box, and believes the world needs more bright and creative young minds.

“I learned that the world is dying for bolder ideas, for people who are not afraid to study anomalies, and illuminate the future creatively,” he said. “As for myself, I learned I will change the world.”

Hunter is the son of Lisa and Steven Jones.



Hunter Jones has received accolades for his movie, ‘The Meaning of Love.’ Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Sydney Karpowich

Age: 17 | School: MMI Preparatory School | Hometown: Sugarloaf Township

By Geri Gibbons For Times Leader



Sydney Karpowich will be attending Villanova University in the fall.

Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

SUGARLOAF TWP. — Recent MMI Preparatory School graduate Sydney Karpowich not only spent her high school career near the top of her class, tackling a rigorous honors course load, she did so while overseeing a nonprofit organization, participating in the Future Business Leaders of America and participating in a host of other activities.

All that is why Sydney is one of 20 students selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

Described by teachers as a “go-getter,” who is not afraid to fail, Sydney has accomplished much in her 17 years.

As captain of the school’s Relay for Life team, she planned and implemented fundraisers to benefit the American Cancer Society, including a Glow Run.

Sydney coordinated the 5K, reaching out to other organizations to get the job

done.

To Sydney, learning how to network and communicate with other individuals and organizations is a key part of the educational process and preparing for the future.

She will be attending Villanova University in the fall, majoring in international business and Chinese.

She plans to become a lawyer focusing on intellectual property rights.

“My father is a lawyer, and I grew up with an understanding of how important law is and what impact it has on people’s lives,” she said.

Also a member of the Future Business Leaders of America, she said, “My passion is both business and law, that’s where I think my career path will take me.”

She was accepted into the University’s Global Citizens program, which will provide the opportunity for her to study in Singapore during her freshman year, with an eight-week internship and eight weeks of classes.

She said he was especially proud of founding “Empower,” a nonprofit designed to promote self-confidence and teach self-defense to young girls.

“I was seeking a way to give back,” she said.

Sydney’s enthusiasm and positive attitude will leave a void at the school, according to guidance counselor Stephanie Shadra.

“You will always know where you stand with Sydney. She doesn’t care about what others think or say about her,” Shandra said. “What I will miss most about Sydney is her endless stream of optimism. She isn’t naïve to the problems of life. She just realizes it’s better to see the glass as half-full and encourage others to do the same.”



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Harley LaRue

Age: 17 | School: Greater Nanticoke Area | Hometown: Nanticoke

By Mary Therese Biebel | mbiebel@timesleader.com

NANTICOKE — When Harley LaRue moved to Nanticoke from Pittston at the end of her freshman year, she knew the best way to feel at home was to get involved.

“The best way was just reaching out to people and trying to make more friends,” said LaRue, 17, who will soon complete her junior year at Greater Nanticoke Area’s John S. Fine Senior High School. “It wasn’t hard because everybody here was really nice.”

One activity that keeps her busy is the online school newspaper, the GNA Insider, for which LaRue writes everything from profiles of faculty members, students and alumni to political commentary and year-in-review synopses of national and world news.

“She has a tremendous work ethic,” said journalism adviser Sean Carey, who has known LaRue for two years. “I knew from the first day that she is going to be a success.”

LaRue hopes to eventually major in English — “It’s what I’m best at,” she said — and thinks she might add journalism as a minor. “It’s hard to know for sure,” she said.

One thing she is sure about is setting her sights on an Ivy League education, perhaps at Harvard or another top university.

She has been accepted into Franklin and Marshall’s month-long college prep program and plans to spend July at that school in Lancaster. She has also applied to a similar program at the University of Chicago.

Back at John S. Fine High School, where

LaRue will enter her senior year in the fall, she serves on the student council and as treasurer of the French National Honor Society, which recently traveled to Montreal.

“I wouldn’t say that I’m really perfectly fluent,” she said modestly, adding that it was “pretty cool” to converse with French-speaking people in Canada. “It was mostly ‘hi’ and ‘hello,’ things like that.”

To help finance the trip to Canada, LaRue and other honor society members sold bonbons that had been made in France.

Speaking of candy, LaRue became one of the first members this year of a new club dedicated to “secret acts of kindness.”

One recent project for that club involved bringing candy, soda and stress balls to the library where advanced placement tests were being held. On other occasions, teachers have received flowers.

“We come up with names of people, if it’s their birthday or we know they’re having a rough time, and we’ll bring doughnuts or



Bill Tarutis | For Times Leader

Harley LaRue spends first period each day, Monday through Friday, working on the GNA Insider, the online newspaper at John S. Fine High School in Nanticoke.

flowers and give them anonymously,” she said.

LaRue, who is the daughter of Megan Mikulka, of Nanticoke, also has a part-time job at Sheetz, making sandwiches and serving as a cashier.

The oldest of five daughters, LaRue said she looks out for her four younger sisters — 16-year-old Miranda, 12-year-old Megan, 6-year-old Brooke and 9-month-old Guinevere. “I work hard to set an example for them.”

Reach Mary Therese Biebel at 570-991-6109 or on Twitter @BiebelMT

Morgan Long

Age: 17 | School: MMI Preparatory School | Hometown: Mountain Top

By Geri Gibbons For Times Leader

FREELAND — Morgan Long, 17, can best be described as a well-rounded student and an asset to the community.

His accolades include not only academic success, but commitment to community and personal resiliency. It’s one of the reasons he was chosen to be featured in the Excel special section.

At MMI Preparatory School, Morgan is very actively involved with Junior Leadership, specifically his team’s service project, a Designer Bag Bingo to raise money to ease the fight against cancer.

Morgan said he views helping others as a responsibility and enjoys getting to know other students and members of the community.

The achievement of which Long is most proud is making it to the Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science for several years.

“I also enjoyed travelling to Penn State for the competition,” he said.

Morgan also steps up when it comes to sports as a member of the MMI golf team and a recipient of the black belt in Okinawan Goju Ryu, a type of karate.

Morgan also participated in the

school’s mock trial, an opportunity for both fun and learning.

“I was on the side of the prosecution,” he said. “I learned a lot, and it required a lot of thinking.”

Morgan has also participated in the state competition of the Future Business Leaders of America, earning a spot in the top 20 at the national competition.

He is a member of the National Honor Society, National Spanish Honor Society, National Science Honor Society and National Math Honor Society.

His success, said guidance counselor Stephanie Schandra, comes from his ability to succeed in spite of challenges.

“This year Morgan demonstrated a great deal of resiliency in dealing with some personal circumstances,” she said. “Despite these difficulties, his commitment to service, co-curricular activities and school have not wavered.”

Morgan is the son of David and Theresa Long.



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Morgan Long is a member of the National Honor Society, National Spanish Honor Society, National Science Honor Society and National Math Honor Society at MMI.

Tom Mercadante Jr.

School: Hanover Area | Hometown: Hanover Township

By Mark Guldish | mguldish@timesleader.com

HANOVER TWP. — You may have seen Tom Mercadante Jr. making some clutch plays on Hanover Area High School’s run through a nearly unbeaten baseball season and into the playoffs.

But that’s hardly all he does. Not even close.

The soon-to-graduate Hawkeye has been a triple sports threat, playing football in the fall, wrestling in the winter and, of course, on the diamond in spring.

Asked what his favorite class in high school is, and he laughs when he answers “is gym a class?” But for a guy this active, he’s only half-joking. He may downplay the academics, but teachers say he works very hard in school.

His physical efforts don’t stop when he’s off the mat or fields. He’s also a volunteer firefighter with the Sugar Notch department, having made time to take three levels of firefighter training as well as hazardous materials, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid certifications.

While he says it feels good to help when property or individuals are at risk, he admits part of the lure is the fire hall camaraderie. “It’s just cool being around people up there.”

And he’s planning on a lot more physical

training for the foreseeable future. He’s enlisted in the military, planning on getting into the military police.

“I didn’t think college was the right fit for me,” he said, “and I wanted to serve and protect our community.”

After that?

“I want to be a state trooper.”

He’s not sure if he’ll stay as involved in sports as he moves on, though he’s “thinking about it.” They way he managed to fit a sports schedule into such a busy life through high school suggests that if he really wants to, he’ll find a way.

Going into the army is a big step, but he insists his parents are OK with it. “They knew I always wanted to do.”

And then there’s a younger brother, who, no surprise, seems to like the idea.

“I think he’s happy to get me out of the house,” Tom chuckled. “It’ll seem like he’s the only child.”



Sean McKeag | Times Leader

Hanover Area’s Tom Mercadante heads back to the dugout during a game against Mid Valley at Hanover Area High School baseball field.

Matthew Metzloff

Age: 17 | School: Dallas | Hometown: Dallas

By Marcella Kester For Times Leader



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Matthew Metzloff, of Dallas, will continue his education in the Ivy League at Cornell.

DALLAS — One Dallas resident is getting ready to trade in the Back Mountain for the big league.

Well, Ivy League, to be specific. Matt Metzloff has dived into all things science, and his commitment has paid off in many ways. From numerous awards and honors to entering Cornell University in the fall to take on a degree in biological engineering, the ace student has excelled in basically anything he touches. That's why the Times Leader has chosen Matt to be featured in the Excel special section. "It's exciting, especially to see the accomplishments of all the nominated students. I appreciate the honor," he said. "I'd like to thank my teachers and the staff at Dallas for the help they've given me during my time there."

Matt said his curiosity about life is what's driven him into the realm of science. He's used that passion as a captain on the Dallas High School LifeSmarts and Science Olympiad teams, helping them to earn numerous medals and honors over the last three years.

With a GPA above 4.0, the student standout is also a member of the National Honor Society. "I am very interested in the processes that drive life, especially genetics, and its applications to modern problems," he said of his interests. The senior aims to become a genetic engineer and find ways to work with developing technologies to help create better lives for humanity. Curing disease, creating better crops and combating invasive species are all on his "to-do" list.

When Matt isn't in the classroom he's busy fencing, a sport he's been involved with for the past six years.

When asked if there was any one particular life lesson he's learned along the way, Matt kept it simple.

"In the long run, hard work and discipline pay off," he said.

Matt is the son of Paul and Sally Metzloff.

Morgan Patla

Age: 15 | School: Lake-Lehman | Hometown: Harveys Lake

By Matt Mattei | mmattei@timesleader.com

HARVEYS LAKE — At age 15, Morgan Patla has already distinguished herself in the classroom and on the field of play.

The Lake-Lehman sophomore has earned her competitive stripes in both track and field and cross country, and she proves her academic achievement as a member of the National Honor Society.

Morgan, who resides in Harveys Lake with parents Krista and Ed, recently attended the PIAA Track and Field Championships at Shippensburg University as an alternate on her school's 3,200-meter relay team — quite an accomplishment for a sophomore.

"We're really excited," Morgan said during a phone interview on May 25. "Today, we made it to (tomorrow's) finals."

The following day, the team went on to finish sixth in the state in Class 2A off of a No. 9 seed.

Typically, Morgan competes in the 400-meter and 800-meter individual mid-distance events.

"I like the 400 because the competition is right next to you, and you're rounding the last bend and it's all or nothing," Morgan said.

Training for such events, she said, can be rigorous but worth being prepared.

"It takes a lot of physical strength and men-

tal strength to tell yourself, 'I can get through this, and I can finish,'" Morgan said.

She enjoys running for its cathartic quality. "When you're running, it's almost like everything else melts away. When you run, you can kind of calm yourself down," Morgan said.

Next year, she hopes to make "states" as a starting member of a team rather than as an alternate.

Morgan's academic conviction is no less concentrated than her athletic ambition — she's been on the Lake-Lehman district honor roll since sixth grade.

This year, she maintained a grade point average of, "I believe a 3.7 or 3.8," and she said she enjoys studying chemistry, other sciences and history.

"In chemistry, we learn how to work with chemicals and balance equations, and it's pretty fun," she said. "Currently, we're learning civics (in history class), so we're learning about our executive department and all the branches. It's interesting to learn how it all works."

Next year, she'll be taking anatomy, a subject she hopes helps her with her future



Amanda Hrycyna | For Times Leader

Morgan Patla competes in cross country and track and field for her school. She typically races in the 400-meter and 800-meter individual events, but recently attended the PIAA Track and Field Championships as an alternate on the 3,200-meter relay.

educational and vocational ventures.

"When I go to college, I want to work somewhere in the medical field, so I'm excited for that," Morgan said.

In addition to her classroom and sport-field engagements, Morgan is a member of Lake-Lehman's chorus. She hopes to participate in both academics and athletics in college and plans to spend her summer running and spending time with friends and family.

Kerry Shamnoski

Age: 18 | School: Pittston Area | Hometown: Avoca

By Jimmy Fisher | jfisher@timesleader.com



Bill Tarutis | For Times Leader

Pittston Area's Kerry Shamnoski will continue her education at Lehigh University.

YATESVILLE — Kerry Shamnoski isn't content with being involved in one activity, so she got involved in several.

The Pittston Area senior participates in numerous activities at her school, including being secretary of the yearbook, member of the National Honor Society and student council parliamentarian.

The Avoca resident's favorite organization to be involved with is the Relay for Life Committee.

"I started only last year," Kerry, 18, said. "I participated for the first time my sophomore year, and it kind of peaked my interest."

"And then the next year I heard the announcements for the committee, so I signed up to be part of the committee."

She served as the logistics coordinator, and this year's event raised

\$27,000.

It's just one of the many reasons Kerry is being honored in the Excel special section.

Organizing the Relay for Life event includes organizing fundraisers, teams, register members, and see how what other Relay for Life events do for inspiration.

It does not come without its challenges, though.

"The most difficult thing is probably just handling everybody and making sure they're doing their jobs," Kerry said, "making sure everyone has enough money for everything, participating and things like that."

Kerry is also a student athlete, playing for the tennis team since her sophomore year and being named captain this year.

She also joined the swim team this year.

"I did it this year just to get another sport under my belt," Kerry said. "I didn't have anything to do in the winter besides school. My friends did it, and they asked if I wanted to join so I said 'Sure.'"

Outside of her school activities, Kerry is very involved at her church Queen of the Apostles, serving as the ISLI youth leader.

Her duties include helping organize dinners and working on ice-breaking skills with the parish children to help them be more outgoing.

On top of everything Kerry does is a very busy school schedule loaded with advanced placement and honors classes.

"A lot of late nights," she said "It's more about staying driven, that I know I need good grades and as long as I motivate myself, and my friends keep me motivated too, I keep going."

Kerry will be attending Lehigh University in the fall, but there's a special reason she chose that school.

"I Googled colleges in Pennsylvania with castles, and it was one that came up," she said. "So, I started to look into it and I decided what my major would be, and it ends up that college is really good for it. I was always a big science fiction fan. I read 'Lord of the Rings' when I was in second grade. I'm interested in 'Game of Thrones.' It's something I've always been into."

Kerry said she got into Lehigh University's IDEAS Program, which stands for Integrated Degree in Engineering, Arts and Science.

"I'm thinking of doing environmental engineering with a chemistry concentration and a Chinese minor," she said.



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Molly Truskowski

Age: 15 | School: Crestwood High School

By Roger DuPuis | rdupuis@timesleader.com

Summer isn't even here yet, and already Molly Truskowski has played some softball, helped work on a construction project thousands of miles from home and gone swimming with Carson Wentz.

Oh, yeah, she also dissected a frog.

"That was really cool," the Crestwood High School freshman said. "I'm looking forward to doing more hands-on things in class."

Molly, 15, is very much a hands-on type of teen, whether it be academics, athletics or the charitable work she does in her spare time. That attitude is one of the reasons Molly is among the 20 students selected to be featured in Excel.

In April, Molly spent a week in Haiti with a group sponsored by Mountaintop Family Center Church. That's where she helped lay the foundation for a new kitchen at a local orphanage, and participated in Bible school classes for the children.

It turns out that Wentz and fellow Philadelphia Eagle Zach Ertz were in the Caribbean nation at the same time, working on a different project for Mission of Hope Haiti, the Texas-based Christian organization for which Molly's group was volunteering. Molly and other volunteers had the chance to meet the players and go swimming with them.

"We're big Eagles fans," she said, "so that was pretty cool."

In the end, the Haiti trip is likely to stay in Molly's memories for a much bigger reason: It could well be the moment she found her true calling. While she has yet to make any formal decisions about

colleges or specializations, Molly said she has her sights firmly set on medical school.

"I wanted to be a doctor beforehand, but when I was in Haiti that's when I definitely knew," she said.

Seeing the medical needs of many Haitians, especially women and children, "was definitely life-changing," Molly said, adding that she hopes to return to Haiti on a medical mission sometime in the future.

In the meanwhile, she looks forward to building her knowledge of science in biology class — one of her favorites, although dad Mark said Molly is a 4.0 student who has applied herself diligently to her studies since kindergarten.

"My wife and I are just extremely proud of her, and the drive and compassion that she has," Mark said.

In addition to the Haiti trip, Molly's compassion also has found an outlet in other church-related activities, including volunteering at an area soup kitchen and watching young children in the kids' room of her church so their parents can enjoy Sunday services.

Her compassion is complemented by a personal passion: softball, which Molly hopes to play in college.

"I've been playing since T-ball and Little League," said Molly, who covers first base. "I worked my up through some local travel



Sean McKeag | Times Leader

Crestwood High School student Molly Truskowski, 15, recently returned from a mission trip to Haiti, where she helped lay the foundation for a new kitchen at an orphanage. She is an academic standout who also plays softball, volunteers at her church and wants to become a doctor.

teams, and I just got done with my Crestwood season, on varsity, and now I'm playing for the Conklin Raiders in Binghamton, N.Y."

Those are a lot of irons in the fire for anyone, especially someone as young as Molly. She offered some wisdom on the fine art of multitasking.

"You have to prioritize," Molly

said. "You have to know what you really care about and what you really want to do and don't waste your time on things that don't really matter to you, but still have fun."

In addition to her dad and mom, Jaimie, Molly's family includes siblings Cade and Marisa.

Stephanie Zellner

Age: 17 | School: MMI Preparatory School | Hometown: Drums

By Geri Gibbons For Times Leader



Aimee Dilger | Times Leader

Stephanie Zellner will attend St. Joseph's University, majoring in international relations with a minor in Chinese.

DRUMS — Stephanie Zellner addressed her fellow MMI graduates recently saying, "I have always been more of a quiet shoulder for anyone who needed a friend, so I now look to those who have inspired me through the years to tell you exactly what I wish to say to you now, just a bit more eloquently."

She went on to quote Robin Williams, reminding her classmates to embrace life and live it to its fullest.

Although Stephanie's academic credits are numerous and her class activities are many, her teachers and classmates are likely to remember her most for her positive attitude and caring personality.

"It's hard to find a nicer 17-year-old," said guidance counselor Stephanie Shandra. "She is mature beyond her years. I think what sets Stephanie apart is that she has the ability to not take things personally and to not hold a grudge."

Neither does she focus on the trivial or the superficial.

"Stephanie focuses on her goals, putting adversity behind her and learning from the experience. Not only is she one of the most important student leaders in her graduating class, but she is one of the most important members of the MMI community," said Shandra.

It's those attributes the led to Stephanie being selected to be featured in the Excel special section.

Stephanie has been a valuable member and leader in the school's Student Ambassador Admission program, volunteering to create and implement training for new tour guides who assist students considering attending the school.

Her passion extends to music and drama. She has served as the student director of the school's spring musical in her junior year and stage manager of the school's musical as a senior.

Her commitment to community is reflected in her extensive history of volunteering, which includes assisting at Hazleton's SAFE Autism Walk, being a peer tutor, serving at her home church and volunteering for Red Cross blood drives.

Stephanie had a passion for Chinese culture and language, fueling a strong interest in traveling the world.

The fall will find her at St. Joseph's University, majoring in international relations with a minor in Chinese.

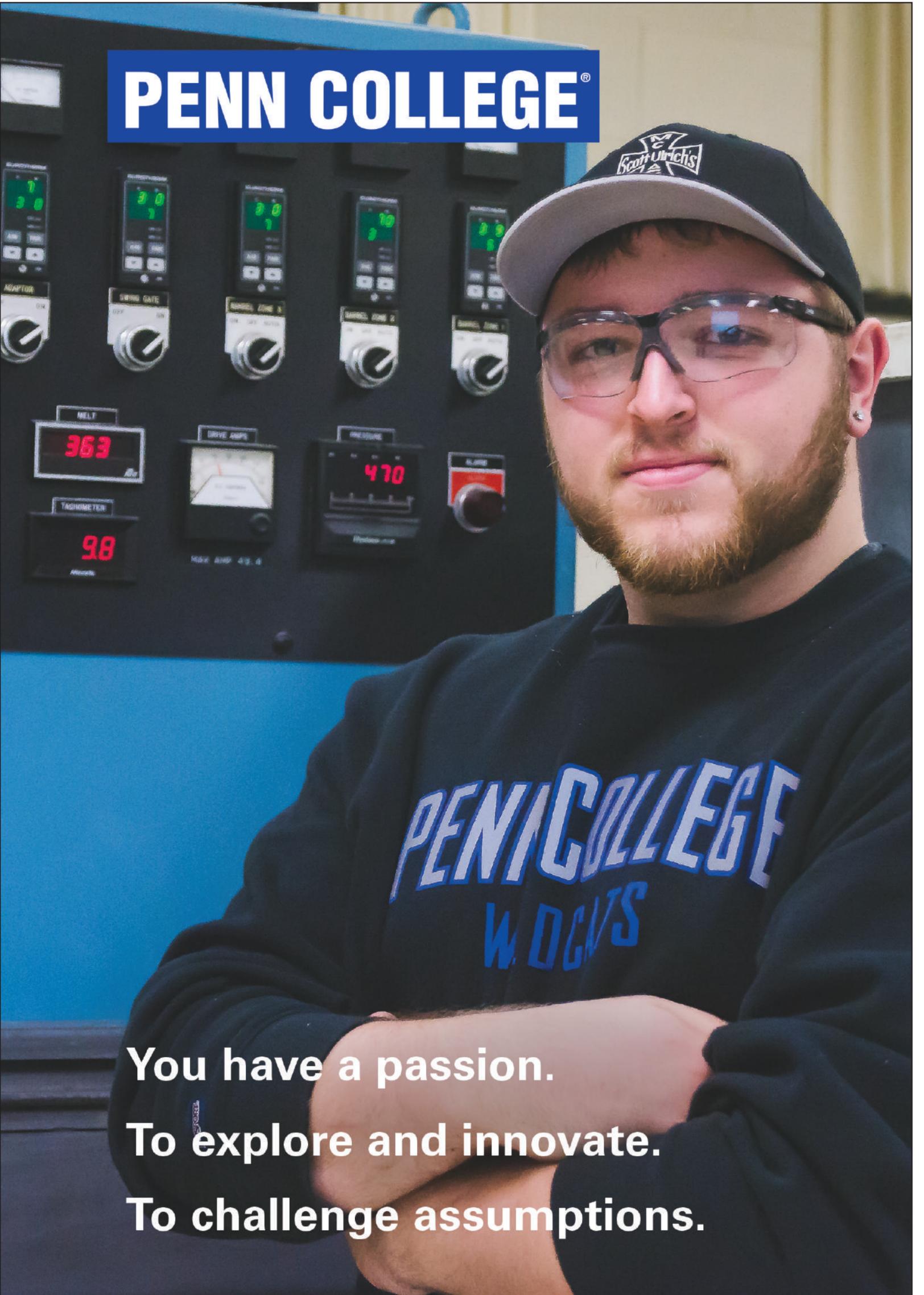
"Some day I would like to work at the United Nations, as a peacekeeper, a liaison between the United States and other countries," she said.

Though Stephanie's goals are lofty, Shandra said believes she is well capable of attaining them.

"The fact that she is mature enough to know these (goals) are possible, coupled with her strong work ethic demonstrates that she is capable of achieving these worthy goals," Shandra said.

Stephanie is the daughter of Steven and Theresa Zellner.

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