Commencement Celebrates Viking Graduates’ Concluding Days on Valhalla Campus

Through smiles, sunshine and a lot of love, Valhalla High School’s 113 students in the Class of 2021 graduated together on Viking Stadium.

The evening of June 25 was a memorable occasion, ending a challenging, yet productive and heart-warming, year. Between earnest applause and excited cheers, family members celebrated the Vikings on their final day in the Valhalla Union Free School District.

Two Student-Scientists Share their Research Work

Valhalla High School’s Science Research Program mixes creativity, passion and genuine interest with scientific investigation. Recent Class of 2021 graduates Juliette Ekeroth Klink and Anant Shyam discussed their work mid-year.

Juliette Ekeroth Klink

In an effort to help her schoolmates deal with stress, get better sleep and improve their grades, Juliette conducted a six-week mindfulness survey with students in their health classes. Her goal was to see if adding mindfulness to their routines would benefit their lives.

Juliette initially became interested in mindfulness at the beginning of her junior year, after noticing that her increased school workload and a new job were raising her stress levels. She
Two Sophomores Place Third in Somers/Westlake Science Fair

Congratulations to Valhalla High School sophomores, Ashwarya Thannikal and Juliette Sullivan, who each earned third place for science projects in a local competition.

During the first weekend in June, sophomores participated in the Somers/Westlake Science Fair. Ashwarya attracted recognition in the Behavioral Science category, for her project “A Qualitative Study on Female Rheumatic Patient Perspective of Bias in Healthcare.” Juliette was honored, also in the Behavioral Science category, for her project “A Study on Adolescent Perceptions of Performance Enhancing Drugs.”

Both students are part of Valhalla High School’s Science Research Program, a class for sophomores, juniors and seniors who are interested in exploring a specific area of science more deeply. Students have the opportunity to investigate a topic of their choosing that they may not necessarily study in other science classes.
Q: What makes Valhalla special?
A: Two key factors that make Valhalla special are its size and its attitude. Having personally graduated high school with a class of about 800, I blow away to hear (retired high school principal) Jon Thomas great every student – middle and high school – who came in by name. Because we are small, we get to know everyone – no one gets lost. Although we are small, our attitude shows that it shouldn’t keep us from having a rich school experience – it just means that lots of us do many different things. For example, maybe the lead in the high school play is also an affiliate or the student doing a summer science program might also be showcasing her work in an art exhibit. Teachers, staff members and administrators wear multiple hats as well. It all adds up to a very positive and supportive place to be, which explains why so many stay here for multiple decades!

Q: Moreover, what makes Kensico School special?
A: Kensico truly is a family! We support each other, jamp in and help one another; laugh, cry and commiserate together, and care about each other. It is more than just a workplace environment (it continually amazes friends who teach in other places).

Q: How long have you been an educator?
A: This was my 32nd year teaching in Valhalla. I was first at Virginia Road School, then Columbus Avenue School, and now at Kensico School – all in the third grade except for one year! Before Valhalla, I taught for a year at Nature’s Classroom. All through college, I worked at the campus preschool.

Q: Discuss what you routinely do in class with your students.
A: Is teaching ever routine? Thank goodness it isn’t – it’s much more interesting this way! As elementary teachers, we do all the academic subjects with our classes. My favorites are probably reading and social studies. I love books and reading – “read aloud” is a daily occurrence to me (and like jokes and puns the kids will even say I tell a good one every so often!).

Q: Share some classroom memories that have stuck out to you over the years.
A: Loads of memories from Nature’s Classroom, of course – too many to share! Directing the middle school musicals and then seeing many of those kids shine on stage in the high school shows is a rich treasure trove of wonderful memories (any theater person knows you can spend hours sharing stories with each other). One of my favorite classroom memories is when a student who struggled with and actively resisted reading early in the year shared how much he loved a book he chose because it was a sequel to one of our “read aloud” books.

Q: How is what you teach crucial to student development? What do you hope your students learn?
A: I hope that my kids leave my class being interested and curious about the world. I hope they leave with a love of reading for pleasure. I hope they leave feeling safe about trying something new or different, comfortable that they will learn as much from an unsuccessful try as from a successful one. I hope they leave knowing that we all can learn something new from others and that we all have something to teach others. Most of all, I hope they leave third grade with positive and happy memories!

Q: What about teaching interests you? What is your background?
A: I love being with the kids, sharing conversations and stories, seeing their “lightbulb moment,” and celebrating the small moments and big triumphs together. Being able to see them grow up first through middle and high school, then onward as adults (and sometimes even as colleagues).

Q: If you weren’t teaching, what would your profession be?
A: Probably a librarian. My first job in high school was as a page in my local library. That’s also how I became interested in storytelling and working with kids. It’s all connected!

Q: Share a few fun facts about yourself.
A: I’m a sailor. I own a 16foot Whitehall-style sailboat and have been sailing as crew with the same person for over 25 years. I enjoy traveling, especially to England, but also here in the U.S. My wife and I once took the train all the way across the country. It takes four days and the scenery is amazing!
What kept me going were actually the little things. A smile from a classmate or a few words of encouragement from a teammate - it is always the impact that we create on each other. Maya Angelou once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Truth be told, these last four years of high school really showed me the deeper meaning to this message.

– Senior President of the Senate Ada Nduka

There is no doubt that despite all of the challenges that we may have faced, we have all stuck together and motivated one another incredibly well. On numerous occasions, whenever I was feeling down or was having a rough day, I couldn’t help but always keep a smile on my face as I knew that I had an entire community – that is Valhalla – to always back me up. And that’s the true character of Valhalla – of each and every one of you – in a nutshell: collaborative and encouraging.

– Salutatorian Anant Shyam

“[It’s] no longer just about personal responsibility. It’s about using our education – that power and privilege of the diploma which will soon reside on our bookshelves – to recognize that we also have responsibility to the greater good. It’s no longer just about washing the dishes, it’s about cleaning the oceans. It’s no longer about balancing social life and schoolwork; it’s about advocating for social justice. It’s no longer just about keeping our voices down on the bus; it’s about amplifying the voices of those historically silenced. It’s no longer just about proper MLA formatting and one-inch margins; it’s about supporting marginalized communities.”

– Valedictorian Dylan Van Bramer
MOVING UP CEREMONIES CELEBRATE STUDENTS’ NEW BEGINNINGS

Virginia Road School

Kensico School

Valhalla Middle School
Academic Challenge Team Competed in National Competition, Highlighting Teamwork and Confidence

For the second year in a row, Valhalla High School’s Academic Challenge Team qualified to compete at the national competition.

In the lead-up to the National Academic Championship, which took place virtually from June 5 to 7, the team focused on improving their knowledge. Their goal was to perform better than the year before, where they won two of six games in a tight competition. Senior Daniel Szlavik, who has been on the team since middle school, said that he expected the Valhalla squad to have a better experience this year since he has seen much growth from his teammates.

“We’ve grown from last year,” agreed fellow senior Anant Shyam. “Last year at Nationals, we learned a lot about how to improve. We’ve been putting those improvements and changes into effect and are looking forward to seeing how the improvements pay off. It has been really rewarding to qualify. It’s a culmination of all of our preparation from previous competitions throughout the year.”

Participating on the Academic Challenge Team gives students the opportunity to competently test their knowledge on quiz bowl-style questions covering a variety of scholastic topics. It competes against other high schools in Westchester County in the Metropolitan Academic Challenge Conference and the Westchester Academic Challenge of Knowledge Organization. Despite the competition’s main focus on knowledge, members of Valhalla’s Academic Challenge Team noted that they are learning from participating. Anant stressed the importance of teamwork and strong communication to produce the team’s best outcomes.

“Chances are that when you go out into the world, someone’s going to know more than you,” said junior Tyler Yeung. “It’s important that we combine our knowledge and be stronger as a team. No matter what, one person doesn’t know everything.”

Senior Arin Altuzi added that having humility lessen some stress from the competition. He said that it’s eye-opening to play against other teams who “know so much more than we do.” Competing has allowed him to observe his team’s strengths and weaknesses, and understand where they may need to fill in gaps.

As one of the team’s longest-serving members, Daniel added that risk-taking is key during competition. “We have to be quick and accurate,” he said. “You have to take a risk and decide if the risk is worth taking.”

Co-advisor and teacher Jennifer Granich applauded the team’s resiliency and said that she and fellow co-advisor Michael Giordano are proud of the students’ hard work.

“It’s fantastic to see them at this point,” she said. “They’ve grown so much, especially in confidence. They won’t be intimidated by people on other teams who appear to know more than they do.”

Qualifying for the 2021 Nationals was a milestone, as it was the team’s goal to compete at the highest level for consecutive years. “It’s nerve-wracking to compete,” said junior Jackson Wallace. “Depending on the competition throughout the year, it’s hard.”

Despite the stressful excitement stemming from preparing to compete at Nationals, team members are focused on contributing effectively and further recognizing the team’s dynamic. Each student excels in different subject areas. For example, Jackson specializes in pop culture, while Arin’s forte is math and general knowledge.

“It’s definitely pretty cool to get this far,” said junior Jared Sonkin, whose strengths are science and math. “I’ve been doing better, and we’ve been doing really well as a team.”

Mr. Giordano noted that having a mix of students—some who are long-time club members and others who joined this year—allows them to create strong partnerships and seamlessly work together during competition.

Daniel and Anant, the club’s longest-serving members, joined because they enjoyed the tournament’s style. Over the years, they encouraged classmates to participate. Anant joined in the fall at Daniel’s behest.

“I’m glad I gave it a go,” Anant said. “I’m pretty competitive, and this is a club that I can contribute to, which is great. I love competition.”

Similarly, this was also Tyler’s first experience competing at Nationals.

“It feels good,” he said. “I haven’t had too much experience here but I think it’s going to be fun. Contributing my skills to a team where we can all collaborate together is pretty rewarding.”

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Soccer Star Alum Kaio DaSilva Signs Pro Contract

Fresh out of college, Valhalla High School’s Class of 2016 graduate Kaio DaSilva signed a contract to play for the Chattanooga Football Club—the first-ever Valhalla soccer player to turn professional.

Kaio signed with CFC—a team in the National Independent Soccer Association—on April 8 and played in his first soccer game with Chattanooga FC on April 13, helping his team earn a 4-1 win over the Los Angeles Force in the opener of the Legends Cup. He was a starting player and stayed on the field for the entire game.

“I truly feel honored and blessed for the opportunity Chattanooga FC has provided to my family as I continue my footballing career at the next level,” Kaio said when he joined the team. “In my short time in this city, I have witnessed a powerful sense of community and am more than excited to play in front of all the fans and people of Chattanooga.”

Kaio graduated in December 2020 from SUNY Albany, where he played for two seasons with the Great Danes. He started in 23 of his 34 games, executed six assists and scored six goals. Academically, he graduated from UAlbany with a 3.8 GPA, becoming the first in his family to earn a college degree.

In Valhalla, he played and started on the varsity team throughout all four years of high school. He was a three-year league MVP and All-State athlete. He also earned All-Region honors and Small School Player of the Year accolades twice for both awards. Kaio was a Con Ed Player of the Week winner, and holds the VHS record for most points scored in a season (43 points = 26 goals and 15 assists) and most points scored throughout high school (63 points = 48 goals and 23 assists).

“Kaio is the most decorated student athlete we’ve had in our soccer program’s 58-year history,” said VHS boys varsity coach Sandro Prosperino. “As much as he has accomplished on the playing fields, I’m most proud of his accomplishments off the fields, his character and how hard he has worked to get to this point.”

Now Kaio is showing off his talents as a defender for Chattanooga, eager to push his team toward a winning season. He is one of only a handful of Valhalla graduates who have become professional athletes. He began playing soccer at age 6 and credits “the support of Viking Nation” during his time at Valhalla for pushing him to reach his potential.

Viking Science Research Students Win Big at WESEF

Four Valhalla High School seniors successfully participated in the Westchester Science and Engineering Fair. The foursome won a combined six awards for their engaging and thought-provoking research projects. The students were Daniel Szlavik, Anant Shyam, Gabriella Shikapawshya and Kathryn Ravan.

In mid-March, the four students competed at WESEF, which was held virtually. The high-level annual fair encourages students to participate in hands-on science by providing a forum for showcasing the outstanding research of high school students in Westchester and Putnam counties. The awards ceremony announced a variety of accolades for the Viking team.

Daniel earned three prizes for his project, “Combating the Mosquito Vector.” He won the Mianus River George Ecology Award, which is given to outstanding projects that study the current health of ecosystems; and the Office of Naval Research Award, which is for outstanding projects in science, technology and/or mathematics. In addition, he won third place in the Animal Sciences category.

Anant’s project, “Assessing the Effect of Various Knowledge Translation Platforms on Patient Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” earned him the Innovations in Biological Sciences Research Award. It is given to innovative projects in biochemistry, cell and molecular biology, medicine and health, microbiology, computational biology/bioinformatics and neuroscience.

Gabriella’s project, “Discovery and Analysis of Bacteriophage,” won second place in the Cellular and Molecular Biology category.

Kathryn earned third place in the Behavioral Sciences category for her project, “Assessing the Capabilities of Subliminal Meditations on Mathematics.”
Valhalla Names Longtime Educator Orande Daring as New VMHS Assistant Principal

The Valhalla Board of Education appointed Orande Daring as Valhalla Middle/High School’s acting assistant principal. Mr. Daring joined Valhalla with over 25 years of experience in education and a sincere passion for supporting students.

Mr. Daring started in Valhalla on Aug. 30. He took over for Miriam Dobbs, who transitioned to the position of interim business official over the summer. Mr. Daring, an Orange County resident, was selected for the role due to his commitment to bolstering education for all children.

“T’m excited to join Valhalla,” he said. “Valhalla does a fantastic job of celebrating students’ successes through academics, athletics and the arts. I love Valhalla’s community feel and the community’s involvement in decision-making. They put the students at the forefront.”

Mr. Daring will join the VMHS administrative team of middle school principal Jason Schrammel and high school principal Jon Hirsch. Mr. Daring said that he looks forward to working with administrators who have a strong focus on student well-being.

“I’m looking forward to getting to know the kids and building positive relationships with them,” he said. “I have access to students in grades 6 through 12, so building lasting relationships will pay dividends in the long run. I would also like to know members of the community as best I can. Relationships with families play a big role in the education of students.”

In mid-August, Mr. Daring visited VMHS and joined a few virtual meetings to introduce himself to and learn about Valhalla’s staff members. He is keen to develop relationships with them throughout the year so that they can see one another as resources.

“Orande is an experienced school administrator who exemplifies Valhalla’s ‘All In’ spirit,” said Elizabeth Kimecki, Valhalla’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “He is eager to meet and support our amazing students, faculty, staff members and families.”

Mr. Daring began his educational career in 1995 as a middle school math and science teacher in Brooklyn. The following three years saw him teach math at Brooklyn’s Boys and Girls High School, his alma mater. He moved to Rockland County in 1999, where he taught at Nyack Public Schools until 2015. He began working at Nyack High School by teaching math, became the department chair of mathematics in 2006 and the mathematics and science coordinator in 2010.

In 2015, Mr. Daring transitioned to the role of principal at Southern Westchester BOCES’ Center for Career Services, where he supervised a dozen programs. He and his team established a student-centered environment and implemented student recognition programs. He initiated computer-aided design and sound programs, and created the Center’s first-ever STEAM competition. After two years, Mr. Daring moved to Orange-Ulster BOCES, where he was the director of the Center for Career and Technical Education and supervised more than 70 staff members. He created three new positions, started three new programs and oversaw technology upgrades, including the cosmetology lab modernization and the computer labs’ transformation into a multipurpose room.

Having a varied resume has enabled Mr. Daring to intimately understand New York’s school system. He is eager to share his knowledge with and continue enhancing the Valhalla community.

“I received a broad picture of education,” he said. “Public education got me to where I am today. Now, as educators, we have to make sure we do it right for all kids.”

Mr. Daring earned his bachelor’s degree in mathematics and his master’s degree in educational administration from New York University. He also received a certificate of advanced study in school leadership from SUNY New Paltz. He is currently obtaining an associate’s degree in cybersecurity from SUNY Orange.

Mr. Daring lives in Middletown with his wife and two children—he is a son entering high school, his daughter is in college. He is a member of the Wallkill East Rotary Club, loves cars and is an avid runner.

Valhalla Honors 12 Impactful Retirees with Gratitude

The Valhalla Schools community extends ever-renewing gratitude to a dozen remarkable staff members who retired in 2021. Between teaching students, sharing smiles, developing meaningful relationships and offering words of encouragement, these dozen Vikings made a lasting impact on the Valhalla community.

Together, they boast 247 years of service to the district. We’re thankful for their care and commitment. Our recent retirees (alphabetically) are:

Linda Carpenteri:
KS library media specialist – 25 years

Stephen Ceretta:
VMHS custodian – 20 years

Donna D’Apice:
KS teacher aide – 20 years

Margo Donghas:
VHS special education teacher – 20 years

Christina Howe:
Interim superintendent of schools – 10 years

Frank Imondo:
VRS custodian (no picture taken) – 23 years

Lisa McGuinn:
VRS teacher aide – 15 years

Lorna McKenzie:
VHS ENL/reading teacher – 13 years

Mario Pierre:
VMHS custodian – 32 years

Laura Raiano:
KS secretary to the principal – 24 years

Virginia Thompson:
VRS speech teacher – 22 years

Dawn Waylonis:
Secretary to the superintendent – 23 years

Valhalla Wins Two Top National Communications Awards

The Valhalla Union Free School District earned three communications awards from the National School Public Relations Association, including two first-place wins.

In July, NSPRA released the winners of its annual Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards. Valhalla was granted two Awards of Excellence—the highest rating—in the categories of Print Newsletter and Excellence in Writing. Respectively, the awards were given for the Valhalla Voyages newsletter throughout the 2020-2021 academic year and an Opening Day speech for staff members written for our former interim superintendent.

Valhalla was also awarded an Honorable Mention in the Social Media category for its work creating the Senior Sports Spotlights, which honored 12th-grade athletes in their final year. NSPRA’s Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards recognize outstanding education publications, e-newsletters, digital media programs, radio/TV/video programs, social media, infographics, blogs and websites. Entries are adjudicated by experts in the field throughout the nation.
Four Passionate Valhalla Teachers Granted Tenure

Congratulations to Virginia Road School second-grade special education teacher Lauren Pagliughi, Valhalla Middle School science teacher Ashley Fetzer, Valhalla High School math teacher Caitlyn Brehm and Valhalla High School science teacher Bobbi Pinnow. The four teachers earned tenure in June, which was approved by the Valhalla Board of Education.

Lauren Pagliughi is a valued member of the Virginia Road School community who goes above and beyond for her students. She continuously seeks out and performs professional development that will, ultimately, benefit her students. In addition, Ms. Pagliughi is a Valhalla alumna, attending school in the district from kindergarten through eighth grade.

“Lauren is an outstanding special education teacher who always has the children’s best interests at heart,” said VRS Principal Hasdee Anoya.

“Lauren takes the time to get to know each child as a person and as a learner. She has high expectations for all of her students. They feel comfortable with her, trust her and know that she only wants them to succeed.”

Ashley Fetzer guides her students by being a teacher who cares, listens, provides direction, sets high expectations and ensures that their needs are met. Her in-depth knowledge of the Next Generation Science Standards allows her to be creative and effective with her work.

“Ms. Fetzer is an excellent teacher, role model, student advocate and colleague,” said VMS Principal Jason Schrammel.

“Ms. Fetzer demonstrates the highest level of professional commitment to her students, work and colleagues. She is always welcoming and willing to listen. A reputation for hard work, dedication, guidance and adaptability are assets that every building and district needs. Her greatest asset, however, is her ability to make others around her better.”

Caitlyn Brehm is a resource to Valhalla High School. In class, her students benefit from her ability to breakdown algebraic equations and concepts into real-world examples. Her colleagues benefit from her indispensable technology knowledge.

The community benefits from her leading the VHS yearbook club as it develops from pictures and paper into the final book.

“Caitlyn Brehm has brought an energy and a positivity to the Valhalla High School math department,” said VHS Principal Jon Hirsch.

“She is a gift to all of us… Her classroom culture is fun and a place for laughter… I wish her a long and successful career here in Valhalla.”

Bobbi Pinnow teaches chemistry and Valhalla’s Science Research Program, a three-year-long program that fosters a family-like environment. Her students have participated in a cutting-edge, international research project and a pilot program that later became a professional development session for teachers.

In addition, Dr. Pinnow is involved in a partnership with PepsiCo and participates in the Million Women Mentors.

“Bobbi Pinnow is a thinker and problem-solver,” said Mr. Hirsch. “She brings her rich academic background and real-world experience into her chemistry classes. To be a student of Bobbi’s is to be asked to think deeply about the world and its makeup.”

Volleyball player Sophia Cavallo was first introduced to the sport in fourth or fifth grade. At the time, she didn’t know how to play, but elementary gym teacher Scott Dooley encouraged her to try. Fast-forward a few years to seventh grade. Her journey began when she tried out for the modified team. As a freshman, she played junior varsity and was called up to the varsity squad the following year.

Sophia’s athletic progression stems from her ever-growing love for the game. In mid-April, she was named LoHud’s volleyball Player of the Week. Against 10 other athletes, she earned 6,110 of the 20,273 votes cast – slightly over 30% of the total.

“It feels really good to win,” Sophia said. “I’ve always wanted to get nominated for Player of the Week but didn’t think it’d actually happen. I genuinely enjoy playing volleyball more than any other sport.”

Sophia first learned that she was nominated for the honor when VHS teacher John Philbin told her that he had cast his vote for her. She immediately looked online to learn more. The following day, in his Government and Economics class, Sophia saw that she was in the lead when the poll closed. She was encouraged by the kindness that her friends, teachers and community members showed as they repeatedly voted for her.

“The size of your school doesn’t matter,” she said. “Why would I want anything more than a small school? It doesn’t matter if you have a large school with a large number of people. What matters is the quality of the people who are behind you.”

Sophia was part of the Viking team that won the state championship in November 2019. She noted that the experience was “like a dream” – the season progressed successfully and felt like she was “just playing a game with my friends.” The intensity increased at the state championship when she realized the situation’s magnitude.

Patricia Ward, Valhalla’s varsity volleyball coach and Kensico School teacher, applauded Sophia’s sacrificial and friendly nature. She said that Sophia’s personality transcends the silliness she first brought to the team as a sophomore and now shines as lovable and loving.

“I can’t describe Sophia in one word,” Ms. Ward said. “She is who she is – and she’s an amazing person. She brings joy to our team every day. There’s never a dull moment. There isn’t anything negative about Sophia. When you’re around her, you’re guaranteed to laugh.”

Sophia committed to Penn State University and will soon study veterinarian and biomedical sciences. She anticipates trying out for the Division I volleyball team as a walk-on player.
VMS’ Fakhri Salim Recognized in Countywide Student Essay Contest

From an increase in screen time to a decrease of in-person socialization, COVID-19 has affected the world in many ways, wrote Valhalla Middle School eighth-grader Fakhri Salim in a poignant article. His writing earned him an honorable mention in the Lifting Up Westchester Student Essay Contest.

In his 810-word essay, Fakhri reflected on a variety of situations, including the distress for low-income and homeless community members, and the resilience shown by teachers and students in school. He also weighed people’s desire to see one another against the risk that in-person meetings create.

“I was excited and happy,” he said. “I didn’t think I’d win. I am impressed with myself. I’m not the best under pressure, but I wanted to do it and I did it. While writing, I thought of COVID as a whole. I improved what I wrote and then kept writing more.”

Lifting Up Westchester is a nonprofit that aims to strengthen the independence and well-being of homeless individuals across the county. The fourth annual essay contest, which was open to students in grades 7-12, invited them “to explore the changes and challenges they have experienced during the pandemic and reflect how those experiences might be the same or different for individuals who are homeless or low-income,” reads its website.

“Situations for the homeless and low-income has been worsened because they don’t have a safe place to go,” Fakhri wrote in his essay. “Homeless shelters are either closed or overrun with COVID. Everyone simply wants to be safe from the virus and does not want to infect others.”

Fakhri was alerted to his win by his father, who texted him in April with the good news while he was doing homework. He competed in the contest’s category for seventh- and eighth-grade students, which attracted 271 competitors. He wrote the essay over a two-week period in teacher John Hayes’ seminar class.

“This was the first major competition I did in school,” he said. “I’m a lot more determined and positive about competitions like this now.”

Fakhri, who has been a Valhalla student since kindergarten, began writing in the first grade and now sometimes accompanies his prose with drawings. In school, he enjoys English, social studies and math classes. He also plays basketball and does computer programming outside of school.