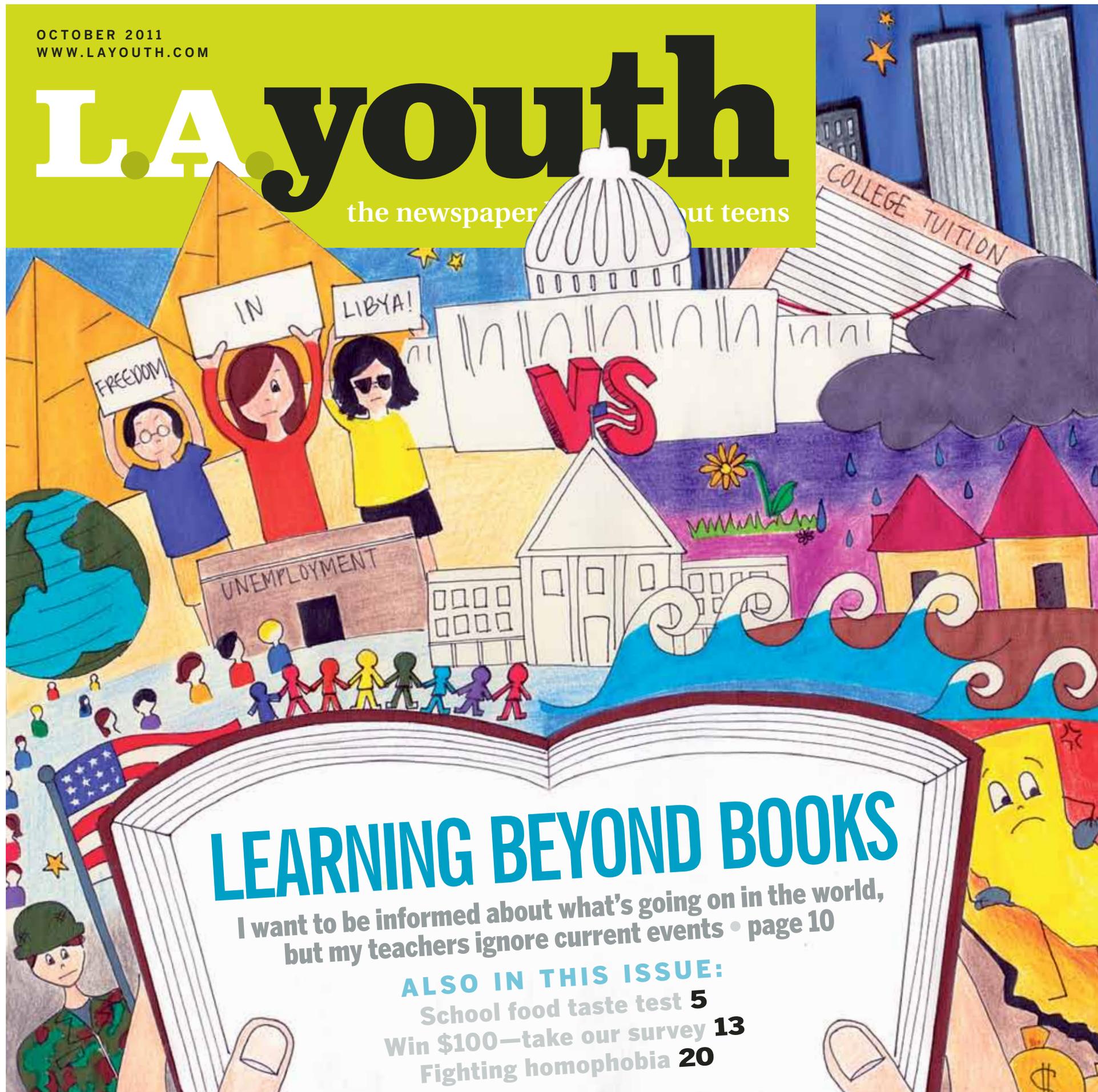


OCTOBER 2011
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L.A. youth

the newspaper for teens



LEARNING BEYOND BOOKS

I want to be informed about what's going on in the world,
but my teachers ignore current events • page 10

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- School food taste test **5**
- Win \$100—take our survey **13**
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L.A. youth

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FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

About L.A. Youth

How L.A. Youth started

Former teacher Donna Myrow founded the nonprofit teen newspaper in 1988 after the Supreme Court Hazelwood decision, which struck down student press rights. Myrow saw a need for an independent, uncensored forum for youth expression. L.A. Youth is now celebrating its 23rd year of publishing.

How L.A. Youth is doing today

L.A. Youth now has a readership of 350,000 in Los Angeles County. Hundreds of students have benefited from L.A. Youth's journalism training. Many have graduated from college and have built on their experiences at L.A. Youth to pursue careers in media, teaching and other fields. Our Foster Youth Writing Project has brought the stories of teens in foster care into the newspaper. For more info, see layouth.com.

How L.A. Youth is funded

L.A. Youth is a nonprofit charitable organization funded by donations from foundations, corporations and individuals.

L.A. Youth's mission

L.A. Youth is a leading advocacy voice for teens through journalism, literacy and civic engagement. We use media as a tool for young people to examine themselves, their communities and the world at large.

Advocating for teens

Do you like what we do and want to support us? Go to why.layouth.com, our blog written by L.A. Youth's adult staff, to learn more about the issues L.A. Youth cares about. You can read our criticisms and praise of policies affecting teens. We take stands on education, access to mental health, foster youth rights, teens' rights to free speech and more. There you can donate to help us provide a place where teen voices are valued.

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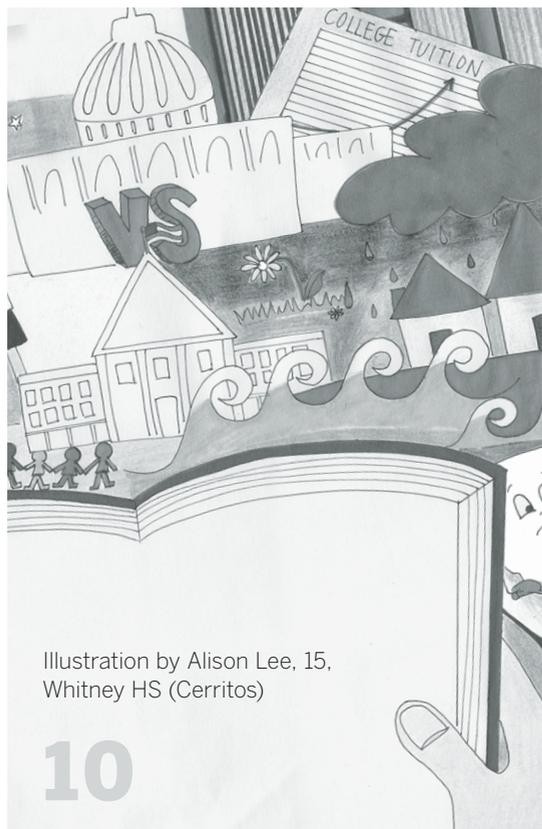


Illustration by Alison Lee, 15,
Whitney HS (Cerritos)

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ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

I really enjoy taking photos for L.A. Youth. I've met new people and seen things I wouldn't have otherwise. When I was taking pictures at the Humanitas school (page 18), they were having advisory. Where the advisory at my school is just sitting in a room, they were doing activities. It would be cool if my school had something like that.
—**Victor Beteta, 18, University HS**



BEHIND THE SCENES

When we read a Los Angeles Times story about LAUSD's new healthier menu, we thought L.A. Youth should write something about it too since many of our readers go to LAUSD schools. We asked a couple of our writers to be our taste testers. Victor and Stefano had stopped eating school food because they thought it tasted bad, but they agreed to try the new menu for about a week. Turn to page 5 to find out how they rated the new food.



STAY IN TOUCH WITH US

Did you like a story in this issue? Hate it? Could you relate? Tell us what you think. Leave a comment on layout.com or on our Facebook page. You can also email us at editor@layout.com or send us a letter to L.A. Youth • 5967 W. 3rd St. Suite 301 • Los Angeles CA 90036. We might choose your comment to be published in the newspaper.

SEPTEMBER 2011 ISSUE **A TEEN STRUGGLES WITH DEPRESSION**

I READ THE article "Held down by depression" because I was depressed for a short time. I was going through some complicated problems with my father, but it wasn't so bad that I didn't go to school or had to be sent to a group home to get help for it. I just had to talk to someone about my problems and that helped tremendously. I encourage you to write more articles about things like that.
Name withheld

I TOTALLY UNDERSTAND how Karen feels. I'm 16 also and I suffer from depression. Just a year ago, I was in her position. Instead of a group home, I was placed in a mental hospital. I learned so much from my experience that I also wrote an article about it for my school newspaper. I love that I was able to reach out to more kids who felt the same, but never spoke up about it. Great article!

Hazelynn

Comment on layout.com

WE MUST BE CAREFUL ABOUT STDs

I WAS BLOWN away by how Frank Reed explained such a taboo subject as STDs in a teen-friendly way. I really needed clarification about this. I'm 16 and around the age when some people start having sex. As a teen I wonder, "Am I ready?" This article makes me feel more confident.

Xavier Magaña

Hollywood HS

DON'T TEXT AND DRIVE

I DO NOT drive but my mother does. She has a bad habit of texting or Facebooking while driving. It really scares me; she hardly looks at the road. I hope that this article makes

her see the error of her ways. No life is worth [risking by] answering a text message.

Madelinn Ornelas

International Studies Learning Center (South Gate)

I TOTALLY AGREE with the article "I should have kept my hands on the wheel." I disagree with the other [driver] being the guilty person because you were the one texting. But it was responsible of you to tell your friend not to text. You are lucky that your mom let you drive your car again. I think you have learned your lesson, so keep encouraging other people not to text and drive at the same time.

Edward Perez

International Studies Learning Center



GIRLS' SPORTS DESERVE EQUAL TREATMENT

I FOUND THE article "Where can we play ball?" to be a very good example of sexism. I feel girls deserve the same amount of equipment and practice space as the boys. If the school's excuse is that there is not enough money for equipment and field space, why don't the teams just take turns by sharing the better field or the equipment? I believe female athletes can play any sport as good as any male athlete can. I am very proud of Karina Arias for writing about this.

Lora Haytaian

Wilson MS (Glendale)

LEGOS ARE A CREATIVE OUTLET FOR A TEEN

I LOVED THE article about LEGOs because every time I get out of bed in the morning, I go straight to my LEGO table. My LEGO table is a table made out of LEGOs with LEGO creations that I have made on top. I can totally compare his life with mine because I'm 13 and playing with LEGOs. Most people say that I have no life, but I don't care what people think. I LOVE LEGOS.

Jessica Thlick

Wilson MS

A GIRL HAD PROBLEMS JUGGLING SCHOOL AND HER JOB

I CAN RELATE to the article "Balancing act." I have a hard time balancing my life. Every day I come home from school, eat and then start doing homework at 4 until it is time for my tae kwon do lessons which are at 7:20. Right after I return from tae kwon do at 8:30, I take a shower and then do homework until midnight.

Just like Jennifer, I do not have any free time left for myself. I agree with Jennifer that people should be realistic when they set goals for themselves. I learned that managing time is the key to a better life.

Alexander Ayvazov

Wilson MS

A TOMBOY DOESN'T LIKE WEARING DRESSES

THE WAY JEAN WROTE about her insecurities really made me think. As I was reading this article it felt like the writer was giving me advice. I don't like wearing dresses. Every time I have to wear a dress, I try to avoid it or wear something more casual. I have so many things in common with Jean that I feel like I could talk to her and she'd understand. This story was inspiring.

Nancy Martinez

Hollywood HS

EATING HEALTHY ISN'T EASY

WHEN I READ the article "What's on your plate?" I was surprised at how many people failed the eating healthy challenge. After reading this article, I realized that I don't eat as healthy as I had thought. The only reason that I am in shape is because I play a lot of sports. I am going to try finding the website the L.A. Youth writers used in the challenge so that I can take it. I really like that you put this article in the paper because it's easy to eat unhealthy and not know it. *Editor's note: If you want to challenge yourself to eat healthier go to choosemyplate.gov.*

Austin Ortega

Wilson MS

REMEMBERING 9/11

THIS ARTICLE TOOK me into the lives of kids who were old enough to realize what was happening in New York on Sept. 11. Reading the article made me feel like I was there at the time of the attacks. I couldn't help but believe the emotions and thoughts of these writers. I will always wonder what was going through the thousands of people's heads at the moment when they knew they were going to lose their lives on Sept. 11. What came to mind first? Was it their families, their close friends or fear? How are the lives of those who lost their loved ones on 9/11? I hope happy, safe and joyful lives to the families and friends who lost a loved one.

Patrick Stepanian

Wilson MS

Illustration by Alison Lee, 15, Whitney HS (Cerritos)

Lunch time has a whole new taste

Two of our writers give LAUSD's new healthier menu mixed reviews

Caribbean Meatballs

★★☆☆

As I looked down at my plate, the food didn't look too appetizing. There were three meatballs floating around in a gooey orange sauce. There were also a few pieces of pineapple and potatoes in the sauce with the meatballs. The potatoes were undercooked and the meat lacked flavor. I also wanted more meatballs because I was still hungry after eating this. The sauce was a little spicy, which I liked, but it had a strange aftertaste.

Sweet Potato Fries

★★☆☆

I like sweet potato fries, but the school fries were undercooked. The middle of the fries was raw, and that made them taste bad. The parts that were cooked actually tasted really good. If they want kids to like the food, they really need to make sure it's thoroughly cooked. Food that isn't cooked enough could be a health hazard, and it also makes the food taste bad.

Turkey Burger

★★★★

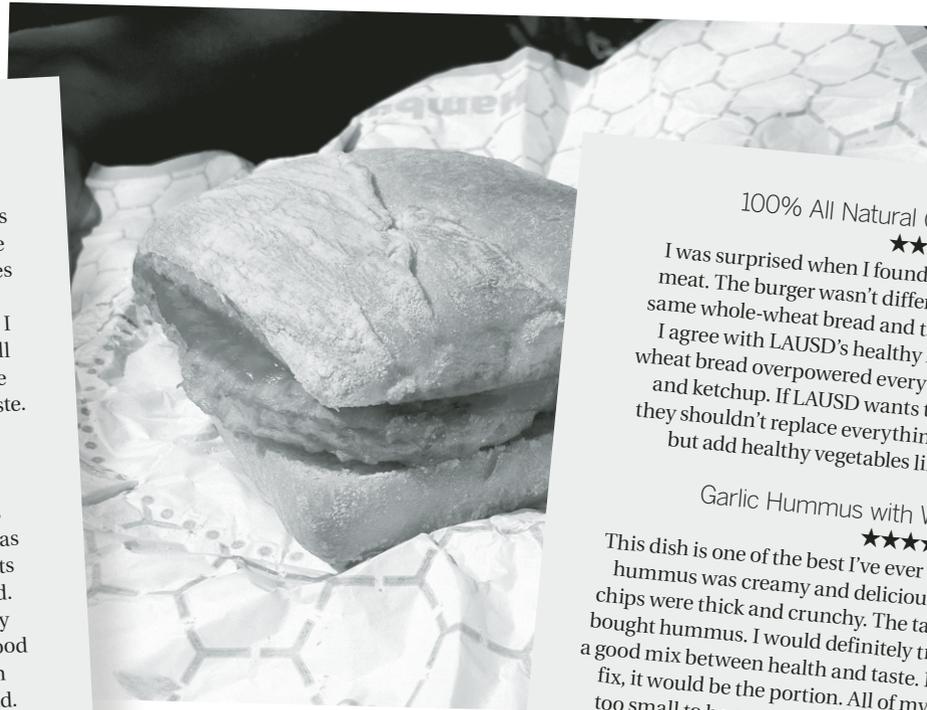
The turkey burger (pictured) was the best meal I ate. The meat was fully cooked and it had a good taste. It would have been better if there was lettuce and tomatoes. The only thing I saw that we could add was the ketchup. But overall the turkey burger is something I would eat again.

California Sushi Roll

★★☆☆

I was a little disappointed that the sushi didn't have crab because they called them California rolls. But when I tasted it, it tasted good. The rice was cooked. The cucumber was still frozen when I got it, but overall it was a good meal. There were four rolls, which was enough food. I would have it again.

Reviewed By Victor Beteta, 18,
University HS



THIS SCHOOL YEAR,

LAUSD gave its menu a makeover by adding healthier food and ethnic dishes.

Chicken nuggets are gone and garlic hummus is in. We

asked Stefano and Victor

to try some of the new

items and tell us what they

thought. They said the new

menu is an improvement

but the school district

could make it tastier

by not always focusing

on healthy food, like

the burger on a whole-

wheat bun. "It killed

the taste of the burger

because all you could

taste was the grains,"

Stefano said.

100% All Natural Charbroiled Burger

★★☆☆

I was surprised when I found out that this burger was real meat. The burger wasn't different from last year's, with the same whole-wheat bread and the questionable rubber patty. I agree with LAUSD's healthy lunch policy, but the whole-wheat bread overpowered everything so all I tasted was bread and ketchup. If LAUSD wants to make the burger healthy, they shouldn't replace everything with tasteless alternatives, but add healthy vegetables like lettuce and tomatoes.

Garlic Hummus with Whole Wheat Pita

★★★★

This dish is one of the best I've ever tried from LAUSD. The garlic hummus was creamy and delicious, and the whole-wheat pita chips were thick and crunchy. The taste was comparable to store-bought hummus. I would definitely try this dish again because it's a good mix between health and taste. If there was one thing I would fix, it would be the portion. All of my friends thought that it was too small to be a main meal, but it would be great as a side dish.

New Orleans Turkey with Red Beans & Brown Rice

★★☆☆

I have never had New Orleans turkey and I have to say, it wasn't half bad (although the turkey had a slight metallic taste). The dish was bursting with flavor (which is a first for LAUSD). The brown rice was slightly overcooked for me, and other friends told me that theirs wasn't fully cooked, so I think LAUSD should work on consistency. The red beans were filling and tasty, and the turkey was tender. I would have this dish again, as long as LAUSD focuses on cooking the food consistently.

Chicken Sate with Brown Rice

★★★★

The chicken sate with brown rice was wholesome and delicious. At first I was hesitant to try it, because I didn't want to have overcooked rice again, but today it was cooked perfectly. The chicken sate was juicy and tender. The rice went well with the smoky flavor of the sate. I think that to make the dish better, LAUSD could include a variety of sauces, like honey mustard or BBQ. I would definitely try this again.

Reviewed By Stefano Rumi, 14,
Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies

Photo by Jasper Nahid, 17, Hamilton HS

I'm glad she adopted me

I didn't always get why my mom pushed me to do good in school, but now I'm grateful



By Charles Watkins

18, King Drew Medical Magnet HS (2011 graduate)

I was adopted when I was 7. Since I'd been with the family since I was a baby, I already felt like I was a part of the family so getting my last name changed just made it official. I didn't know very much about my biological family. I knew that I had six brothers and sisters but I had never met them. I didn't know why my biological mother wasn't raising me, but I didn't think about it that much. When I was younger I took where I was in life for granted. As I got older I became more appreciative of being taken in and raised by someone who didn't give birth to me.

Growing up I felt like any other kid. I loved playing with LEGOs and cars and my adoptive mom would always get me new ones. I felt loved but sometimes it would bother me when people would say I didn't look like my mother or ask me if she was my real mother. It

made me feel like I didn't belong with my family. For a moment I would think about my biological mother and siblings. Where are they? How would things be if I was with them? But I'd quickly get over it because I knew my family loved me.

I took school seriously in elementary school, practicing my cursive and multiplication tables, but it got harder in middle school. All I thought about was having fun. I'd tell jokes to get attention and wouldn't pay attention in class. I would rarely do homework at home. I only wanted to play basketball and video games. I'd do my homework the next day in home-room or at lunch.

I IGNORED HER LECTURES ABOUT MY GRADES

When my report cards came, I had Ds and Fs. My mother would lecture me, "You aren't going to get anywhere in life if you don't do good in school. I'm in your corner 100 percent but you have to do better. The sky is

the limit." I'd tell her "I know" or say "OK" really loud so I wouldn't have to listen to her. Then she'd start yelling, "You need to start listening and stop thinking you know everything." I wanted her to stop yelling so much and leave me alone, even though I knew it was my fault for getting bad grades.

In some classes I got my grades up to Cs by the end of the semester. In other classes I wasn't so lucky so sometimes I had to go to summer school. We didn't have homework in summer school so I got As and Bs and I was able to graduate from middle school.

My mother didn't go to college but she would always stress to me how important college was. My aunts and uncles would too. A lot of them dropped out of college because they had a job at the same time and it got too hard for them. They would tell me how they wished they could have stayed in college so they wouldn't be working minimum wage jobs and struggling to pay their bills. I always wanted to go to college and what

they said motivated me even more. I knew it would help me be successful. But I didn't think Cs were that bad.

I thought I was right about everything so I was always arguing with my mom. If she asked me to do something I'd continue to play my video games or if she asked me to clean up something, I'd say it was my sister's turn. When I talked back to her, she would remind me of everything she'd done for me. "I took you in. You should be grateful." I would say, "I am grateful" to get her to be quiet. I didn't like when she said that because I wasn't ungrateful. I felt bad that she felt that way.

Other times when we got into a really bad argument, she'd get fed up and send me to my adoptive sister's house for a couple days. It gave me time to reflect on what I did wrong. Every time I went back home, I would try to do the right thing so I wouldn't get in trouble. It would last for a few weeks but then I'd end up going back to my old ways. That would get me in trouble again.

I IMAGINED LIVING WITH ANOTHER FAMILY

I started to wish I was never adopted by her and that I wasn't being yelled at all the time. I would picture myself with a family like the ones in the movies I watched because they looked so happy and it looked like their lives were easy.

When I was graduating from middle school my mom wanted to send me to King Drew, a smaller magnet high school known for its academics. I didn't want to go. I

In 11th grade my friends and teachers were talking about college more often. I started to realize my mom wasn't yelling for no reason—everything she was telling me was to help me—so I started to listen. At college workshops I learned that the UCs require a minimum GPA of 3.0. I realized that too many Cs won't get you a 3.0. I needed to focus and work hard.

I moved my seat to the front of the class and raised my hand and participated more. I started studying and I asked my teachers for help after school if I needed it. I started doing a lot better. I had As and Bs and one C in physics. My mom would say that's good but even then she'd say, "You need to get that C up." I appreciated that because it helped me want to do better.

When senior year began, I had a 2.7 GPA. I applied to five Cal States. My mom really stayed on me. She made sure I mailed everything and didn't miss a deadline. It was helpful because there's a lot you have to turn in to schools, like transcripts, tests scores, letters of recommendation and essays. I might not have made all the deadlines without her.

I got even more motivated to do something with my life one day in November. I woke up late and missed the school bus so I ended up staying home from school. I watched SportsCenter and ate Frosted Flakes. About 30 minutes later my mom called me into her room and we started talking.

"Your social worker called yesterday," she said.

were doing and I wanted to meet them. She told me that it would be good for me to find them so I could get to know them.

Then she said not to go down the same path as my biological mother. "Don't be a liar. Stay on the right path and keep doing what you're doing."

The call bothered me for several weeks. I was angry that my biological mother had lied to the social worker. All this time I don't hear from you and this is the way you try to contact me? I thought about whether I should try to talk to her, but if this was the way she contacted me, maybe this wasn't the right time. But it made me want to find my siblings and see how they were doing.

I went in my mom's room one night and asked her if she would help me find my biological siblings. She looked through her closet to find some papers from my adoption. She gave me a list of their names and I searched for them on Facebook but I didn't find them. The people who popped up were old. I was disappointed but my mother told me not to worry; I might come across them later in life. Her words comforted me and I let it go, hoping that someday I would find them.

MY LIFE IS BETTER WITH THE MOM WHO RAISED ME

After that I realized that I couldn't keep feeling bad because it's not my fault. After 18 years my biological mom still didn't have her life together. It made me upset but I used it as motivation. I told myself I will never become like her and that I would always strive to be the best I can be. I don't think about my biological mother much anymore because my adoptive mother is my mom. She's done a good job of raising me. If it wasn't for her where would I be? I wouldn't have the same opportunities. I'm grateful she pushed me, even when I didn't want to hear it.

In the spring I got accepted into three Cal States—Dominguez Hills, Northridge and East Bay, which is the school I am currently attending. After graduation I walked out of the tunnel at the Home Depot Center in Carson and saw my mother, sisters, aunts, uncles and neighbors in a circle. They all hugged me and told me how proud they were. My mother was smiling really big. She told me she was proud of me and encouraged me to stay on the right path. Making her proud is one of the best feelings I've ever had.

I'm happy I was adopted by my mother. I thank her for all she has done. I've learned that if you don't work hard and go after the things you want, you won't get them. I want to finish college and get a degree. It would mean a lot to me to show her I'm successful. It'll be my way of saying thank you for helping me get here.



Charles thanks his mom for helping him get to college and accomplish his goals.

In 11th grade my friends and teachers were talking about college more often. I started to realize my mom wasn't yelling for no reason—everything she was telling me was to help me—so I started to listen. I needed to focus and work hard.

wanted to stay in my neighborhood with my friends. I kept trying to convince my mom to let me go to my home school, Santee. "Santee's new, it's nice," I'd say. "My best friend is going there. Why can't I go there?" She would respond, "King Drew sends a lot of students to four-year universities. You'll have a better chance of getting into college." But I figured I could go to college no matter which high school I went to. In the end I didn't have any say, so I ended up going to King Drew.

When I got to King Drew I was still lazy. I was tired when I got home from basketball practice so I wrote anything down for my homework and went to sleep. I wouldn't study for tests. I'd think, "I'll remember what I learned," but I was wrong. I had Bs and Cs. When I got a C on my report card my mom would say, "You need to bring that up." I'd think, "OK I got this, I'm going to do this." It was high school and a new start so I wanted to do well. But it was hard to improve my grades because I procrastinated and talked to my friends in classes I didn't like.

"Wow, for what?" I asked. She said, "Your mom lied to the social worker saying I had died." I had never heard from my biological mother, so it was weird. She said, "I guess she was trying to get you back." I said, "Well she could have done it a better way." She said, "I think she's still on drugs, Charles."

I was in shock; it was so much to take in. It answered questions like why she didn't keep us but it raised more questions. Why couldn't she give up drugs? Were me and my siblings not good enough? Why hasn't she come to get me before? Why did she wait 17 years? Will I ever meet her or my siblings?

I wondered how my biological mom was doing now. I felt bad for her. I've seen TV shows and movies that made it seem like it's hard to get off drugs. Maybe if she wasn't on drugs she would have kept us and she'd be doing better.

I asked about my siblings and she told me that they were adopted by other families. I wondered how they

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A few of the foster youth stories we've published in L.A. Youth.

Editor Amanda Riddle works with Charles on his story.

Contact Editor Amanda Riddle at
(323) 938-9194
or ariddle@layouth.com

Invite Amanda to speak at your school, group home or foster agency about writing for L.A. Youth.

Got questions?

Go to layouth.com and click on the Foster Youth link to learn more and read stories written by foster youth.

L.A. Youth art contest: Injustice

RULES

- 1) Contest entries must be original artwork of Los Angeles County youth ages 13 to 19.
- 2) The work may be done in any medium, including acrylics, oils, charcoal, pencil, pen, watercolor, collage, multimedia, photography or sculpture. The dimensions should be 8 1/2" by 11". Three-dimensional artwork should include a photograph of the artwork.
- 3) Each artist may submit only one entry.
- 4) The artist's name, age, address and phone number should be included on the back of the artwork. If the artist is in school, the school's name should be included. If the artwork was created as an assigned project in a classroom, the teacher's name should be listed. Artwork will be returned if a return address is provided.



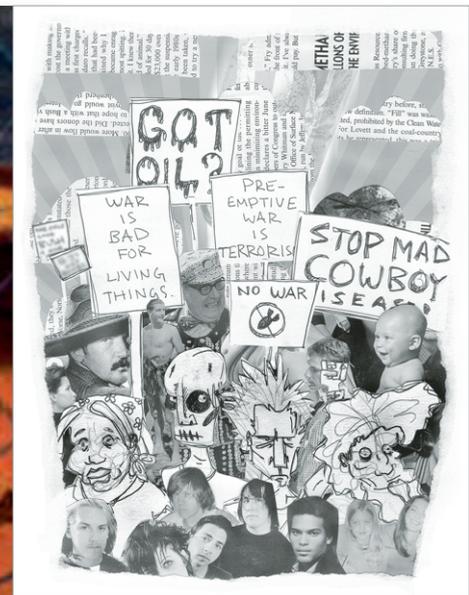
The teen staff of L.A. Youth will select a first-, second- and third-place winner as well as some honorable mentions. The first-place winner and his or her teacher will each receive \$100. The second-place winner and his or her teacher will each receive \$75, and the third-place student and teacher will get \$50. Winners and honorable mentions will be published in the May-June 2012 issue of L.A. Youth and on louth.com.

Questions?

Contact us at (323) 938-9194 or editor@louth.com.

**DEADLINE:
MARCH 31,
2012**

Send your submission to:
**L.A. Youth Art Contest
5967 W. Third St., Suite 301
Los Angeles, CA 90036**



Illustrations from L.A. Youth archives

Art has always been used as a form of expression. Since the beginning of civilization, artists have been using art to communicate their ideas about injustices like oppression, the inhumanity of war, civil rights, political corruptness and other issues important to them and their society. That's the true beauty of art. It's more than just a pretty picture—it can carry a message. Art can be a form of protest and a way for artists to try to create change.

For this year's art contest, we want you to create a piece of art about an injustice. It's your chance to raise awareness about an issue you care about. It could be about an unfairness

you see in your community, like bad schools, discrimination against certain groups like gays or minorities, or not enough opportunities for the people who live there. Or it could be an injustice happening around the world, like war, poverty or people living without freedom. Before you get started, think: What do you care about? What do you think is wrong in the world? How can you express your idea visually in a way that other people will understand what you're saying?

We hope these images from L.A. Youth's archives help inspire you. The image of the girl at the fence is about immigration. The artist said he was depicting a young Mexican

girl who has been separated from her family members who are living in America illegally. The fence represents the Mexican border and she is imagining how their lives are. The flag image was the artist's redesign of the American flag. She said, "Everyone says America is the best country, but human rights are still being violated." In the image of the fist, the artist has a more positive message and seems to be saying that we can fight AIDS. And there is an image of people protesting war.

You can also go to <http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld> and click on Guernica to read about Pablo Picasso's famous mural protesting the Spanish Civil War.

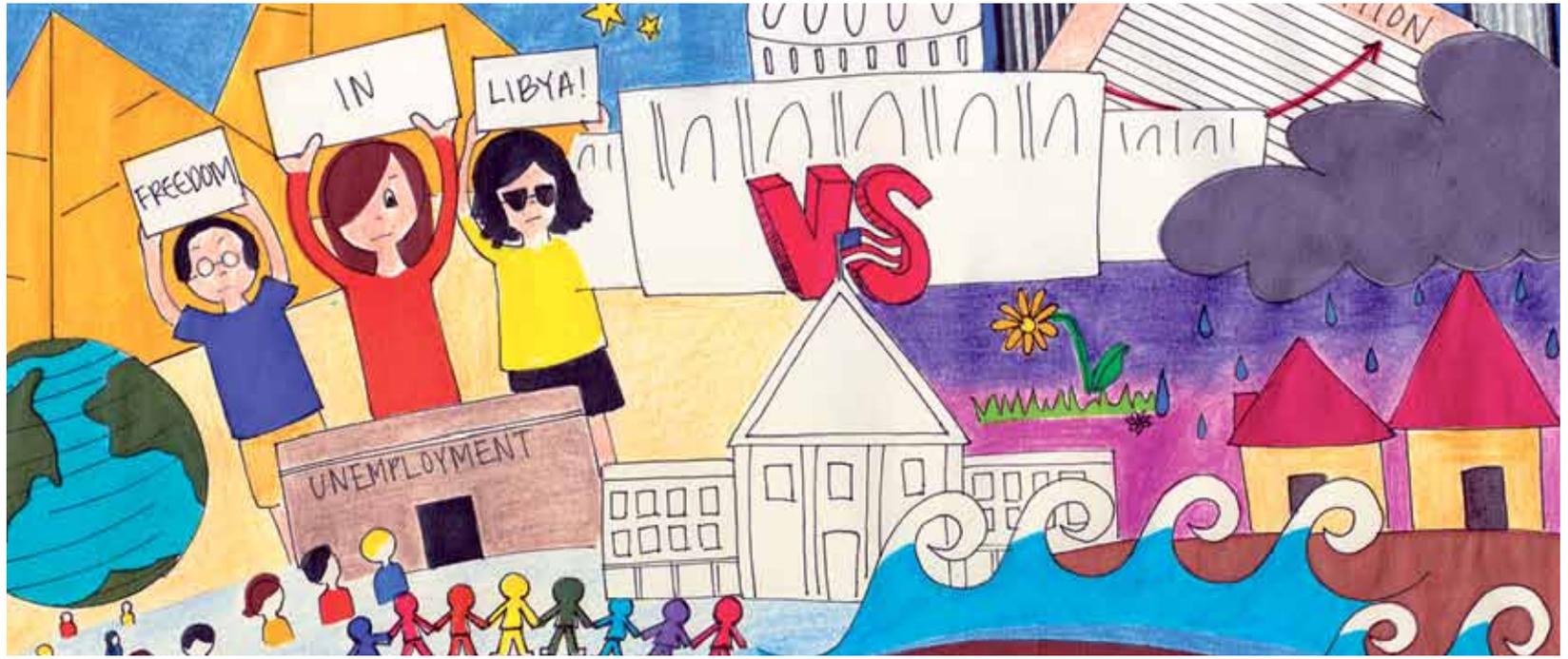


Illustration by Alison Lee, 15, Whitney HS (Cerritos)

Learning beyond books

I want to be informed about what's going on in the world, but my teachers ignore current events

By Kiera Peltz
17, CHAMPS (Van Nuys)

When Osama bin Laden was killed on May 1, my friends' Facebook statuses immediately filled my newsfeed declaring "Osama's Dead!" and "Obama Got Osama." Friends texted me to turn on the TV news. This was going to be a front-page story for newspapers around the world. Unfortunately, the next day in school none of my teachers mentioned bin Laden's death. Instead, in AP U.S. history, we continued learning about the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression.

I was upset. I wanted to hear the other students' reactions and learn more about the events leading up to bin Laden's capture and death. While reading news articles is informative, I learn so much more when I'm debating with my classmates because I'm able to hear many different opinions. I wish not talking about bin Laden's death would have been a shock to me, but I was used to ignoring current events at school.

In middle school things were different. On the first day of eighth grade, my history teacher told the class that we would begin each day with 15 minutes of current events. Mr. Graham said he would randomly

call on a student to share a current event, so we were required to come prepared every day with a piece of news. I was excited that I'd have a chance to learn more about what was happening in the world. Whenever my mom and her friends got together at our house they talked about events in the news, and I always felt stupid because I never knew what they were talking about.

That night I searched through all the news on Yahoo!'s homepage so that I could impress my teacher and classmates by having the most interesting news in class. Finally, I came across an article about how scientists discovered that Einstein's brain was different from normal people's brains, and I knew this was perfect. I was disappointed that I wasn't called on the next day. But during our discussion about the economy, every hand in the classroom shot up to comment on how the recession affected their lives, with parents losing their jobs and families moving into smaller apartments to save money. We spent the entire class discussing this.

For the next nine months, every night right before I went to bed, I would scour my Yahoo! homepage for news. I read international and political news—anything I thought would spark an intense class discussion. Then the next morning I would rush to my first period and impatiently wait for the bell to ring so we could talk

about news from the day before. With liberals and conservatives in my class, we heard both sides of every argument, like why the war in Iraq was necessary or why it was the biggest mistake America has made. My mom thought I was finally learning things that would be useful in the real world like when I would be old enough to vote.

OUR EXCITING DEBATES ENDED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

I hoped high school would be a continuation of the debates in Mr. Graham's class. I was wrong. Not once in world geography, AP European history or AP U.S. history did my teachers mention anything that happened within the last decade. In AP U.S. history our class never even learned about a lot of important late 20th century events like the Vietnam War, Watergate and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

I realized in January how connecting history with current events makes both the past and the present more exciting. I was in the car with my mom, and she mentioned how her friend had traveled to Egypt right before the demonstrations there began. She then asked me, "What has your history teacher told you about the uprisings?"

“Nothing,” I told her. I felt awful. Since I still scanned headlines on Yahoo! every night and read a few articles, I knew that the Egyptian demonstrators didn’t like their government or leader so they were protesting. But I didn’t know what specific events led to the uprisings. Articles give me the facts, but discussions bring the facts to life. In discussions, everyone has a different outlook on the event or an interesting fact that no one else knows about. Afterward, I’m more inclined to look up articles and read them, but I need the discussions to develop that interest and help me understand the event.

My mom let out a sigh of frustration and began explaining everything her friend had told her about his trip to Egypt. She told me about how it started after one man in the nearby country of Tunisia lit himself on fire in protest of his lack of freedom. That inspired the rest of the country and then people in Egypt to begin protesting as well. The Egyptian protestors wanted their president, Hosni Mubarak, out of power and a democracy to take the place of their corrupt government. I learned more about the uprisings in those five minutes than I had from the previous week of simply scanning Yahoo! headlines and obviously more than

tions still occurred in the 21st century.

Now, when I hear someone mention the American Revolution, rather than ignore the conversation I put myself in the shoes of the Americans who made history. If my teachers drew parallels between present times and past times instead of making me cram and memorize for the exams, I would have a better grasp of the past and be more interested in it.

At the beginning of March, a few months after I made the connection between the American Revolution and uprisings in Egypt, I saw hundreds of Facebook statuses about a devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan. My friends posted links about the disaster and statuses about how their hearts went out to the people in Japan. They really cared about these people who lived an ocean away and paid attention to the evening news and read articles on the Internet for updates.

The nuclear power plants in Japan were on the brink of a meltdown as I read on Yahoo!’s breaking news, and my teachers didn’t say anything. Radiation had already leaked from the power plants into the ocean and air. At least once a week I asked my history, science and English teachers why we never talked about these

If my teachers drew parallels between present times and past times instead of making me cram and memorize for the exams, I would have a better grasp of the past and be more interested in it.

I had in school. The idea that one man’s actions could have such a big effect intrigued me. This was more than a simple demonstration; it was the beginning of a new government in Egypt.

In U.S. history when we learned about the American colonists declaring their independence from England during the American Revolution, I couldn’t relate because it seemed like ancient history. It was just another event I had to memorize for my test, which is what I feel I do for everything I learn in school—memorize for the exam and forget about it afterward. Once I connected the American Revolution to the uprisings in Egypt though, I realized how significant both events were.

THE PROTESTS IN EGYPT ARE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT WE LEARN IN CLASS

In 1776, most people probably thought that the American Revolution was started by a bunch of Americans who wanted to stir up trouble and wouldn’t amount to anything. Looking at where we are now as a country, they were dead wrong. A revolution can change the course of history, and now, in 2011, we are fortunate enough to witness another event that could be just as significant as the American Revolution: the birth of democracy in Egypt. I never realized revolu-

serious news stories. They either ignored my question with silence or said, “There’s just not enough time.” This frustrated me.

I received a call two weeks after the earthquake from my uncle. He heard I was going to Hawaii for spring break and was worried that I could face danger from the radiation. I hadn’t thought about whether the radiation leaks in Japan could affect me in Hawaii.

Since none of my teachers had talked to us about the nuclear power plant crisis and instead had us continue with handout upon handout, I researched this myself. After searching “radiation in Hawaii,” I read that scientists were unsure if there was a significant amount of radiation there. I still didn’t know if it was safe for me to travel to Hawaii, which is about 2,000 miles closer to Japan than California. A week before my trip, I asked my science teacher at the end of class if he thought it would be safe for me to travel to Hawaii. He responded with an indifferent, “I don’t know much about it, but you’re a big girl. Research it yourself.”

I couldn’t believe it. Teachers have become so focused on fulfilling their lesson plans and standards that they have forgotten that their job requires more than just teaching what’s in the textbooks. Their job is to help us become informed citizens. The only way

they can do that is by helping us understand the world through the past and present.

For this article, I wanted to understand the teacher’s perspective so I asked my history teacher, Mr. Thomas, why we didn’t learn more about current events.

TEACHERS AREN’T TO BLAME

He agreed with me that current events are one of the best ways to educate students. But, he said, teachers are limited to the state curriculum. “Therefore, we cannot teach what we want or what we think will even be more beneficial,” he said. “We must teach you the standards. Teachers do not have enough time to get through the standards, let alone the very important current events. And so, we are slaves to the system.”

I was surprised by his comment. I wasn’t expecting such an honest answer that matched my views. I had been blaming teachers this entire time for not teaching us about current events, but it wasn’t their fault. I felt bad for Mr. Thomas and all my other teachers because I could see now that they felt forced to teach only what would be on our state tests at the end of the year. After that I stopped automatically blaming my teachers for not discussing current events. The state should give teachers the freedom to teach us what they are passionate about in the context of their given subject. I would rather learn about the Great Depression while connecting it to our current economic crisis and spend a month on it rather than moving quickly through decades of events so we can cover all the standards.

I don’t remember one of Mr. Graham’s lectures from eighth grade. But I will never forget how great it felt to be so informed about the news. While some people may say that our history class should have used those 15 minutes as instruction time, to me that means that 60 minutes of class would have been wasted instead of 45. The lectures didn’t motivate me like the current events discussions did. They made every student so attentive and ready to participate.

It upsets me a lot that the standards are preventing us from learning about current events. While I understand the importance of passing the APs and other tests, I also know how important it is to be aware of what is going on in the world around us. When a class is excited to learn and passionate about what they are studying, they’ll retain the information better than simply memorizing for a test. Now in my senior year, I still remember everything we discussed about current events during my eighth grade history class, and the discussions and opinions I was surrounded by have helped shape my opinions and decisions.



The latest current event Kiera is learning about on her own is the Occupy Wall Street protests.

Where we get our news

SINCE SCHOOLS DON'T always teach current events, we asked our staff writers to share where they learn about what's happening in the world. They said they go to news websites, use social media like Facebook and Twitter, and even watch shows making fun of the news.



THE L.A. TIMES AND HUFFINGTON POST

I started getting into the news this summer. I used to not pay attention to it because I didn't know what they were talking about. But then I picked a project for school to write restaurant reviews and I started reading news stories on Yahoo! so I could learn how to write articles. When I didn't understand a definition or topic I looked it up online. I started reading about the demonstrations in Egypt and I was learning about things that mattered and I felt more connected to the world.

Now I sometimes buy the Los Angeles Times. I start with the front page and then I look for articles about politics or other parts of the world. I also read political stories on HuffingtonPost.com. It's helped me a lot in school. Right now I'm taking government and reading the newspaper shows me how the government really runs. We took a test and I was the only one who got an A plus. By reading the newspaper you can make up your own mind about what's right and wrong and not be influenced when politicians lie.

*Miguel Molina, 17,
Film & Theatre Arts Charter HS*

MY FACEBOOK NEWSFEED

With the economy in bad condition and UC tuition rising, I like to know what's happening in the world and how it affects me. I also like being informed because it makes me feel smart. In class if the teacher talks about a current event, I like being able to contribute. In the mornings while I'm getting ready for school, I watch KTLA. The weather reports are important to me because I dress according to the weather. In the evenings I watch the news in Spanish with my parents. They focus on things happening in Mexico and Latin America. Both my parents are from Mexico so they like to see what is happening there and I feel connected to my culture through the news. Another way I keep up to date is by "liking" news organizations on Facebook. I've liked a few news pages such as L.A. Youth, LA Weekly and a few Spanish news organizations. This is easy and convenient because updates and breaking news show up in my newsfeed.

Jessica Marin, 17, Culver City HS

THE L.A. TIMES, ECONOMIST AND NEWS SITES

I check the news several times a day. It's a bit like an addiction. When I was in ninth grade, I started reading the news to prepare for speech and debate competitions. I enjoy following current events because I learn a lot about the world, like when I read articles about the stock market and the global economy (although it can get really confusing sometimes). When I read something really interesting or surprising, I share it with my friends.

My family gets the Los Angeles Times every day and the Sunday New York Times. I usually read the front page, local news and the comics (I like Frazz). I get the Economist magazine every week, which is my favorite news source because of how sensible and balanced it seems. I also read online sources

like CNN, the Washington Post and KTLA because they are free and at KTLA.com I can get updates about what's going on in my area. It takes me only 30 minutes a day to stay informed.

Aaron Schwartz, 16, Gabrielino HS

THEHILL.COM

I discovered TheHill.com one night while searching for information about a bill for my government homework. It's a website that monitors what's happening in Congress and many of the articles are about issues I'd never heard of before. This website made me realize how much power the people in Congress have to pass laws that affect the American people, whether in a good way or a bad way. As future voters, we will have the power to change our society, but to do so we must be informed. I intend to stay informed about politics so that when I become a voter, I can make decisions that reflect my interests and values and vote for public officials who have similar views.

*Laura Rios, 17,
Bishop Conaty—Our Lady of Loretto HS*

TWITTER

When I noticed that the Los Angeles Times had a Twitter account I started to follow them so I would know about breaking news as it was happening. I also started to follow The Associated Press and Time magazine. They tweet breaking news and interesting articles.

What I like about Twitter is that with the app on my phone I can access it wherever I am. Now I always know what's happening in L.A. and around the world. I always felt it was important to be informed but I didn't want to go out of my way to find the news. With Twitter, the news is always in front of me and I don't need to hunt down the information. Now I get local news such as robberies and accidents near my house, as well as national and world news, on my own time.

Victor Beteta, 18, University HS

THE DAILY SHOW AND THE COLBERT REPORT

I don't like the news because it always gets me upset. When I watched MSNBC I would get angry about the stupidity of our elected officials. But I still feel it's important to stay updated on current events, so I don't become ignorant. Weirdly enough, I watch two comedy shows, The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, to get my news. The shows air on Comedy Central and are parodies of news organizations like MSNBC and FOX. One time John Stewart was talking about tax increases on the rich and how Republicans are up in arms about rich people becoming an endangered species. He followed it up with a segment in which he was setting up a donation fund to help keep rich people from becoming extinct. I watch them for fun, but it's a nice bonus that they keep me up to date on my news.

*Nicholas Robinson, 16,
Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts*

Win money!

You could be one of three teens to win \$100 by taking our survey about school budget cuts

For the past few years because of the state's bad economy, schools have had to make cuts because they didn't have enough money to pay for teacher salaries, programs and supplies. By answering this survey, you can help L.A. Youth find out what cuts have been made at your school and how they have affected students. If you answer every question, you will be entered

in a drawing. Three people will be randomly chosen from all the entries to win \$100 each.

Please fill out the survey only once either here or at layouth.com. To be eligible to win the money you must answer all the questions and your name, address and phone number must be included. Only public school students who live in Los Angeles County can participate in the survey.

To be eligible for the drawing to win \$100, please fill in the following information. Your information will be kept confidential. It is used only to mail checks to winning entrants. The deadline is December 1, 2011.

Name _____
Email _____
Age _____ Sex: M F
School _____
Grade _____
Teacher (write in if you were given the survey by a teacher) _____
Home street address _____
City _____ Zip _____
Phone (_____) _____ - _____
Your race or ethnicity: Latino Black White Asian Other (write in) _____

1. Do overcrowded classrooms make you feel like your teachers don't have enough time to teach?

- No Yes

2. If your school had to make cuts to save money, what should they cut first? Rank the following things in the order that you would eliminate or cut back on, with 1 being the first thing you'd cut, 2 being the second and so on:

- ___ Teachers
___ Sports
___ Arts and music
___ Guidance counselors
___ Administrators (like principals and assistant principals)
___ Security guards
___ Custodians
___ Libraries
___ Field trips
___ Summer school
___ School newspaper or broadcast outlet
___ Other (please write in) _____

3. Have you been unable to participate in a program or class because it's no longer offered at your school?

- No Yes

3a. If yes, please list all the programs/classes that apply to you: _____

4. Have you experienced any of the following in your classroom in the past two years? (Check all that apply.)

- Not all the students had a desk to sit at
 Copied information from an overhead because there wasn't enough paper to make copies of a lesson for everyone
 Students had to share textbooks because there weren't enough for everyone
 Not enough computers or enough working computers
 None of the above

5. What have you or your family had to pay for in the last two years at your school?

- Participation on a sports team
 Sports uniforms
 Music program like band/choir
 Buses for a field trip
 Lab fees for science classes
 Supplies in art class
 None of the above

5a. If yes for any of the above, about how much have you and/or your family spent in the last two years? List estimated dollar amount: _____

6. Has your school cut any of the following journalism programs in the past two years? (Check all that apply.)

- Newspaper club
 Television station
 Radio
 Journalism classes
 No, none of the above have been cut in the past two years
 My school doesn't have any of the above

7. How many students are in your English class? Please get an exact count: _____

8. How many students are in your math class? Please get an exact count. _____

9. Do any of the following need repair at your school? (Check all that apply.)

- Graffiti-covered walls
 Classrooms/desks
 Public address/bell system
 Restrooms
 Air conditioning/heating
 Cafeteria
 Other _____
 No, all of the above are in good condition
 Please tell us more about the conditions of the areas you checked: _____

10. Have you left or thought about leaving public school because of the budget cuts?

- No Yes

11. Have budget cuts affected your ability to get the classes you need to graduate?

- No Yes

11a. If yes, which ones? _____

12. Are you planning to attend college?

- No Yes

12a. If no, briefly explain why not: _____

12b. If yes, where are you planning to apply?

You can check up to three choices.

- Community college
 Four-year public university in state
 Four-year public university out of state
 Private college or university
 Trade school

13. How do you expect to pay for college? (Check all that apply.)

- Family
 Loans
 Scholarships
 Work
 Military
 Other (Please list briefly): _____

14. How do you feel about your future? _____

Teachers who have 100 students answer the survey will be entered to win one of three \$500 STAPLES GIFT CARDS.

How would you describe you

DRESSED TO EXPRESS: THESE TEENS
 SAY THEIR STYLE CAPTURES WHO THEY ARE



Laura Rios

**17, Bishop Conaty—
 Our Lady of Loretto HS**

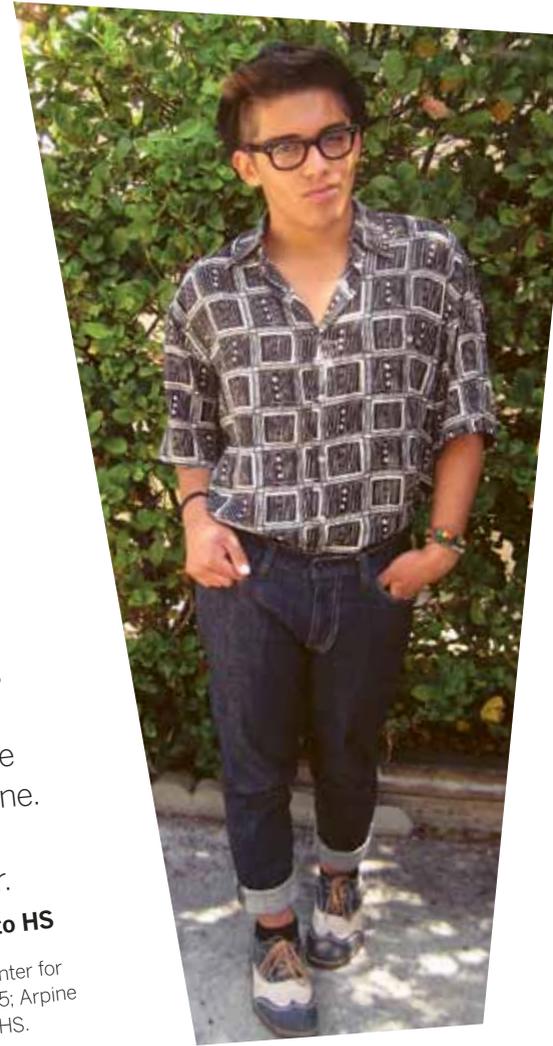
I like to mix a tomboyish style with girly pieces. My style is mostly relaxed and casual but it still has a girly tone. I like to dress casual because I feel comfortable and I'm able to express myself.

I go to a school where a uniform is required so wearing flower pins in my hair is my way of showing who I am. The first time I wore a flower was in middle school. I had a red rose that I bought at a hair boutique but I didn't wear it often. Then one day in high school, my mother gave me a green flower pin with sparkles and feathers sprouting from it. I wore it the next day. Some people loved it, others just stared. I still wore flowers because I felt they fit me perfectly. They showed that I'm different and have a creative side. I get my pins from small boutiques around Los Angeles. Now I have enough to fill up five drawers with roses, carnations, tulips and even butterfly and bow pins. I'm known as "The Flower Girl" at my school.

My fashion advice is to be yourself. If the current trend isn't your style, then make one. Be happy with whatever you decide to do, and don't judge others for what they wear.

Laura Rios, 17, Bishop Conaty—Our Lady of Loretto HS

Photos and interviews by Stacey Avnes, 17, Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies; Jazmine Mendoza, 16, Valley Regional HS #5; Arpine Tsaturyan, 16, Glendale HS and Jessica Marin, 17, Culver City HS.



Jaime Martinez

16, Valley Regional HS #5 (San Fernando)

I would say that my style is different. I think it's very unpredictable. I enjoy taking risks and very often I find my mother telling me I'm ridiculous and that I'm crazy. But it's what I feel comfortable in—it's just me. I go out of my house and see anything funky and different and I build an image in my head for an outfit.

your style?

Meshale Akopian

16, Glendale HS

My style is indescribable. I have different moods each day and dress myself according to my mood. Monday I might go casual to start off the week, Tuesday I may go Bohemian, and Wednesday I may go for a more relaxed beach look. I don't follow others, I make my own path.



Nick Bohana

16, Culver City HS

I don't know how to describe how I dress.
My inspiration is my own personality.



(below) **Paola Ramirez**
17, Culver City HS

I would describe my style as urban and Bohemian.

It's different cultures, like Guatemalan culture, the style of Hawaii, and the Philippines.



(above)

Stacy Grinberg

15, Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies

It's difficult to describe, but I would call it eccentric and eclectic with a love for tailoring. I love mod and punk and I reference those styles often. I draw inspiration from everything. It could be a time period, a particular person, a painting, a song, a piece of clothing. At this particular moment it's the 90s, the 50s and bright colors.

Fresh food instead of fast food

Helping build a community garden turned me into a vegetable lover



By **Blanca Gonzalez**
17, Hollywood HS

One morning in February, my friend Karen gave me an application for an organic cooking class called Just Food. Karen always pushes me to join things with her, so I automatically said yes. As I thought more about it, I realized this would be a good idea. I usually skipped lunch and after school ate frozen yogurt or snacks from 7-11 because it's just a couple blocks from school. For dinner, if my mom wasn't home I'd eat packaged cup noodles or macaroni and cheese. I thought being part of Just Food would help me eat healthier, since I would be learning to cook with organic foods that I would like the taste of.

A week later Karen, Stephanie, Jenneva, Jeremy and I went to the orientation, which was at a church in Hollywood near the 101 freeway. A woman led us to a lot out back with dirt and hay on the ground. I wondered where the kitchen and stove were.

There were about 20 of us from Bernstein and Hollywood high schools there and a few minutes later we met the woman leading it. Corrine, who was in her mid-20s with short brown hair, wore jeans and a T-shirt and smiled a lot as she described the program. She told us that Just Food wasn't only a cooking class. We'd also learn how to grow our own food in an organic community garden. Then we would learn to cook. I was surprised when she mentioned the gardening, but Corrine was so passionate when she explained that the garden would be organic and healthier than what people usually ate, that I got pumped up. She told us that although this lot doesn't look like a garden now, "you will transform it into a garden."

I was skeptical because none of us looked like farmers. I tried gardening in elementary school, but mostly because I liked digging holes and finding insects and worms.

Corrine gave us a brief description of the class. She said that we'd be building boxes for our garden. Then we would plant our seeds, and maintain our plants. Last she talked briefly about the cooking portion. She said that we'd be learning to cook with organic food and eventually we could use vegetables from our garden.

THE GARDEN WOULD HELP FEED THE COMMUNITY

Corrine concluded the orientation by talking about the importance of a community garden. Her smile widened when she told us how the garden would reduce pollution (because food wouldn't be transported in trucks) and how it would provide healthier choices for the people living nearby. The area had many homeless people. It seemed like this neighborhood could use a garden like this.

The next Monday Corrine broke us up into groups and had each group use a catalog to choose five vegetables, herbs or flowers that we wanted to grow. Karen and I chose a couple of tomatoes (these tomatoes were blue!), carrots, potatoes, rosemary and soybeans. We chose mostly based on the unusual shapes and colors rather than what meal we could cook.

After that we had to start building boxes that we would fill with soil. We were planting our vegetables and herbs in boxes because the ground soil was polluted, Corrine told me. Making boxes for the next two weeks was tedious manual labor in the hot sun.

Once the boxes were arranged in the garden, we had to line them with a layer of rocks for drainage because although plants like water, too much water will drown them. Then we finished off the bed by covering it with a layer of black soil. The lot was starting to look like a garden, just as Corrine had said it would.

About four weeks into the class Corrine finally taught us how to plant the seeds and seedlings we had ordered. Seedlings are what seeds become right after they sprout. They look like a few inches of green stem in dirt in a hand-sized plastic pot. Corrine had us repeat everything she did with her seedling, starting with choosing the right place to plant it. I had to make sure my squash plant had enough space to grow. I chose the middle section of my bed because there was a lot of room.

We watered the seedling in its pot and then dug a small hole with our hands. I felt like a kid again as I felt the moist soil in my hands.

Next Corrine turned the seedling's small pot upside down and gently tapped the bottom until the seedling popped out. Then we had to "tickle the baby," which

means to use our fingers to gently loosen a plant's roots from the dirt that had taken the shape of the pot. This way the roots will extend once they're in the soil. Finally, Corrine put the seedling in the hole and packed soil around it for support. As I finished, I gently patted the soil around my squash. In my head I was saying, "I hope you grow" and "I won't let you down." I wouldn't forget to water it, like I had with the cucumbers I tried to grow in elementary school.

During the next few weeks, I learned that the correct way to water plants is to pour the water on the soil around the plant (instead of directly on the plant) so that the water can be absorbed more efficiently by the roots. We also learned that it's best to water early in the morning or late in the evening when the sun isn't as high in the sky. This prevents the water from evaporating before it can be absorbed.

To teach us how to trim a plant, Corrine demonstrated how to cut off the lifeless, yellow and brownish leaves that were hanging down. If a portion died we had to cut it off to help the rest of the plant grow. After that whenever any of us saw brown or yellow leaves and branches we'd carefully take them off, making sure to rip off only the dead part.

WORMS WERE HELPING OUR GARDEN GROW

Since we were building an organic garden we used a mix of ground up seaweed, fish and other plants as well as worm poop for plant food, not chemical fertilizers. Corrine dug a hole in one of the beds, spread newspaper down and added worms. She told us that the worms eat newspaper and then they poop it out, which adds nutrients to the soil. Worms also shuffle the soil and its minerals, so that the minerals don't sit at the bottom of the bed where the seedlings can't reach. I was fascinated by the abilities of these worms, and how they actually like to eat newspaper!

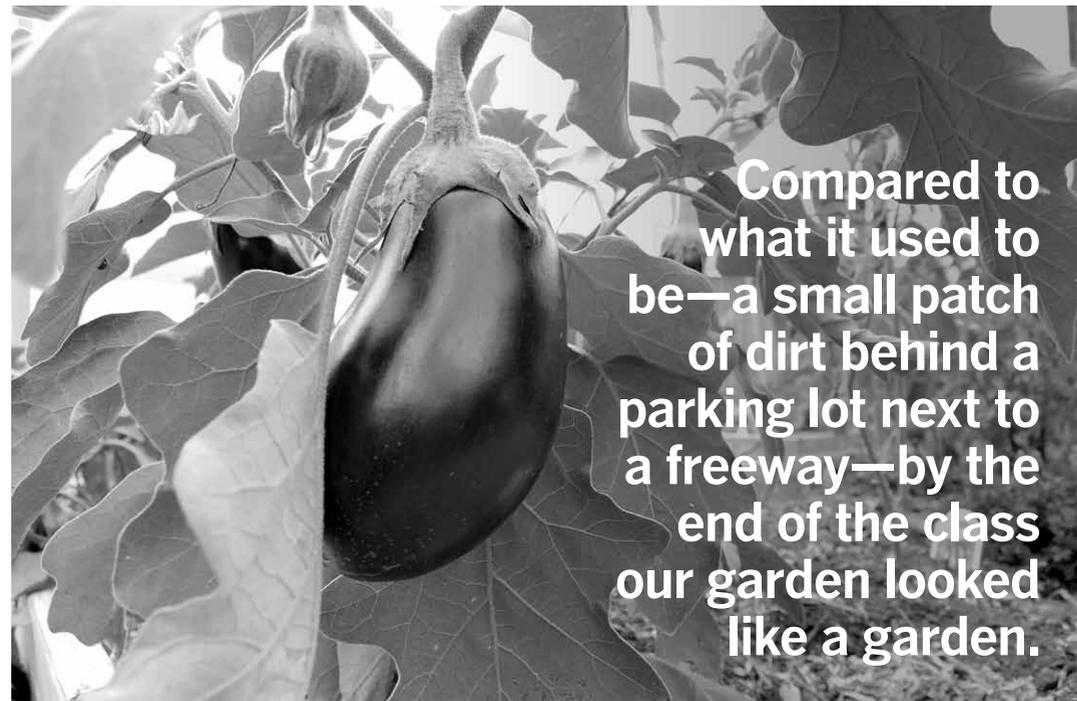
Halfway through the class, all the plants in a couple boxes had died. Corrine told us that it wasn't anyone's fault. Sometimes plants just don't grow.

Corrine let the students organize the new boxes. As we were choosing our layout someone remembered something we had learned. "We have to water our bed and seedlings," someone said. Then we looked at our layout and made sure that we had spaced things out correctly. Everything looked swell and we were ready to put everything in the bed.

"Wait!" my friend Jenneva said. She pointed out that my squash seedling and another squash seedling were way too close.

"Oh that's right!" I said. "Thanks!" I was relieved that we were there to catch each other's mistakes. We switched the squash with some mint, which doesn't need as much space. Then I saw a spot that needed more water and told another girl. I felt proud that I had caught that and that we were applying everything we had learned. I felt closer to the plants in this box than the first ones I planted, because we did these on our own.

Once we had everything planted and were waiting for the vegetables to grow, we learned to cook. I liked how much I had learned about gardening, but this was what I had signed up for. A woman named Tanya taught



Compared to what it used to be—a small patch of dirt behind a parking lot next to a freeway—by the end of the class our garden looked like a garden.

us to make spring rolls, which were vegetables, small noodles and herbs wrapped in lettuce. For my filling, I chose noodles, carrots, beets and rosemary from the bowls of ingredients. I had never heard of spring rolls and I'm not the biggest veggie freak but that roll was amazing. I even made a second one with mint, hummus and other sauces. It was delicious too, but tasted different than the first one. This taught me how small herbs could dramatically alter flavor.

My other favorite cooking class was when we cooked with tofu. I had finally made peace with veggies but Corrine was asking for the impossible when she said we would be using tofu to replace meat as a protein. I love meat, especially beef. The good news was that we were cooking zucchini and quinoa, a rice-like grain loaded with protein. These were two of my favorites and perhaps the only healthy things that I ate regularly.

COOKING HEALTHY CAN BE TASTY

I had imagined tofu as a tasteless sponge but Corrine explained that it absorbs any seasoning it's in. She also said that the more water you drain the tougher the texture, which can make it feel more like meat. We placed our sliced zucchini, which was marinated in oil, into a pot and added sea salt, black pepper, onions, garlic and tofu. We took turns stirring the mixture. After the food was done cooking, I didn't want to eat the tofu. I still didn't believe it would taste good. But Karen insisted and the chewiness was amazingly similar to chicken. And the pepper, oil, sea salt and garlic made it taste great. I decided that I would eat tofu whenever I got the chance.

Corrine told us that tofu and some of the other vegetables we cooked with were available at bigger grocery stores like Ralphs, Trader Joe's and Whole Foods. This disappointed me. I was learning important information about healthier foods, but I would hardly ever get to cook with them because the grocery stores near my

house don't have them. I would have to wait until my mother absolutely needed to go to Ralphs to stock up.

Every once in a while I'd stare at the garden and although the plants were green and healthy, they still looked small. I wanted to see everything grow before the class was finished. And it didn't seem like that would happen. But by our last week, when we invited community members to the garden, I finally saw our cherry tomatoes and strawberries start turning red. And our bell peppers were starting to grow, though they were just tiny green bulbs hanging from a small stem.

Compared to what it used to be—a small patch of dirt behind a parking lot next to a freeway—by the end of the class our garden looked like a garden. The tomato plants were sprouting tiny red round spheres, the rosemary took up complete corners of most boxes and the squash were spreading as they pleased. I carried home a sunflower seedling on my last day. On my way home I realized how much fun gardening was.

I've been planning to build my own small garden since my parents got a new home. I created a layout and have an idea of where to get my seedlings from. I'm just waiting until the spring to start planting. I plan to grow foods like zucchini, and more importantly those foods that aren't at my neighborhood grocery store, like arugula and kale. I want to grow a variety of fresh and healthy foods so that I can eat better.



Blanca says all you need to start a garden is empty space, seedlings and dedication.

By Jazmine Mendoza*16, Valley Regional High School #5 (San Fernando)*

I went to San Fernando Middle School and in eighth grade I had to choose between Sylmar High or San Fernando High. When I told my friends I was going to Sylmar, they asked why. Most of them were going to San Fernando because they thought Sylmar was “ghetto.” The school had low test scores and a high dropout rate. I told them that my cousin, who took school seriously, went to Sylmar. And if she liked it then it must be a good school.

I want to be one of the few from my family to graduate from college. My mom would have done anything to be able to go to college, but she got pregnant with me and wasn’t able to finish high school. So a lot of my determination comes from me wanting to do what she couldn’t. When my sister and I complain about homework or school, my mom tells us that it’s not so bad. She says doing well in high school leads to college, a good career and a nice house.

I was excited to start high school because I knew I’d have more classes to choose from than middle school. And I would be only four years from college. But a couple weeks after ninth grade started, I thought my friends who chose San Fernando might be right about Sylmar being “ghetto.” Every day while I brought a shoulder bag

introduce ourselves and answer a couple simple questions like, “What’s your favorite color?” Then to test us the teacher picked students to sign in front of the class. But as he called names, one by one each student would shrug their shoulders and say, “I’m not going to do it.”

OUR TEACHER STOPPED TRYING

The teacher would say, “Really? We’ve only been working on it for the past few weeks.” The students would laugh in response. This happened several times and I could see that my teacher felt that pushing the students harder was worthless. So we kept moving slowly and I got so bored I brought a Seventeen magazine to read in class. In the end I felt like I hadn’t learned anything.

I didn’t tell anyone about how bad some of my classes were, because I didn’t know who I would complain to. My mom saw that I was getting good grades, so she never asked me about school.

A few months into the year, the students ditching and smoking in the hall and teachers giving up became normal to me. I had a few good classes, which I did well in, and to challenge myself I took health at a community college. But since I found my community college class challenging, I started taking it easy at Sylmar—just like everyone else. I stopped raising my hand to answer teachers’ questions and told my sign language teacher I wasn’t ready to take the tests, even when I was. The

teacher, who was one of my favorites, told all of us in his class to join the Humanitas program, which focuses on social justice, art, literature and history. This teacher recognized how bad some classes at Sylmar were and said that he enrolled his son in Humanitas because it was so much better. I liked hearing his honesty, so I changed to Humanitas.

In 10th grade I noticed drastic changes in students’ attitudes right away. Most of the students in Humanitas seemed excited to be in class. Everyone was on time, prepared and raised their hands to participate in discussions.

In class we did a lot of “feedback loop,” during which the teachers told us what they expected from us, and we let the teachers know what we expected from them. Our English teacher asked us what we wanted her to do to help us understand the material. I told her that when we are reading a book for class, she shouldn’t move on to the next chapters until she’s made sure we understood what we just read. In response to my suggestion, our teacher had us pair up after every few chapters of whatever book we were reading and discuss the characters and events we had just read about.

OUR DISCUSSIONS MADE ME THINK

One of my favorite classes that year was world history. One time our teacher asked us if we thought the

Getting the education I deserve

At my old school it felt like no one cared, so I switched to a program that’s getting me ready for college

jammed with notebooks and folders for each class, I saw other students walk in with no backpack, no books—just a pencil in their back pocket. Most students showed up late to classes because they were socializing on the quad. And once class started, most of them were talking to each other and not listening to the teachers.

The worst was my first-year sign language class. The class was overcrowded, which made it hard to hear the teacher over the talking students. And even when he got some students’ attention he would only have us copy him doing a couple simple signs. It was easy if you paid attention.

I was disappointed that the teacher had to dumb things down. We spent weeks learning how to say hi,

teacher let all of us take the tests later without any penalty. I was ashamed that I got sucked into that. I started thinking about transferring to a different school for sophomore year. I wanted an education that would prepare me for college.

I got mostly As and Bs on my report card, but I felt like I didn’t learn very much. And I failed geometry, because when I asked my teacher for extra help he would tell me that it was all on the board and ask me if I was listening. How was I going to do when I took more advanced classes like calculus? I began to give up on myself, but worse than that, I felt like my school gave up on me.

Toward the end of freshman year I learned that we had to choose an academy for sophomore year. The academies were smaller schools that specialized in a career path or subject and they were all on the Sylmar High campus. There were six academies: Social Justice Humanitas, Business, Law & Government, Health & Wellness, Visual & Performing Arts, and Future Teachers. Once we chose our academies, we’d have all our classes with the same students and a small group of teachers who taught only at that academy.

I planned to choose Health & Wellness because my goal was to become a doctor. But on the day we were supposed to turn in our applications my life skills

slave trade was an act of racism. An opinion we read in our textbook said that the slave trade wasn’t racist. The argument said that black people ended up as slaves because the Europeans found their slaves in Africa where almost all people happened to be black. Some students agreed and took the position that the Europeans didn’t intend to enslave Africans just because they had darker skin. The other side said it was racist because slavery was dehumanizing and white people owned black people as slaves, not the other way around. I wasn’t sure what to think, because I could see both sides. This type of discussion was common in world history and everyone tried to come well-prepared for them.

All the teachers in Humanitas encouraged us to ask whatever questions we had and even to stop by outside of class to get them answered. A few times after my English teacher explained our assignment to the class, I would call her over to explain it again to me because sometimes it helps me to hear things twice. She was always happy to do that.

In Humanitas the last period of the day was advisory. If you needed help with a class, you’d ask your classmates in your advisory, or you could go to the teacher whose class you were struggling in. One day a lot of us were saying that we weren’t learning much



Jazmine loves everything about her school, she just wishes it had better lunch food.



in chemistry. Our advisory teacher overheard us and asked what was wrong. We told him that our chemistry teacher took too much time telling us how to organize our notebooks and not enough time explaining chemistry or he went off topic. Our advisory teacher was surprised and immediately suggested a plan for Humanitas students to rate their teachers. Each teacher would be evaluated on a 1 to 5 scale on things like the quality of their lectures, class control and preparation.

We liked our chemistry teacher—he was a nice guy—we just wanted him to teach better. When our chemistry teacher saw the results, he acknowledged that he wasn't using the class time efficiently. After that he stopped spending so much time on notebook organizing and stayed on topic more, and by second semester the class was a lot better.

STUDENTS LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER

Another thing I liked was that each student had a mentor who was an older student, and we also mentored freshmen in Humanitas. One day toward the end of the year I was feeling out of it so I was relieved when Jairo, my mentor, came and asked how I was doing. I told him that everyone's bad mood was bringing me down. He

reminded me to keep studying for the upcoming AP world history exam (he was always telling me to stay on track academically) and we also talked about my boyfriend. That talk made my day.

If there had been mentoring freshman year, I know things would have been better. When I was lost in my geometry class, I didn't know who to ask since my teacher didn't help me even after I asked. If I had had a mentor, he or she could have directed me to someone who could have helped.

As part of Humanitas we even went on a college tour and visited UC Santa Barbara, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Stanford and Berkeley. After touring each university, we would sit with a group of current college students who grew up in the San Fernando Valley. They told us how they came from the same place as us, and if they made it to a university, then we could too.

I also learned what classes and standardized tests I needed to take to go to college. We calculated our GPAs and saw what colleges we might be able to get into. This was like a new world. Toward the end of my sophomore year I felt like I was back on track for college.

Humanitas has challenged me and given me the support to meet those challenges. I think it's good that the teachers in Humanitas ask for our best, because in

WE'RE ALL CONNECTED

To build a sense of togetherness, Jazmine and her classmates passed a ball of string to each other as they defined what "community" meant. Photo by Victor Beteta, 18, University HS

the end that's what everyone in life will ask for. Seeing the classes my freshman year at Sylmar not asking for my best made me think, "Why should I try my hardest?"

At the end of 10th grade, we learned that our Humanitas program would be moving from Sylmar High to become part of the new Valley Regional High School #5, so I made the switch, too. I was a little afraid because I wasn't sure if Humanitas would be the same. But from the first day Humanitas didn't let me down. The teachers are constantly asking whether we like not having bells on campus, how we like the curriculum, and if our teachers are teaching well. It feels like we students are helping run the school, and we feel a responsibility to give serious and honest feedback. It's exciting to smell freshly painted hallways and not sit at tagged up desks like we had at Sylmar. The environment within Humanitas is so comforting that it makes me love school 10 times more. I can't wait to make these last two years in high school the best.

Standing up for gay rights

I joined the Gay-Straight Alliance to fight homophobia at my school

By Kristy Plaza

17, Duarte HS

At my school same-sex couples are welcome to every school dance. The administration is trying to create an open-minded environment, but the reality is that not all students at my school are tolerant. There are guys who call my gay friend Tom* offensive things like “you stupid, sick fag” whenever they see him. He told me that even though now he doesn’t care what “a bunch of idiots” think, the attacks used to make him sad. But during high school he decided he wouldn’t let the words hurt him anymore. Whenever I hear stuff like this I think, “Why is there such hatred in this world?”

We’re seniors now, but people have been picking on Tom since middle school because of his high-pitched voice and how he giggles a lot. I was frustrated by how he was treated. Gay or straight, everyone can be hurt by words and we all deserve kindness and respect. I eventually realized that if I didn’t stand up for gay rights, then I’d be just as bad as those who make fun of people who are gay. So sophomore year I signed up for my school’s Gay-Straight Alliance—a club for gay and straight students to combat the homophobia gays face.

When my best friend, Angie, and I walked into our first meeting there were about 15 people writing on pieces of paper. The advisor, Dr. Brown, told Angie and me that everyone was writing questions that they were too embarrassed to ask out loud. I was surprised that kids were embarrassed to ask questions. Since it’s common at my school to hear students use “fag” and “that’s so gay” as an insult, it seemed like it took courage to join GSA. After the other students wrote their questions, Dr. Brown put them in a box and pulled out many that asked how someone should come out to their parents.

Everyone sat in an awkward silence for about a minute shifting their gazes from the ceiling to the floor. I said that even though I’m straight, I thought that you should tell your parents, but only if you’re prepared for the consequences, like getting kicked out of the house. It would be better to know if your family would accept you for who you are. No one said anything for a minute.

A BOY SHARED HIS FEAR OF COMING OUT

Then another student said that he was almost certain his parents wouldn’t accept him when he came out. But he was tired of keeping his secret and decided that he would tell them anyway because he had learned to accept himself. (A few months later, after he came out, he shared how he was surprised that his parents were

**To protect his privacy, the name of Kristy’s friend has been changed.*



Illustration by Michelle Cao, 17, Temple City HS

supportive and accepted him for who he was.)

A girl then shared that she knew her parents wouldn't understand because of their religion. She told us her mom referred to homosexuality as "disgusting." She would just nod when her parents expressed their views on homosexuality, and would sometimes later cry in her room. When I heard her story, I understood why she didn't come out to her parents and realized that coming out was more complicated than I had thought.

I thought it was only ignorant kids and teens who openly discriminated against homosexuals. But during a meeting at the beginning of junior year, a club member's dad talked about the obstacles he had to overcome as a gay man. He shared what it was like having to quit his job because people gossiped about his sexuality. After he came out, some of his friends and relatives called him "faggot" and "homo" and no longer welcomed him in their homes. He said he felt like he was treated as if he had a deadly disease. But he endured the harassment because his immediate family supported him. I thought adults were more mature, but hearing about their cruelty made me tear up.

I RECRUITED OTHERS TO JOIN

I think that since society is still not as accepting as it should be, I need to do whatever I can to promote tolerance. One day in P.E. some friends and I were talking about how people at school weren't open-minded about sexuality. I brought up GSA and explained how it's a great place to stand up for equality and four of them, two who are straight and two who are bisexual, joined.

The students at my school need to learn the tolerance our GSA promotes. When one guy says to another that he looks good, he feels like he has to immediately say, "No homo." When I hear someone say that, I tell them, "Please don't say that. It's offensive and I'd appreciate it if you didn't say things like that. Thanks." I don't explain to them why it's offensive because I don't think they would listen to me. I know that I may not be able to make them believe in gay rights the way that I do, but I still want them to stop saying hurtful things.

I know that some people think I'm a lesbian because I'm in GSA and also probably because I hug my female friends and kiss them on the cheek, which is how everyone in my family greets people. But I don't care because I think it's important for people to stand up for what they believe in, regardless of what anyone else might think. When there are class discussions related to same-sex marriage or people's rights, I make sure to say everyone is entitled to equality. I want to help make sure that everyone is accepted because we all deserve it.



Kristy says that straight supporters should join or start Gay-Straight Alliances at their schools.

RESOURCES FOR LGBTQ TEENS

A list of helplines, resources and organizations that provide support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning teens.

SUPPORT AT SCHOOL

GAY, LESBIAN AND STRAIGHT EDUCATION NETWORK (GLSEN)

www.glsen.org
Offers speakers, conferences, LGBT-friendly materials to use in schools and develops policies to end discrimination in schools.

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE (GSA) NETWORK

(213) 482-4021
www.gsanetwork.org
email: socal@gsanetwork.org
Information on how to start a Gay-Straight Alliance club at your school, how to work with other Gay-Straight Alliances in your area and how to fight discrimination and abuse in schools.

PROJECT 10

(626) 577-4553
www.project10.org
email: project10@hotmail.com
Provides educational support and advice to LGBT students at LAUSD schools.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

BIENESTAR SABORES YOUTH PROGRAM

(323) 727-7896
www.bienestar.org
email: info@bienestar.org
Community center for gay and lesbian Latino youth. There are locations in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties. Bienestar offers free and confidential HIV testing (call for hours at each location), counseling, support groups and activities.

L.A. GAY & LESBIAN CENTER (LAGLC)

(323) 993-7400
www.laglc.org
email: Youthservices@laygaycenter.org
Provides different services to youth including a transitional living program and a daytime drop-in center for homeless youth, and free HIV/STD testing.

LIFEWORKS MENTORING

(323) 860-7373
www.lifeworksmentoring.org
email: info@lifeworksmentoring.org
Mentoring program for LGBTQ youth ages 12-24 run by the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center. Organizes annual Models of Pride conference.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE

(877) 727-4747
Anonymous 24-hour suicide hotline.

TEENLINE

(310) 855-HOPE
teenlineonline.org
Anonymous hotline staffed by trained teens who will listen and make referrals for all issues. Open 6-10 p.m. Or you can text "TEEN" to 839863 between 5:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.

THE TREVOR PROJECT

(866)-4-U-TREVOR
www.thetrevorproject.org
24-hour hotline for suicidal gay teens. Free, confidential and staffed by counselors.

LEGAL SERVICES

GAY YOUTH FOSTER CARE HELPLINE

(866) LGB-TEEN ext. 350
www.lambdalegal.org
For youth in foster care who have questions about LGBT-related discrimination or abuse, a service of Lambda Legal.

LAMBDA LEGAL

(213) 382-7600 and ask for the Help Desk
www.lambdalegal.org
Provides assistance, advice and referrals for all LGBT legal issues.

TRANSGENDER LAW CENTER

(415) 865-0176
www.transgenderlawcenter.org
A civil rights organization that advocates for transgender communities. Provides legal services and referrals to resources.

How can schools be more accepting of gay students?

Our teen writers say schools, teachers and students all need to do their part

Last month a 14-year-old boy from outside Buffalo, N.Y., killed himself after being bullied because he was perceived to be gay. The parents of Jamey Rodemeyer said in news reports that he was teased and bullied in middle school and online, including anonymous posts on his Formspring account. One post said, "JAMIE IS STUPID, GAY, FAT ANND UGLY. HE MUST DIE!" Another read, "I wouldn't care if you died. No one would. So just do it :) It would make everyone WAY more happier!" A recent national survey by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) found that nearly 9 out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender students had been verbally harassed at school in the past year, while 4 in 10 said they had been physically harassed. A few L.A. Youth teen writers got together to talk about the environments at their schools for gay and lesbian students and what they think can be done to make schools safer and more accepting places.

Julia Waldow, 16, Beverly Hills HS: I was really shocked when I heard about Jamey. It's so sad that some people feel they have to kill themselves because other people tease them so much.

Nicholas Robinson, 16, Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts: I feel my school is accepting of gays and lesbians. I think that's because it's an art school and they brought in a whole bunch of people from around the city who want to be there.

Editor Amanda Riddle: Do you feel students at your school can be more open with their sexuality because it's a more accepting place?

Nicholas: They can. They're not afraid that being gay will affect how other people treat them. All schools are trying to push tolerance, but I believe it's really the students who are pushing the tolerance to a good level.

Julia: My parents taught my sister and me that you can't judge people just because of what they look like or what they wear or how they act, so we learned about tolerance in our family. When I went to school it bothered me that other students weren't brought up the same way.

I know a few kids who are gay. Some of them are popular and they're treated well, I think because they're popular. But other kids are made fun of because of their sexual orientation. There is a kid at my school who is openly gay. I came in one day to my classroom and I saw that on the computer was a picture of him and around it someone had drawn inappropriate genitalia on his face. I was so shocked that somebody would do that. What if he saw this picture?

I think they [the school] didn't know about these



Teens gathered at L.A. Youth for a discussion with Editor Amanda Riddle.

incidents because people hadn't reported them. But I feel like this year they're really cracking down on bullying. They've given us a lot of papers with new school rules. There's a whole section on bullying.

Amanda: How did students respond to the photo incident?

Julia: They were like, "Don't worry, it's funny." I said, "No seriously, that's really offensive. You need to take that down," so they took it down.

Rosie Baek, 15, South HS (Torrance): A guy I knew was openly gay and he was a senior last year. There was this one kid who blew up at Jared. [He said,] "You're going to go to hell" and he started screaming at him. Band members got protective of Jared. Jared said, "What's wrong with you?" to that guy. No one ever did anything. I don't think anyone reported it. We don't have any school policies on gay bullying [that I know of].

Amanda: What do you think your schools should do

At the beginning of the year a lot of teachers have guidelines for the classroom. A lot of them talk about harassment and how they'll have no tolerance of that in their classroom and if they see it, they will report it. I think that helps.

to make school a more tolerant place?

Rosie: I don't know because the school does have a Gay-Straight Alliance club but all the [other] students think of it as a big joke. One day the members of the club wore duct tape over their mouths as a statement and everyone rolled their eyes and laughed it off.

Nicholas: I think that the school should initiate the [discussion that] bullying is wrong and don't pick on other people because of their sexual orientation. We have an assembly every year that says don't bully people for sexual orientation, race or anything else. I think it stays in their head, that thought of what it does to people, and that helps them not do it. They talk about the punishment. Usually it's suspension.

Rosie: It's really different [at my school]. In middle school it was a lot harsher. Some guy posted on the school website, "blah blah blah is gay" even though he wasn't, just to make fun of him. Immediately the principal called him up to his office and they had a talk and I think he was suspended for a week.

Julia: We have a Tolerance Club at our school. The guy who runs it printed out fliers that have rainbow stripes on them and they say these bad things about bullying and have statistics on them. A lot of the teachers put them up on their doors so you can see them when you walk out, which I think is really good.

Amanda: Police are investigating whether they're going to charge students for bullying in the death of Jamey Rodemeyer. It seems more common that police are saying bullying could be a criminal act.

Nicholas: If it happens once, bring them in and talk to them, [then] let them go. If it happens more than once, you need to punish them, starting with suspension. If it keeps happening you need to consider any punishments beyond that. There's a point where you need to involve law enforcement if it's happening too often.

Amanda: Do you feel your teachers could be doing more?

Nicholas: At the beginning of the year a lot of teachers have guidelines for the classroom. A lot of them talk about harassment and how they'll have no tolerance of that in their classroom and if they see it, they will report it. I think that helps.

Julia: I had a class once where this kid was being bullied. [They said,] "Oh my god. You're so gay, you're so annoying. Why don't you shut up." The teacher was like "OK you need to stop" but it happened again and she just brushed it away. So I feel like teachers should do more to enforce that.

Rosie: I think teachers should receive better training.

By Amy Fan
17, Temple City HS

I got into animé in fifth grade. I liked animé and manga (Japanese cartoons and comics) because they were so different than the American ones I had seen. Animé characters were drawn with amazing details and big eyes, which made them look more beautiful. Throughout middle school, I joined online clubs for my favorite video games and animés. I liked browsing through art that fans made and finding new mangas to read.

But I thought it was weird that some fans would argue about which characters should be in relationships with other characters. When some animé fans talked about dressing up as a character they liked (cosplaying, which is short for costume playing) at animé conventions, I thought that was beyond geeky. And the pictures I saw in animé magazines of cosplayers in strange or revealing outfits, like guys in frilly dresses and people showing their midriffs, made me even more creeped out by the fans.

So when I got tickets to Anime Expo this summer at the Los Angeles Convention Center in downtown, I was afraid that I'd be surrounded by overly enthusiastic people in bright leotards and bikinis.

But I changed my mind about cosplayers a week later after seeing pictures of gorgeous cosplayers on an art website called deviantart.com. There was one cosplayer who looked so much like Riku from the video game Kingdom Hearts that it took me 20 minutes to figure out it was a girl dressed as a guy. They were so good at dressing up that it looked like the real character had jumped out of the video game as a human being. I realized that cosplaying was like a form of self-expression and then I wanted to try it too.

For Anime Expo, where lots of people would be cosplaying, I wanted to pick a character who was like me, (friendly, creative and helpful) and wasn't too hard to make or find clothes for. Ever since playing my favorite video game, Kingdom Hearts II, three years ago, I've always been a fan of Namine, a shy artistic girl who tried to help other characters, so I chose her.

COULD I TRANSFORM INTO THIS CHARACTER?

Even though we're both short and skinny, I worried that Namine's simple outfit would be difficult to replicate correctly. Namine was blonde and wore a plain white dress and light blue sandals (sometimes she carried a sketchbook). Messing up any detail would throw off my costume.

I read online posts on cosplaying, looked at YouTube tutorials for wig-styling and learned what make-up was best. I looked on deviantart.com for cosplay photos of Namine and noticed the mistakes that others made, like getting sandals in the wrong color or style. I also found out that eBay was the best place to buy the blue contacts and blond wig I needed. Namine also has pale skin, but there was nothing I could do about my tanned skin.

Bringing animé to life

It was exciting to dress up as my favorite character at Anime Expo



Amy dressed up as Namine from the video game Kingdom Hearts. She's posing with Sokka from Avatar: The Last Airbender.

Photo by Emily Fan, 14, Temple City HS

There were many types of sandals on eBay, but almost all of them had too many straps and too much design, or they were the wrong size or too expensive. I never found sandals the right shade of light blue, so I went with white.

Thankfully, Namine's white dress was simple, so I made it by sewing together two extra-large T-shirts. I sewed for three years as a hobby, so it wasn't hard. I saved my \$7-weekly allowance for six weeks to pay for my costume. When I got nervous about how much I was spending I reminded myself that some costumes cost up to \$200, according to what I read online. I was excited to wear my costume, but I was worried that my mom would get freaked out by the cosplayers.

THE COSTUMES WERE SO COOL

When my mom, sister and I got there, I was excited seeing people wearing costumes in the lines outside the convention center. But I was more amazed when we entered. It seemed like one out of every three people was dressed up. The best part was taking pictures of people dressed up as characters I recognized. I saw people cosplaying in big groups, like a Kingdom Hearts group, with fake weapons and black coats, and people dressed up as characters from Avatar: The Last Airbender. I also saw people going as couples, like Winry and Edward from Full Metal Alchemist. They looked so amazing that I felt sort of embarrassed that my cosplay was so easy to make.

Sometimes I burst out laughing at the funny cosplayers, like a Lady Gaga version of a character from the Yu-Gi-Oh card game or Waldo from the Where's Waldo books. The shirtless Pokémon and Mario guys were funny, too.

A few times, Kingdom Hearts fans asked to take a picture with me. Everyone was super-friendly. I had heard about fangirls screaming "Kawaii!" (the Japanese word for cute) and jumping on people, but everyone I saw asked first for a picture or a hug. I was happy that I chose a character I liked and every time someone recognized me or called out "Namine!" I would feel proud of my costume.

Even though I went for only one day, Anime Expo changed the way I looked at cosplayers and the animé culture. It was so much fun that when we were in the car going home, my sister and I started making plans to dress up and sell art at the next Anime Expo. One of my friends called me a "weirdo" after I told him that I had dressed up as Namine for Anime Expo, but I'm proud of the cosplayer inside me.



Amy's definitely going to dress up again for next year's Anime Expo.



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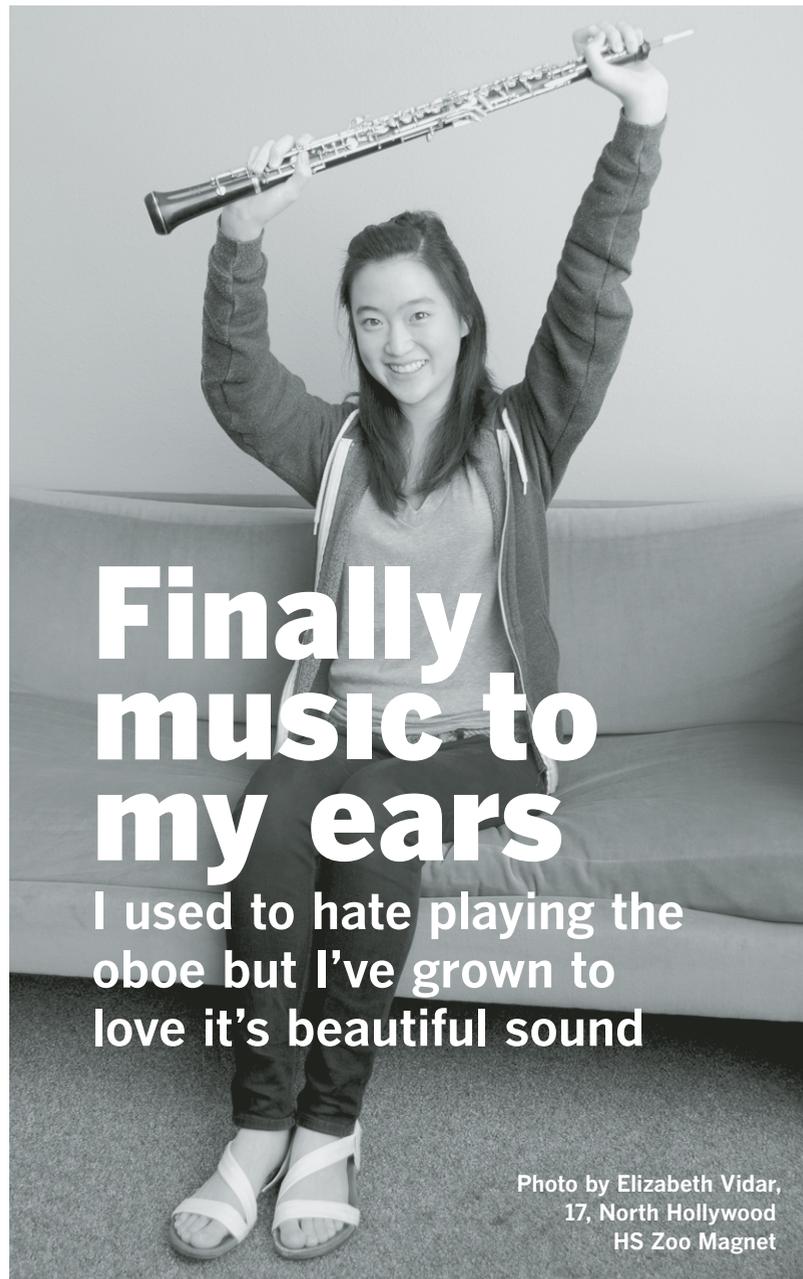
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Finally music to my ears

I used to hate playing the oboe but I've grown to love its beautiful sound

Photo by Elizabeth Vidar,
17, North Hollywood
HS Zoo Magnet

By Sydney Chou
15, Sonora HS

I've grown up in a family that listens to classical music all the time. So in fourth grade my friend and I joined band as clarinet players. I liked that the clarinets usually had the best parts in the songs. And the clarinets were the biggest section, which made me feel like I had joined the most popular group in the band.

So when my parents switched me from the clarinet to the oboe in sixth grade, I didn't agree with them. But I've grown to like the oboe more and more over the years and now I thank them for their decision.

My parents wanted me to switch to the oboe because they said it had a beautiful sound and not many people play it. I had never heard of an oboe. I told them several times that I didn't want to switch because clarinet was pretty easy. They insisted though. I tended to do what my parents said without too much complaining, so I reluctantly started oboe lessons.



Sydney is learning to make her own oboe reeds, which takes a long time and is really hard.

As we drove to the first lesson, I wished I were home. When my teacher brought out her oboe I was surprised how much it looked like a skinnier clarinet, except with a different reed. I couldn't blow a single note. I thought to myself, "See mom and dad, I can't play this instrument." My teacher taught me how to hold the reed in my mouth and a nasty, high-pitched quack came out.

My parents bought me an oboe a couple weeks later. When I practiced, I intentionally held the reed too far into my mouth to make ugly sounds hoping that my parents would let me quit. Rather than convincing them to let me quit, they said, "Keep practicing, you're doing a really good job." Even though I was trying to sound bad, my fingerings for the notes improved through repetition.

When adults, like my parents' friends, heard that I played the oboe, they thought it was good that I played something more unusual. I didn't understand why they thought being different was good.

In seventh grade, my parents switched me to an oboe teacher who entered me in more competitions. I didn't want to compete, but if I was going to I wanted to do well. So I practiced more and my high-pitched quacks became actual notes (though not always in tune). As I became a better oboe player, surprisingly, I started to like it.

A few months later I auditioned for the Southern California Youth Philharmonic. When I made the orchestra I was happy, but not as happy as my parents. They called my grandma right after they found out and told their friends.

I had never been in an orchestra and I was nervous on my way to the first rehearsal. I was the last of the five oboists. Everyone else in the orchestra seemed to play the music as if they had practiced it before, even though this was the first time any of us had seen it. I ended up moving my fingers and faking it. After the two-and-a-half hour rehearsal, I dreaded the thought that I would have to go through this every Saturday for the rest of the year.

After that first rehearsal I increased my practicing from 15 minutes a day to 25. I was getting better but oboe practicing, rehearsals and concerts kept me from going to parties or friends' houses. And it still sounded too much like a duck to me, which some school friends I'd invited over for dinner said when they heard me practicing. I used their comments as motivation to improve.

MY HARD WORK EARNED ME A BETTER SPOT IN THE ORCHESTRA

The summer before I started high school I switched to an oboe teacher who taught at the prestigious Colburn School in Los Angeles. I auditioned for the youth philharmonic again and I was second out of five oboists. When the principal oboist left because orchestra conflicted with his soccer schedule, I was excited to take his place, but also nervous. Now I would have to tune the orchestra and I would have solos. If I made a mistake everyone would notice. If I had played the clarinet in orchestra instead, I wouldn't have had this chance.

My new teacher helped me with the difficult solo parts and creating a loud, round sound. I didn't know that I could make my oboe sound like that. I practiced 30 to 45 minutes a day to perfect my solo parts. When I watched the recording my dad made of a concert, I was surprised by how beautiful I sounded. I was sad that

my friends who I had invited to the concert couldn't make it, because I didn't sound like a duck anymore.

I also could see why my parents liked the oboe so much. They wanted me to play a more unusual instrument so I would stand out. Although I didn't like the oboe at first, I'm thankful that they steered me toward an instrument where I get more chances to solo.

In June 2010, I auditioned for another orchestra and I was happy when I made it and would get to play with different musicians. I learned how to make an even better sound from listening to the principal

oboist and trying to match my sound with hers.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I love the oboe now. I'm excited to be in my school's band. I will be the only oboist, but it's cool because the conductor is excited about not needing to find another woodwind instrument to cover oboe parts. I'm also extremely excited to be the principal oboist in my orchestra next year. I'm grateful my parents chose this instrument for me. It was like they could read my future mind and knew just what I would enjoy.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

By Stieg Larsson

Reviewed by Amy Fan

17, Temple City HS

I started reading *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson after seeing it advertised around Borders. It was so fast-paced that I read the 600-plus page book in two days. The story is about a journalist, Mikael Blomkvist, and a computer hacker, Lisbeth Salander, who are trying to solve a murder in Sweden. However, as thrilling as the story was and as much as I was surprised by the twist ending, I felt like the book could have been written better.

The book is a thriller about a man haunted by the disappearance of his daughter. He hires Blomkvist to figure out the mystery. Blomkvist then asks Salander for assistance. Salander has dragon tattoos, but the significance of them is not explained. Despite how exciting it was to find out what happened, it wasn't realistic. Some of the later chapters were so unbelievable that I questioned how they'd even be possible. When one character was about to be hurt by the villain, another character arrived just in time to save him even

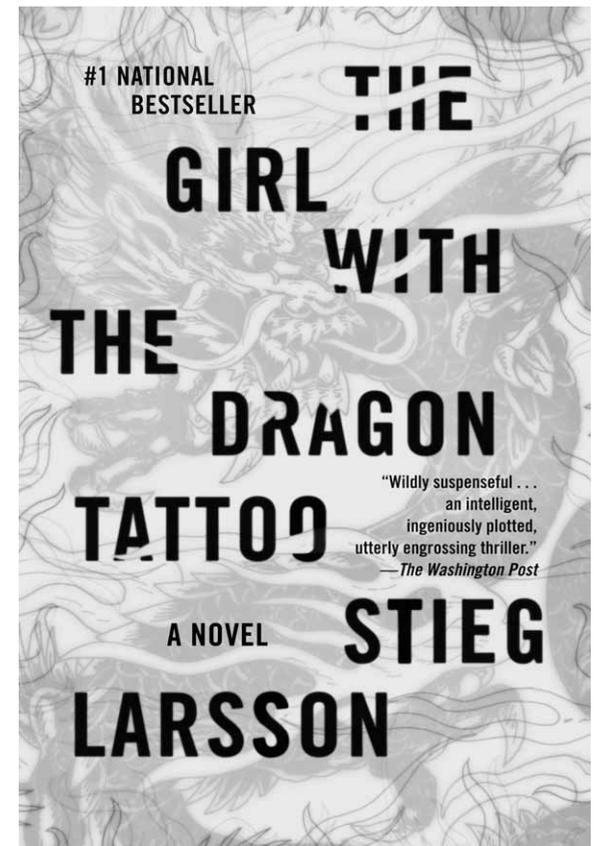
though she had no idea where he was.

Also, there were too many scenes in which the main characters talked and drank coffee and did things that didn't contribute to the plot. The ending also went on for another 50 pages after it should have ended, just like the *Lord of the Rings* ending that also drove me crazy.

And although most of the characters were realistic, Blomkvist didn't have much personality and I couldn't picture him in my head. I also couldn't understand why the female characters were so attracted to Blomkvist.

One thing I liked about the novel was that it was brutally honest. Many of the scenes were explicitly violent, but it sent the right message to the readers that violence against women was unforgivable. In Sweden, the title of the book is *Men Who Hate Women*. Before he died, Larsson was a big supporter of women's rights so I like how he created a strong female lead who's both tough and intelligent. I just wish she was more realistic. The author doesn't explain how she can hack into computers so easily and he makes everything too easy for her.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo was a thrilling read, but not without flaws. I'll check out the rest of the trilogy eventually, but the first book hasn't made me excited to start the next book, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*.



Band of Brothers

By Stephen E. Ambrose

Reviewed by Daniel Choi

16, Cerritos HS

My favorite historical event to study is World War II. Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* show how intense the fighting used to be. A few years ago while doing a school project, I came upon the book *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* by Stephen E. Ambrose. This is the best book I've ever read about World War II because it showed how hard it was for the Americans to win in Europe. The writing was so detailed that I could picture the scenes.

My favorite part of the book is when Ambrose describes the harsh winter. There weren't any heated tents or warm beds, so to stay warm the men had to stay in their foxholes (holes the soldiers dug to take cover from enemy fire), which weren't warm at all. The food from U.S. military headquarters always arrived cold. The soldiers' snow-drenched socks froze from the cold wind hitting them. These were the worst conditions they could have imagined. My eyes were glued to this book.

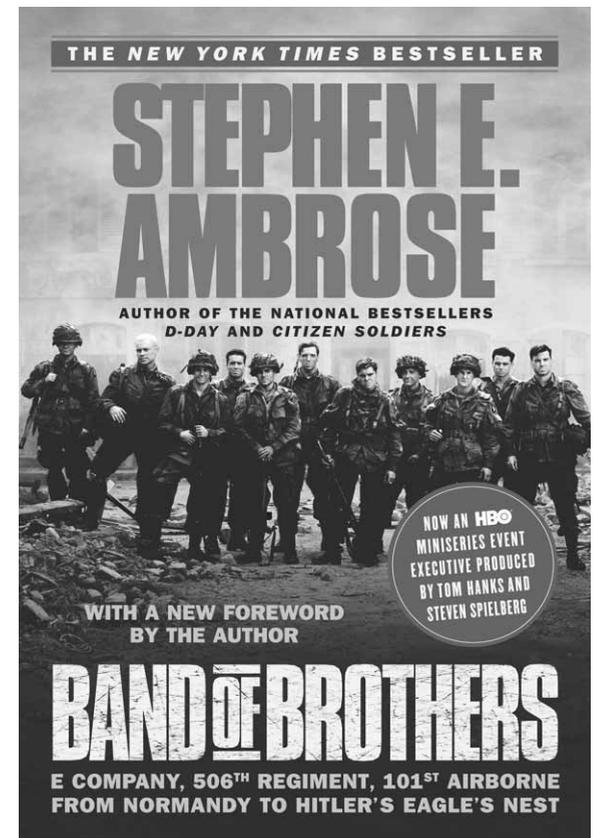
Ambrose learned all this information from inter-

views with soldiers of E Company who survived the war. These were the soldiers who parachuted out of planes and into battle. One of the main subjects is Private Winters, who rises to the rank of captain through the book.

Ambrose also included pictures of combat, group pictures of the regiment and squad, and even a sketch a soldier drew of the view from jumping out of a plane in the middle of a war. To me the most moving picture shows Private Winters in front of the entrance to a village they captured. Toward the end of the photo gallery, there's a picture showing Private Winters 10 years later standing in front of the same entrance. His hair was gray, he wore glasses and he had more wrinkles. It looked like he had aged 20 years, not just 10. I think Winters wanted to go back and see how much it had changed in those 10 years.

In the book, the soldiers first thought it was a pointless war and they all wanted to go home. But after freeing Jews from a concentration camp, they realized why they were in Germany and what they were fighting for. Before reading the book I knew the basics about World War II, but I didn't know anything about what life was like for the soldiers in the war. After reading this book I learned about all the challenges they had just trying to survive every day and how they overcame them.

This book isn't just for people who are World War II fanatics, but anyone looking for a good historic book with an interesting plot and great details.





30 Seconds to Mars

CD: This Is War

Reviewed by Kristy Plaza

17, Duarte HS

Ever since I listened to 30 Seconds To Mars's album, *A Beautiful Lie*, I've been hooked. And listening to the band's latest album, *This Is War*, only made me love them more.

The powerful lyrics on the first single, "Kings and Queens," inspired me: "We were the kings and queens of promise/ We were the victims of ourselves/ Maybe the children of a lesser god/ Between heaven and hell." By using words like "we" and "us," front man Jared Leto is including the audience in the songs. When I hear this song I feel like standing up and singing along, because I feel like I'm part of something bigger than myself.

Every song has a message. When I listen to "This Is War" I feel the need to fight for what I believe in.

The song "Vox Populi" makes me understand the true power of unity. The title is Latin for "the voice of the people." And that's exactly what the band is trying to be. At the beginning and end of the song, fans (who were recorded and added to the CD) are singing the lyrics. They say: "This is a call to arms/ Gather soldiers/ Time to go to war." Then Leto follows it up with: "Here we are at the start/ I can feel the beating of our hearts."

The rhythm of every song is repetitive but hypnotic. The music and words need to be repeated so that the band's message can get across: the world isn't perfect, nor are people, but there is hope for change as long as we fight for it.

Every song has a message. When I listen to "This is War" I feel the need to fight for what I believe in.



Cage the Elephant

CD: Thank You Happy Birthday

Reviewed by David Garcia

16, Monrovia HS

I think one of today's best indie bands is Cage the Elephant, which was formed by two brothers and their friends from Kentucky. Cage the Elephant's new album, *Thank You Happy Birthday*, is excellent. Instead of the screaming rock and blistering speed of their self-titled debut album, the band incorporates elements of punk, grunge and pop rock. They re-invented their sound, something I'm always excited to hear bands do.

The album opener, "Always Something," is already a new direction. The buzzing keyboards and twanging guitars are a tribute to 90s grunge. They create an eerie soundscape for the dark lyrics, which deal with murder and paranoia. Despite the intense lyrics, I felt that they were more about how everyone has issues we can't avoid.

"Shake Me Down" is a solemn number that's punctuated by bursts of drumming and electric guitar. The lyrics paint a picture of hope in dark times: "All my life/ I have seen/ People walk into the sea/ Plagued by constant misery ... Their eyes cast down/ I'll keep my eyes on the sun." It's more pop rock than most of their music, but I thought it was one of the best songs on the album.

Halfway through the album, the band returns to the ruckus rock of their first album with "Sell Yourself," about the pressure to sell out in the music industry. Singer Matthew Shultz screams out the lyrics, almost as if he's rapping, pausing only to allow guitarist Lincoln Parish a few moments for a chaotic solo. It's a song that will pump you up and have you bobbing your head to the lightning-fast tempo.

The band finishes on a lighter note with "Flow," a slower song with a tinkling guitar riff that you'll be humming to yourself later. *Thank You Happy Birthday* is one of the best albums I've heard this year.

They create an eerie soundscape for the dark lyrics.



Coldplay

CD: Parachutes

Reviewed by Jaanvi Sant

13, San Marino HS

Parachutes is British alternative band Coldplay's debut album, which was released in 2000. I became intrigued by this CD months ago when I heard the soft melodies blaring from my guitar teacher's speakers. This is now one of my favorite records.

The songs on *Parachutes* focus on emotions like love and heartbreak. Lead singer Chris Martin's voice is so pure that I can almost feel what he is feeling. A song that I love is "Trouble," which is about regretting past mistakes. "Oh no, what's this?/ A spider web and I'm caught in the middle/ So I turned to run/ The thought of all the stupid things I've done." The piano chords in the intro set a sad tone for the rest of the song. The emotion is so real and direct that I feel like I can identify with it more than I can with pop songs.

I like listening to Coldplay at night, because the soft acoustic guitar and drums soothe me and put me to sleep. I don't ever feel lonely when I listen to each relatable song, especially "We Never Change." Martin sings, "So I wanna live in a wooden house/ I wanna live life and always be true/ I wanna live life and be good to you/ And I wanna fly and never come down/ And live my life and have friends around." My life changed when my parents got divorced, and even though I became more serious and introverted, I still longed for a close family. The slow tempo and drawn-out guitar notes remind me of hard times, but also of how I got through them with the help of music.

Every song, even the 46-second-long "Parachutes," is packed with sincerity and heart. *Parachutes* is simply beautiful!

The emotion is so real and direct that I feel like I can identify with it more than I can with pop songs.

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I ENJOY BEING ON THE STAFF of L.A. Youth. I like having a place to express my thoughts and opinions. The weekly staff meetings are a great way to discuss important topics like budget cuts and racial diversity with other teens from all over Los Angeles County. Writing for L.A. Youth is fun. I love seeing my finished work in the paper and working with an editor has improved my writing.

—Jessica Marin, 17, Culver City HS



L. A. YOUTH HAS BECOME a big part of my life.

At the weekly meetings we discuss current events and controversial issues and I get to hear the opinions of other teens. My writing has improved and I've become more aware of the mistakes I used to make. The editors not only help you write your stories, but are always there to listen to you about anything. I also like how I've gotten to take pictures for the newspaper.

—Victor Beteta, 18, University HS



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