



EAGLE ERA

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A penchant for adventure

Inside senior Chloe Dang's drive to explore, push limits, and find meaning in the overlooked

Iniya Prabahar | Staff Writer

In today's society, teenagers are often relegated to digital spaces or heavily supervised "third spaces." But for Chloe Dang (12), who has a restless curiosity for the unknown, the world is her infinite playground.

Dang is an urban explorer—someone who seeks out abandoned or hidden spaces and explores them to observe rather than disrupt. Whether it's a decaying refinery or a makeshift swing in a sewer drain, she's drawn to places that others don't notice.

While urban exploration (urbex) often gets brushed off as reckless trespassing, Dang approaches it differently. "[These locations] are like a memory that's stuck in place," she said. "You walk in and everything is still there, frozen in time. You can imagine what happened there."

That sense of stepping into the untouched is what keeps her coming back. Unlike crowded, conventional spaces, urbex offers her something rarer. "You get to see things you'd never see if you just walked into a normal place," she said. "When would I ever get the chance to do this again?"

That pull isn't always easy for others to understand at first. Her sister, Kris-



Dang stands by the philosophy of never turning down a new experience. "She's a yes-man—almost always down to do something. She's definitely found more freedom in what she does," said Lad (Photo Credit: Chloe Dang (12)).

tine Dang (Class of 2023), remembered being worried when she first heard about it. "At first, I thought it was kind of dangerous, and I was iffy about it," she said. "But she seems to know how to keep herself safe, and it makes her happy."

Dang didn't begin these journeys alone. Her friend, Alan Chen (11), introduced her to urbex and quickly noticed how naturally she took to it.

"She was kind of interested [in urbex], and I've done it with my friends before, so we just went together one time over winter break and she enjoyed it," said Chen.

The same curiosity that drew her to urbex pushed her further than where most people were comfortable going. "Generally, Chloe doesn't listen to anyone. She just does whatever she wants," said Chen. "I'll tell her not to climb something, and she'll do exactly that. She's a big risk-taker."

That mindset showed itself during a trip under the Dumbarton Bridge. While attempting to dock paddleboards in the middle of the bay to go fishing, Dang and her friends were swept into the current after a series of mishaps. Despite the danger, Dang's instinct was to go through with their fishing plans rather than retreat. Chen said,

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A silent anchor

Color guard captain Acintya Shenoy (11) proves that effective leadership doesn't need to be loud

Sachi Ladole
Staff Writer



Shenoy showed off a second place trophy for an AHS Marching Band and Color Guard parade performance (Photo Credit: Cave James (Class of 2025)).

"I think it gave me an identity. Being a part of color guard, I'm a part of something," said Acintya Shenoy (11). For Shenoy, color guard isn't just performance art but a place where she can belong. Now a color guard captain in her third year, Shenoy channels that confidence into her leadership, uplifting her team and pushing them to improve alongside her.

Shenoy's confidence grew out of a passion for movement, shaped by training in Bharatanatyam and classical ballet before starting color guard in her freshman year. However, as she advanced with her dance program, her time commitments grew, and long commutes to the dance studio became unsustainable. "My parents were like, 'No way, we are not going to be able to pick you up and drop you off.' So I had to quit," she said. "That really broke my heart because it was a dance form I was really passionate about."

That early discipline—and its loss—shaped

her approach to color guard. Joining the team, she was able to rebuild her previous connection to dance. "It was comforting, finding some of that in guard," she said.

By the winter season in her freshman year, Shenoy had grown to love color guard. However, in order to diversify her extracurriculars for college, her parents steered her away from joining in the winter season, and she ended up turning to Speech and Debate instead. Despite this, her passion for the sport remained, and Shenoy continued to unofficially show up for winterguard practices. When a spot on the performing team opened up, she didn't hesitate to take the chance to try to convince her parents once again.

"One Tuesday, there was a spot open in the drill, and Jennie [a color guard instructor] asked me if I could join," Shenoy said. "When

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Checkmate on connection

How Rishab Sehgal (12) transformed chess on campus

Jonathan Wang
Staff Writer

Rishab Sehgal (12) scans the chessboard looking for an opening to attack. He smiles, sliding his queen across the g-file. *Checkmate*. While chess is usually thought of as a nerdy hobby that requires logical and strategic thinking, for Sehgal, it is also a way for him to connect with others.

Sehgal was first introduced to chess at an early age by his father, Manish Sehgal, who said, “I started teaching him because it was a good way for us to spend time together and to teach him important skills, like patience and smart decision-making.”

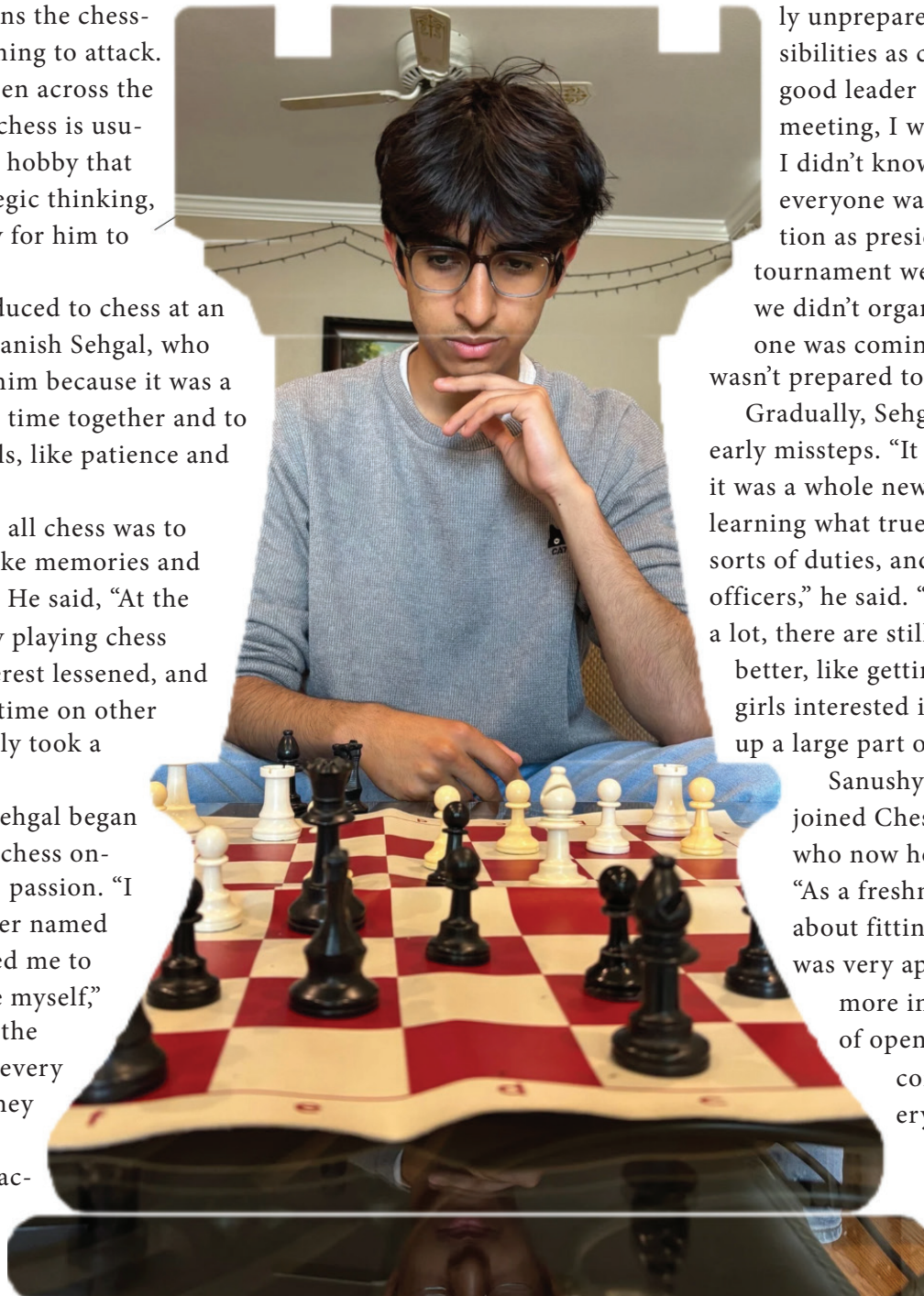
And for a while, that’s all chess was to Sehgal—a fun way to make memories and spend time with his dad. He said, “At the time, I didn’t really enjoy playing chess itself. Over time, my interest lessened, and I started spending more time on other hobbies, so chess naturally took a backseat in my life.”

But in eighth grade, Sehgal began seeing other people play chess online, slowly igniting a deep passion. “I started watching a YouTuber named GothamChess, who inspired me to learn more and play online myself,” he said. “I fell in love with the game; it is so fascinating—every move, every tactic—how they all come together to form such an amazing and interactive game.”

At his peak, Sehgal was able to reach around a 1600 rating, putting him in the 98th percentile of over a quarter billion players who use Chess.com, the largest internet chess platform in the world. His mother, Jaya Seluja, said, “He would play for hours a day, watching videos and practicing puzzles. I think it helped him learn to deal with frustration whenever he lost games or struggled with learning new tactics.”

However, there were also times when Sehgal found it difficult to stay consistent and engaged. He said, “I would quit playing for months sometimes because other things in my life would come up, and I felt I wasn’t actually getting better. The worst part is how isolating it can be when you’re hunched over the computer playing against faceless names online.”

So after nearly 2 years of studying openings, analyzing games, and constantly practicing, Sehgal’s focus shifted to forming an official chess club at AHS. Aditya Das (12), one of Sehgal’s close friends, helped him set up Chess Club and eventually became its treasurer. “When we were freshmen, Chess Club was a sub-club of the E-sports Club due to a lack of management. Rishab assumed a leadership role, and we filled out a charter which was accepted,” he said.



Sehgal examined his position in an intense over-the-board game of chess (Photo Credit: Jonathan Wang (12)).

“HE WOULD PLAY FOR HOURS A DAY, WATCHING VIDEOS AND PRACTICING PUZZLES. I THINK IT HELPED HIM LEARN TO DEAL WITH FRUSTRATION WHENEVER HE LOST GAMES OR STRUGGLED WITH LEARNING NEW TACTICS.”

Sehgal’s motivation to form Chess Club primarily stemmed from his desire to interact and collaborate with others. He said, “I wanted to meet other people who enjoyed chess so I could learn from them. I found chess to be really fun and engaging, so I knew others would too, and I could introduce it to them.”

But in the first months, Sehgal felt woeful-

ly unprepared to maintain his responsibilities as club president. “I wasn’t a good leader at that time. In our first meeting, I was intimidated because I didn’t know what to do or say, and everyone was looking at me for direction as president,” he said. “The first tournament we hosted was mayhem because we didn’t organize it well enough. Everyone was coming to me with questions that I wasn’t prepared to answer.”

Gradually, Sehgal learned and grew from his early missteps. “It was pretty challenging since it was a whole new experience. I had to confront learning what true leadership meant, juggling all sorts of duties, and building a good team of officers,” he said. “But even though I’ve learned a lot, there are still things I could have done better, like getting more upperclassmen and girls interested in chess since they don’t make up a large part of our membership.”

Sanushya Subramaniam (11), who joined Chess Club as a freshman and who now holds an officer position, said, “As a freshman and a girl, I was worried about fitting into the club, but Rishab was very approachable. As I became more involved, he encouraged lots of open discussion and genuinely considered the thoughts of everyone when making decisions.”

Other members have also commented on how much they appreciate Sehgal’s friendliness. Wesley Guo (12), an avid chess player and member of the club, said, “He constantly checks on everyone to see how they’re doing and is always willing to play a match. He’s challenged me countless times, even though he hasn’t beaten me yet. He’s created a very special environment where you can feel everyone just wants to have fun.”

Sehgal’s passion eventually led him to create a nonprofit organization called Golden Bay Chess Foundation that aims to provide free chess tutoring sessions for youth, hosting meetings twice a month at Centerville Library and Fremont Main Library. He said, “I found out the chess club at my elementary school got shut down, so I wanted to build a community where kids could learn creativity and problem-solving while also becoming friends and forming connections.”

Sehgal sees chess not only as a hobby to be enjoyed but also as a way to find fulfillment through the relationships he has built and the sense of unity among his fellow chess players. “Chess cuts through all cultural boundaries—any label you put on yourself—because anyone can play chess,” he said.

Passion for fashion

Insight into junior Liona Li's love for fashion

Kaitlyn Liu | Staff Writer

As the lights dimmed and the stage was illuminated with a navy blue hue, Liona Li (11) caught the audience's attention in her handmade dress. With stitched-together fabrics, layered clothes, vines, and accessories tying the outfit together, Li confidently strutted down the runway at the Fine Arts Fair, pausing every now and then to strike a pose.

Li highlighted the frills, lace, and accessories that set her outfit apart. "I combined different aspects of an enchanted forest into a dress, with the corset being a tree trunk, and a bunch of vines as leaves," she said. This was only one of the many intricate designs Li has created since she began sewing.

Li started sewing in middle school, when she became frustrated with limited outfit choices and began experimenting with styles. "I learned to sew from a summer camp I attended in fourth grade, and I started by making purses and wallets before I began sewing clothes with a machine."

Once she felt comfortable sewing basic bags and clothing, she took on her first major project: a clothing revamp. "I turned a pair of skinny jeans into a tube top with these flared sleeves," said Li. "I remember using Pinterest and Instagram as a way to gain inspiration, so they really helped a lot."

Elaina Root (11), who helped Li set up her stand at the Fine Arts Fair, described how they became friends and bonded over her unique style. "I've always thought she had such a cool style, but I started associating fashion with her when she would wear these really cool clothes that she made herself."

Building on this, Root explained that the cohesiveness of Li's outfits and attention to detail makes her style so unique. "While some people have cute clothes or fun jewelry, Liona puts effort into every part of her appearance so it all works together, which is why I think she stands out so much more than anyone else."

When choosing which clothes to pair together, Li said that she matches textures and uses color combinations to add a pop to her outfits, adding chunky necklaces and gold bracelets she finds at thrift stores. "I always dress the way I feel, so whenever I'm feeling happy, I wear brighter colors. When I'm feeling moody, I tend to prefer darker colors," she said.

Carolina Vasquez (11), who bonded with Li over their shared love for fashion—especially in regards to thrifting. "One thing that Liona and I do have in common is sustainability," Vasquez stated. "I admire her for recycling old clothes and making her own—thrifting, donating, and trying not to buy from big fast fashion companies that use hard labor."

Kathy Masnik (11), one of Li's close friends, explained how her willingness to use fashion to express her personality and to go against the norm makes her someone others have fun around. "She really enjoys trying new things with her clothes, hair, jewelry, and makeup that might be unconventional or bold to others," Masnik said. "She isn't afraid of what others think, and that's what makes her so optimistic and bubbly."



"One of her outfits that I think is just iconic is a yellow dress with a denim vest, and these snake pattern pants, along with lots of jewelry," said Root (Photo Credit: Kaitlyn Liu (11)).

Kira Hao (10) originally connected with Li over her unique homecoming dress. "I genuinely love her style so much; it is so unique, so colorful, just like she is," she said. "I always ask her when she comes to school wearing something new or if she changes her hair because I really like hearing her talk about it. I just love seeing her get fired up."

Aanya Singh (11) described her friend's style as particularly distinctive. "It is the kind of style you notice

right away without even trying—it naturally stands out in a crowd. She mixes creativity with bold choices, so nothing ever feels basic or predictable," Singh said.

Root explained that there is no way to confine her style to just one word because the way she dresses strays from contemporary fashion. "Rather than describing Liona's style with a specific word or aesthetic, it's more accurate to use 'Liona's style' as its own way to describe other outfits and clothes."

"RATHER THAN DESCRIBING LIONA'S STYLE WITH A SPECIFIC WORD OR AESTHETIC, IT'S MORE ACCURATE TO USE 'LIONA'S STYLE' AS ITS OWN WAY TO DESCRIBE OTHER OUTFITS AND CLOTHES."



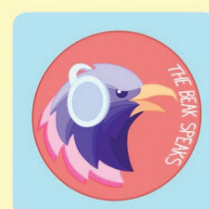
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A penchant for adventure (cont'd)

“We were all soaked and tired, and my friend asked if we should go home, and she was like, ‘heck no—we’re staying.’”

Dang doesn’t deny it. “We’d already been through all that,” she said. “So why leave now?”

This all-in attitude concerns many people around her. Mimi Chang, Dang’s mother, recalled the Dumbarton incident, saying, “I was scared because it was 4 AM, it was pitch dark outside, and the water was freezing cold. I told her she’s never doing that again.”

Yet, similar to Dang’s sister, her concern has shifted to acceptance. Instead of shutting her explorations down completely, she’s chosen a different approach. “I don’t like to restrict her too much, because if you say no all the time, kids just do the opposite. I love her doing it, but I want her to do it safely,” she said.

Still, Dang’s decisions aren’t purely impulsive; she plans every excursion meticulously. Before stepping foot into a site, she researches its history and layout, ensures she has the right gear, and chooses her attire based on the environment. “I’m always prepared. I bring flashlights in case the area is dark, I bring shoes I don’t really care about in case they get muddy, and I choose to wear long clothing to cover up as much as possible, because in these abandoned places, you don’t know if the infrastructure’s being taken care of or if there are toxins.”

She also makes sure to rely on experience—both her own and that of others’. “I go with people who’ve been before,” she said. “I ask how risky it is. If there’s no entrance, I’m not breaking in. It’s not worth it.”

For Dang, urbex is not about thrill-seeking but rather about preservation and observation. “I go to explore and feed my curiosity,” she said. “Not to destroy things. It’s best to leave it how it was.”

As a practitioner of Taekwondo, Dang has been taught to anticipate and handle danger. Mrs. Chang sees it as a necessary precaution. “I know society thinks boys and girls are equal, but in a way, we’re just more concerned about a girl being alone,” she said. “That’s why I put her in Taekwondo, so I know she can protect herself if the situation arises.”

Shreya Pawar (12), a friend and swim teammate, has watched Dang translate her athletic discipline into her outdoor pursuits. “In the team, she’s always pushing herself in hard situations, such as her goal to beat the record for the 50-fly,” Pawar said. “I think that translates to urbexing as well.”

Pawar admitted that seeing Dang apply that same intensity to exploring windmills and rooftops can be nerve-wracking. “From an outsider’s point of view, I think it’s dangerous. But I trust her enough that she knows what she’s doing.”

For Dang, that trust comes from choosing to push limits without overthinking the risks. “Honestly, I don’t think about the consequences too much,” she said. “I just go, ‘You know what? Let’s do it, YOLO,’” she said.

But even that mindset isn’t as careless as it sounds. “I do think about risk a little,” she added. “But at the end of the day, I don’t want to look back and feel like I didn’t live my life.”

That impulse that drives her to say yes, especially when most people would hesitate, shows up in other parts of Dang’s life. Ms. Leonarduzzi, who coached her in the swim team for 3 years, has seen that tendency to push past hesitation. “She challenges herself. Even if she feels nervous, she still goes for it,” said Ms. Leonarduzzi.

Yet, this courageous version of Dang didn’t always exist. It’s a shift that feels especially clear to those who knew her before she got into this hobby. “If you told me she was doing all these

explorations a few years ago, I would’ve been so surprised. She used to be much more reserved,” said her friend, Suhani Lad (12). “But given how she’s grown over the past 4 years, it’s not the biggest surprise anymore.”

In an environment as high-pressure as AHS, Dang’s adventures give her a chance to take a break. “Everything feels so structured, and I feel like she’s learned to zoom out and just do what she wants,” said Lad.



Trading the structure of the classroom for the unpredictability of the world, Dang has learned to value the moment over the plan. “Sometimes you just kind of got to go for it and see what happens,” Dang said (Photo Credit: Chloe Dang (12)).

A silent anchor (cont'd)

I went home, I made an entire slideshow about the benefits of doing color guard from a college application perspective and presented it to my parents.”

Sahana Reka (11), a friend and current co-captain of color guard, explained what happened as a result of her plan. “2 competitions in, she finally got her parents’ approval, learned everything, and she joined us for the next 3 competitions.”

That same persistence has translated into a maturity that often surprises those around her. “People

always think Acintya’s a senior, and it’s just because of the way she carries herself,” said Reka. “She’s always been ahead of the curve.”

Through her practiced skill and raw talent, her peers see her as a leader who is able to back up her confidence with consistent execution. Charlize Cho (11), a previous winterguard and current marching band member, noted, “She carried herself as a leader since day one.”

That motivational mindset is just as visible in the classroom. Chemistry teacher Mr. Sharma described her as someone who leads through her actions. “She’s not a massive talker—not blabbing out every 5 seconds—but she knows what she’s talking about, and she has this quiet confidence about her. She doesn’t need to be flamboyant.”

Shenoy’s strength lies in a humanity that makes her power approachable. English teacher Ms. Luong initially mistook Shenoy’s reserved personality for mere quietness but now sees it as one of her strengths. “She’s not tyrannical,” Luong said. “She’s understanding—which makes people more inclined to listen to a leader like that. Because you trust them. You feel comfortable around them.”

While Shenoy’s raw talents are evident, stepping into leadership didn’t come without uncertainty. Entering her second year in color guard as one of only 2 sophomore Marching Band leaders, she questioned

whether she belonged. “I was petrified,” she said. “All of them had more experience and have done other stuff to buff themselves up.”

That risk marked the beginning of a different kind of growth that extended beyond her performance and into leadership. In her first year as captain, Shenoy struggled to balance high expectations with the realities of her team. “I think I have matured in the way I lead, because especially in my first year, I was very much a control freak,” she said.

Coming from a strong dance background, she often held herself and others to a high standard of perfection. Latayjah Kennedy (AHS Class of 2025) noted how this strength created challenges when it came to being a captain. “She always had talent when it came to color guard, but that’s what made it hard for her to teach others sometimes.”

Over time, her approach began to shift. Moving into her second year as a color guard captain, Shenoy has learned to adjust her expectations and to focus on the overall success of the group. “Everyone is coming here at a different level, and as captain, it’s not my job to bring everyone up to the highest level. It’s to play into everyone’s strengths so that we can all look good together,” she said.



Shenoy practiced a rifle toss before a parade performance. “She’s very driven to succeed, and I think that’s really inspiring to see,” said Atsu Iyer (12) (Photo Credit: Taeho Um).

Keep calm and carry on

Oviya Ravi (11) does what it takes to ensure success on all fronts

Ananya Pangarkar | Staff Writer

“The biggest thing you’ll hear people saying about her is, ‘How is she so smart? How does she do it?’” said Ranvir Thapar (11) regarding his friend and dance teammate Oviya Ravi (11). Between an AP-packed schedule and participating in, teaching, and captaining a dance team, Ravi has become someone whom most look at in awe and wonder how she does it all.

At school, Ravi’s reputation centers on her intelligence. Her close friend Saanika Uргаonkar (11) said, “She’s extremely smart, and if you have a question about something and you share that class with her, you would be going to her first to ask questions because she probably has an answer.”

Ravi rejects the idea that this academic success comes naturally despite others’ assumptions. “There are people who think I don’t study and I am naturally able to get the grades I have, which is difficult because it diminishes the amount of effort I put into school,” she said.

The reality involves careful management from her side. Ravi said, “I use a lot of to-do lists to keep myself on track. I have a whiteboard where I keep track of school assignments, and my stuff is constantly littered with Post-it notes.”

Ravi has made sacrifices to maintain her current schedule, such as art classes, which she enjoyed before high school. “That is something that I wish did not have to happen. I started art when I was really young because I was always drawing when I was at home, and I got pretty good at it,” she said.

This sacrifice was not a conscious choice, though. “It would just be like, ‘Okay, I don’t have time to go [to art class] this week,’ and that just kept continuing,” said Ravi. “I’m in the middle of a piece that I haven’t worked on since freshman year. I don’t even need to finish it. I just want that one piece back.”

Sleep is another casualty. “Most of my free time is at night after my work is finished. I usually spend an hour watching a show or reading before I go to sleep, but I don’t know how much that counts as free time because I am compromising on sleep,” Ravi said.

Thapar confirmed this struggle. “Oviya is probably the most perfect person until it comes to her sleep schedule. She is undoubtedly one of the hardest working people I know, but that usually encroaches on her sleep,” he said.

The time she has after sacrificing sleep and hobbies is devoted to doing schoolwork or other extracurriculars. Ravi said, “I think it’s worth it in the sense that I feel accom-



[Left to right] Ananya Pangarkar (11), Ravi, Finn Dotson (12), Varsha Bhat (12), and Thapar. Ravi does not let her academic or extracurricular commitments get in the way of spending time with her friends and forming core memories from her high school years. “She always makes time for her friends. She’s the kind of person that will text you not because she needs something, but just to talk, catch up, or share a funny story,” Thapar said (Photo Credit: Ananya Pangarkar (11)).

plished with how much I’ve done and how well I’m doing in school.”

Despite the constant reevaluation of what is worth her energy, Ravi protects her dance commitments. “Teaching dance is one of the most rewarding things I do,” said Ravi. “There are often weeks when I have so much to do that teaching starts to feel like a burden, but as soon as I am in class, I can forget about everything else that is going on.”

Her mother understands why dance remains as a constant in Ravi’s life. “Since she enjoys it and that is one way she de-stresses from the school workload, we don’t force her to stop it or cut back on it.”

Aayushi Dixit (11), a close friend who teaches dance with Ravi, sees how she manages both worlds. Dixit said, “Somehow, even with her other extracurriculars and school schedule, Oviya shows up to every meeting and practice. She never overlooks dance, and she is really good at managing her schedule to show up when she is needed.”

Ravi also intentionally makes an effort to not sacrifice her relationships. “This year I made it a goal for myself to not say no to hanging out with friends because of school, and that has made it easier for me to find a balance between personal life and academics,” explained Ravi.

Unlike many high achievers driven primarily by grades or college applications, Ravi’s motivation comes from within. “My mindset is that once you commit to something, you have to figure it out,” she said. “If I’m taking hard classes, they may be difficult, but I have no choice but to figure it out—and I know I’m going to. That confidence is what gets me through everything.”

“I think it’s kind of innate,” said Ravi, regarding the root of her drive. “When I was in kindergarten, the teacher at my daycare would let me go sit in the room with the first graders doing their homework so I could observe them. I never wanted to go sit and play with toys; I was always very academically oriented even when I was really young.”

This intrinsic motivation becomes apparent when considering how Ravi approaches learning. Uргаonkar, who shared a class with

her in elementary school, recalled, “When we first got introduced to decimals, she didn’t understand it fully, and honestly I didn’t either, but I just went along with it. I was like, ‘Okay, this is just how it is,’ but [Ravi] wanted to learn about it in its entirety. She was asking a bunch of questions until she finally got it.”

Ravi doesn’t claim to have achieved perfect balance. “[Balance] is definitely possible, but it is difficult to achieve. I don’t think I have mastered it,” she said. “I don’t want to maintain a similar pace in college. School can be very overwhelming, and I want much more time for myself.”

She understands that her pace isn’t feasible long-term, but this lifestyle sets her up for success so she can relax in the future. “If I push myself now, then I’m setting myself up for better opportunities in the future. [This choice] wasn’t intentional; it’s just who I am,” said Ravi.

Actions are stronger than words, though. In the future, Ravi wants to be more realistic with her commitments. “Right now, I’m trying so hard to balance extracurriculars and school, but once you get to college, that becomes less of a priority,” she said. “College applications are no longer something to worry or think about, so that takes a lot off my plate.”

Even so, her parents have seen growth in how she handles pressure over the past few years. Her mother explained, “She has learned to prioritize her school work and outside activities over the years. Before, she used to get very stressed, but now, not as much.”

Her father added, “Oviya seems a little calmer about outcomes than before. She still puts in a lot of work, but she is moving past what has happened a little better.”

Though she’s worked hard to build balance, Ravi is the first to admit it’s not always sustainable. “The main thing that helps me is to just remind myself that everything will work out eventually. Everything happens for a reason, and I should just trust myself to do what needs to be done,” Ravi said.



Ravi prioritizes dance in her busy schedule because of how important of a hobby it is to her. “She never overlooks dance, and she is really good at managing her schedule to show up when she is needed,” said Dixit (Photo Credit: Kai Sugano (12)).

Spinning from the corners to center stage

How Gianna Lee (10) is shaping dance at AHS and beyond through choreography and leadership

Jovina Zion Pradeep | Staff Writer

Like many AHS students, Gianna Lee (10) grew up jamming to her favorite songs and binging her favorite movies, which, for her, were all in the K-pop genre. What began as a childhood interest later turned AHS into her stage.

Without any formal training, Lee taught herself how to dance by imitating dances she saw online alongside her sister, slowly developing her own style through repetition and observation. “I would constantly watch K-pop performances sitting in my mom’s restaurant as a child. My sister and I would learn dances and practice together, having fun trying to copy the dances in the videos,” said Lee.

Lee first stepped into choreography during her freshman year at AHS, when she choreographed a K-pop dance for the Class of 2028 Spirit Week rally. “That performance is what I believe jumpstarted my career as a choreographer because people began to notice my potential and skill in dancing,” said Lee.

Since then, she has been offered opportunities to choreograph for International Week, Springfest, and other school productions. School rallies hold significance in Lee’s repertoire because they are rare opportunities for dedicated audiences to watch her dancing.

“Without rallies, I wouldn’t have been able to show my dancing to the entire school,” Lee said. “During the rallies, everyone is always trying to keep their energy up, which boosts my confidence.”

Another choreographer, Caira Dong (10), noted Lee’s thoughtfulness during International Week in making sure that all dancers had a good experience. “Though Gianna wasn’t technically a choreographer for my group, she saw that our current position would have blocked the view of some dancers,” said Dong. “She rearranged all of them to be visible because she knows how important it is to be seen as a dancer.”

Miley Chang (10), who has learned routines for rallies from Lee, felt that Lee was thorough and supportive. “She went in depth through all the steps and made sure that everyone was prepared,” Chang said. “I think that her versions of the dances for the rallies are often better than the originals.”

Lee continues to expand her role as a dance mentor by volunteering weekly at the New Life Korean School, where she assists in classes and teaches K-pop dances to 4- and 5-year-olds.

“It’s the only place where I often speak Korean,” she said. “I’m preparing them to perform for their parents at the end of the semester. I want the kids who are interested to start somewhere, since even just learning dance at your local Korean school could kickstart your dancing career one day.”

Lee also teaches young children to dance at the New Life Church, choreographing Korean dances for Christmas and Easter services for the Korean community there. “I never had younger siblings, so I enjoy organizing dances for the youth at church,” said Lee. “Seeing how much they want to perfect a dance at their age is heartwarming.”

Lee’s Korean culture remains central to her identity as a dancer. “Korean media and K-pop are what influenced me,” she said. “If I wasn’t Korean, I don’t think I would have the same opportunities or skills that I have now.”

While she enjoys dancing with her friends, Lee turned to AHS’s American DanceX club (ADX+) for dancers at her own skill level. “Since there’s an audition process for the dance team ADX+, people with a lot of talent are selected, and there are great dancers in the club,” said Lee. “Being able to have an environment with dancers who can absorb my choreography faster makes the performances look better and is more fun.”

Isabel Mendoza (10), a member of AHS ADX+, found herself mesmerized by Lee’s performance. “I was awestruck when I first saw Gianna dance,” said Mendoza. “You can see her charisma, confidence, and simply how happy she is whenever she dances.”

Many members of the AHS dance community find Lee’s commitment to the craft inspiring. Michelle Ho (10), who worked with Lee to choreograph for rallies in the past, said, “Her passion motivates me to work toward my own goals as a dancer. It’s hard to find one thing to be that passionate about, and discovering it early is valuable for her.”

Lee continues to improve and challenge her own physical limita-

tions. “Whenever I try a new set routine and dance to it, I feel accomplished when I complete it,” she said. “That feeling is what motivates me, and it’s why I lean towards hip-hop for my own practice.”

Lee constantly seeks settings that allow for more creative freedom, and AHS’s Fine Arts Fair captured her attention for the ability to curate her own team. “I liked getting to choose who I danced with,” Lee said. “The feeling of knowing that my friends were in the audience cheering me on

“DANCING FOR FUN IS SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE SHOULD DO SINCE IT’S SO FREEING TO BE ABLE TO MOVE YOUR BODY HOWEVER YOU WANT; THERE’S ALWAYS A GOOD EXCUSE TO DANCE, LIKE BEING HAPPY OR EATING GOOD FOOD.”

and having lights in my face to forget everything else for the moment was incredible.”

As a self-taught dancer, Lee hopes to help people discover their passion for dance regardless of their available resources. “Dance can be really expensive, and I didn’t have those resources, so I made the most of what I had,” said Lee. “I want people to know that if you care enough about something, you will find a way to pursue it.”

In a world where sedentary lifestyles are common, Lee encourages others to experience the thrill of physical movement through dancing. “Every day, most people are sitting or standing for hours,” Lee said. “Dancing for fun is something that everyone should do since it’s so freeing to be able to move your body however you want; there’s always a good excuse to dance, like being happy or eating good food.”



“I performed at last year’s Fine Arts Fair with ADX+ after I got in through auditioning. It’s a great opportunity for me to experiment with complex choreography that I can’t do with opportunities like Spirit Week, which are meant to be accessible for all sorts of dancers,” said Lee (Photo Credit: Darren Guo (10)).

Beyond the spotlight

Sophomore Grace Zhao's experience co-choreographing Mean Girls with no prior experience

Aarnav Raamkumar | Staff Writer

On any regular day during rehearsals for *Mean Girls*, AHSPA's 2026 spring musical, Grace Zhao (10) was doing everything at once. With a production so demanding, things wouldn't have been able to run without Zhao's precise, behind-the-scenes coordination which built the production choreography from the ground up and shaped it into a performance the crowd loved.

Ms. Benedetti, the director of *Mean Girls* and a drama teacher at AHS, was especially impressed by Zhao's dancing and her ability to learn and teach choreography. She said, "She taught tap in such a short time, better than I'd ever learned in high school. And she's a sophomore too; it blows my mind."

In addition to the impressive tap number, "Stop," Zhao, along with another choreographer, Gianna Lee (10), choreographed for every dance number in the show without assistance. Zhao's efforts did not go unnoticed. Mikaela Torres (12), one of her cast members and friends, said, "Grace is one of the hardest working people I've known in the theater. She's always so determined and so good at everything she does—as an actor, choreographer, and friend."

Someone outside the theater may not understand the true extent of the effort put into the production, but for Zhao, the work she puts in is constant. "Grace literally makes all of the formations. She puts so much time into it, and she makes sure she's on top of everything. She knows everything about it," said Lee. "She cares so much about the production, which I really, really admire."

Even when her responsibilities extended past rehearsals, she handled it with grace and still got everything done. "You don't really see all of the work that she does outside of rehearsals," said Cinthana Santhakumar (12), the co-stage manager for *Mean Girls*. "Rehearsals run really long; they're usually 3 to 5 hours sometimes, but even after going home—even when she's exhausted—she still choreographs more dances, grades assignments, and helps out people."

According to Zhao, each dance number needed its own time and effort. She said, "I would spend hours actually deciding what moves I wanted to go at, what beats, and decide formations. And another thing a lot of people don't realize—I have to know what is going on onstage, but also backstage."

Zhao's commitment to her leadership shows just why she was chosen to be the choreographer. Ms. Benedetti said, "She started as a dance captain, and then we bumped up her position to choreographer once I saw just how much work she was also doing." This promotion happened within a week of her becoming dance captain.

Regarding choreographing, Zhao said, "I feel like it came very naturally. I had a vision for how I wanted them to look. Figuring it out wasn't something I struggled with since I already had a picture in my head, and executing that wasn't hard."

Being a leader, but also a regular actor doing a show with her friends, Zhao must achieve a balance between being friendly and responsible. Sophie Leiner (10), a *Mean Girls* cast member, said, "She's locked in when she needs to be, and she's strict and keeps us in check when we need to be kept in check. But when we're just cast members, she's super fun to work with."

Another cast member, Lexi Dumatol (11), said, "She's really fun, but you have to make sure that you're on top of everything. Otherwise, she will clock you, which I think makes her a better boss."



Grace Zhao performed "Sexy," a dance number from *Mean Girls* (Photo Credit: Mumin Yousif (11)).

In addition to being assertive, Zhao makes sure to keep Theater 70 an inclusive space where every performer has their chance to shine. She said, "The energy that we have in this cast is also so good; you can see it. They're literally radiating on stage with energy, and that's really entertaining to see."

This same energy carried into rehearsals, where Zhao managed to balance her high expectations with encouragement. Dumatol said, "She's always so jolly, and she's always trying to push us to be better. I think that's great because we

need the motivation. And she's always excited."

Ms. Benedetti said, "I think something that she did really, really well was making sure that everybody has their moment, and everybody's feeling seen in the show."

Even with her energy, keeping up with academic work and theater duties together was no easy feat. Ms. Benedetti noted, "I think she's handling things very, very well right now. And if she isn't, she doesn't let it show. I think she gives off a very good face of, 'I'm handling this. I'm doing very well. I've got things under control.'"

Zhao, however, acknowledged that juggling it all was harder than she had let on. She said, "Balancing this much at one time has been really challenging, and my mental health has not been the greatest. Obviously, the reality of it has been that I've had to have a lot of late nights and all-nighters, and it's been affecting my health, too."

Despite this, Zhao's passion for the theater and the friends she's made make it worth it for her. "The thing that keeps me going is my passion for the theater, obviously," she said. "But also, I think it's the people there. Because the community is so tight-knit, so close—like such a loving community—seeing their hard work also is what pushes me to keep trying for them."



Grace Zhao with cast member Sana Arora (11) in *Mean Girls* (Photo Credit: Mumin Yousif (11)).

Turning a voice into action

Evangeline Blom (11) encourages political awareness and action among her peers

Lisa Shokoor
Staff Writer

Evangeline Blom (11) represents a rare type of student in this day and age; even while still in high school, Blom is already making her mark in politics and human rights, using both her involvement in AHS's Amnesty International Club and her podcast to engage in advocacy.

Blom started Amnesty International at AHS in an effort to tangibly impact real-world problems. Blom said, "We send out letters to local legislatures. For instance, we've written to [former Secretary of Homeland Security] Kristi Noem a few times, and we've also written to [Representative] Eric Swalwell and had a phone banking event where we called [Senator] Adam Schiff. Additionally, we hold paper doll events where we made dolls in protest of family deportation."

Blom emphasized that the club's purpose goes beyond discussing political issues in meetings. "With Amnesty we don't just talk about human rights; the main point of it is that we actually do something about it. We try to have our voices heard—which aligns with what I wanted to do in the first place with politics," she said.

Blom then highlighted the rarity of student-led activism in this day and age. "A majority of us can't vote yet, and we think that our voices don't matter because we haven't lived life yet, but I think it's incredibly important because we offer a fresh perspective on everything," she said.

Despite her accomplishments, Blom acknowledged the challenges that come with entering a political space from a young age. "It's kind of intimidating sometimes because, whenever you're around assemblymen or local [representatives], you feel really small. I think I have less respect in the eyes of a lot of individuals, and it's tough when you're young and not as experienced or educated," she said.

Through Amnesty International, Blom emphasizes student leadership in order to spark meaningful action. Tia Srivastava (11) is an officer of Amnesty International and spoke highly of Blom's leadership. She explained, "As our president, Evangeline leads our meetings and events by presenting slides and making announcements. She helps keep the team organized and on task, which is crucial as it is common for members to forget their responsibilities often."

Srivastava notices the passion Blom has for student activism and its influence on the rest of the club. "Evangeline's strong political interest ensures that she is informed of all that's happening in the political world, and she passes on this knowledge to the members of our club and our club officers," said Srivastava.

Mr. Kaeding, the club advisor for Amnesty International, encouraged students to be more involved in organizations like Amnesty. "They've done letter writing campaigns and other things of that nature to raise awareness. I think it's a great way for students to start to see how they can be engaged civically to be able to make meaningful action and have

their voices heard in our local politics."

In addition to her work in Amnesty, Blom also currently hosts a podcast called PoliTea for Teens, aimed at increasing political awareness among students. She said, "I thought that in our day and age, a lot of kids our age were just tapped out, and what I really wanted to do with my podcast was build awareness around current events and give kids ways to actually create tangible change."

Blom then discussed the future of PoliTea for Teens and the impact she hopes it will have. She said, "I really love working with podcasts because I get to meet and talk to a lot of interesting individuals, and I hope to not only equip myself, but to equip our generation with tools for them to be able to know what they can do."

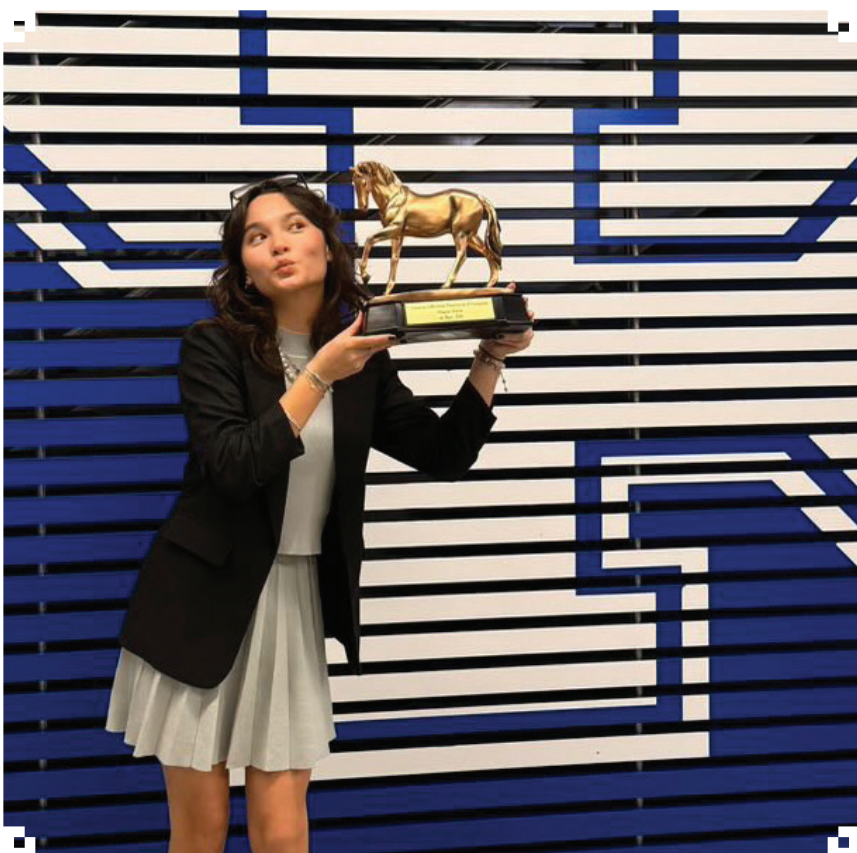
Mr. Pepper is Blom's AP U.S. History teacher, and he talked about the issue of student political engagement. "A lot of times kids are just focused on what's in front of them. Evangeline and I always talk about how kids aren't focused on what is going on from a political standpoint. Kids need to realize that they're going to inherit what is going on now."

He continued, "For most students, it's not on their radar because they have other concerns such as college apps; they're not worried about things that are going on politically. It doesn't become an issue until it affects them directly."

Shari Vaidya (11), a friend of Blom's, reflected on how her confidence has developed over time, especially as she has stepped further into political spaces. "She's really grown into her own person. Through her podcast and Amnesty, she's become much more confident in speaking than she used to be in the past," she said.

Christine Thomas (11), a speech and debate teammate of Blom's, agreed, commending her communication skills and her presence in competitive speaking environments. "One thing that I see that definitely puts her apart from others is her willingness to go out and be herself. It's very hard for some students to break the barrier [of] being shy but Eva has no issue in conquering that. I think that she doesn't care if people judge her," said Thomas.

Thomas is optimistic about Blom's future in politics. "I see great things for her; I know she'll be able to address these issues in her own school and in her own clubs, and I'm sure she'll take it outside and enter the world of politics that she aspires to be a part of."



Blom held her trophy after competing, placing fifth overall nationally in Speech and Debate (Photo Credit: Evangeline Blom (11)).



Blom stood next to Congressman Alex Lee at the Capitol in Sacramento as part of the Young Legislators Program for Students (Photo Credit: Evangeline Blom (11)).

Drive on the cricket field

A closer look at the hard work and dedication behind freshman Vilohith Adusumalli's success

Kshitij Rajmohan
Staff Writer

Cricket is a sport that not many people are naturally talented at; it takes many hours of practice and daily commitment for players to succeed. For the athletes, it becomes not just a game, but a lifestyle that they give up a lot for.

Vilohith Adusumalli (9) plays for the Virinchi Krishna Cricket Academy (VKCA) Vikings, which is a team in the Bay Area that is a D1 finalist and D2 champion for the Fremont Hub Circuit. He said, "Being on a D2 team takes a lot of work. I have to take time out of my schedule for 3-4 hour practices 4 days every week."

The team meets weekly for batting practice, bowling practice, and a solid hour of conditioning. "Our coaches have this rule—however many runs we lose is how many laps we have to run," said Adusumalli.

Coach Narsingh, one of Adusumalli's coaches, said, "When he joined, he wasn't really great at the game and didn't have anything to his name except his passion and hard work. Then eventually, he got really good at cricket and became the best on our team, so [we] made him the captain."

Adusumalli said, "It was initially confusing and overwhelming, which made me want to play more. The joy of playing and allowing me to get away from my schoolwork

was what motivated me to keep going."

Adusumalli's other coach, Coach Sravan, said, "When I first saw Vilohith, I noticed his hard work. Making him the team's captain was one of the best decisions I've ever made." Both of his coaches mentioned his attendance at practices and games as even if he was injured Adusumalli would still do his best to keep up during practice and root for his team on the bench.

Adusumalli has also built strong relationships with his teammates. Atiksh Jain (9) is on the same team as Adusumalli. Jain mentioned, "When I joined the team, Vilohith gave me a warm welcome and pushed me to do better than I thought I ever could." Now, when Adusumalli is unable to play in a game, Jain is the player that steps up and fills his shoes.

Adusumalli stated, "I really am proud of [Jain], because he improved a lot. He just keeps getting better; I can see myself in him."

Sharanya Yadav (9) is another one of Adusumalli's closest teammates and friends. She said, "I see him at practice every day giving it his all, even if he's not in the right mood to play. It seems like an escape from stress for him."

Adusumalli said, "When I play, I tune out all background noises and give it my all on the field."

When he joined, Adusumalli wasn't the best at the game, but his hard work and dedication lifted him to the top of his team. "Before I joined the cricket acad-

my, I thought I would be completely mediocre my whole life, but cricket showed me something that was a part of me that I didn't know existed," he said. "The sport gave me perspective; it showed me how hard people work, how little they get, and yet how satisfied they are with their results. Never look at a chance as a chance to fail. Always look at it as a chance to succeed."

"THE SPORT GAVE ME PERSPECTIVE; IT SHOWED ME HOW HARD PEOPLE WORK, HOW LITTLE THEY GET, AND YET HOW SATISFIED THEY ARE WITH THEIR RESULTS. NEVER LOOK AT A CHANCE AS A CHANCE TO FAIL. ALWAYS LOOK AT IT AS A CHANCE TO SUCCEED."

If lost, check the stage... or the 50-yard line

A look into how the arts have shaped the identity of Benjamin Chen (12)

Suhani Thakkar
Staff Writer

The stands go silent as Benjamin Chen (12) raises his hands—and within moments, the field fills with music as hundreds of musicians move around in perfect unison. Just hours later, he'll be under the stage lights, unrecognizable and taking on an entirely different character. Yet somehow, both versions are the truest reflections of himself.

Chen was always fascinated by the musical world—from taking singing lessons to learning piano at a very young age, music has always shaped his life. As his love for music grew, so did his interest in theater. His sister, Olivia Chen (10), said, "He truly fell in love right before COVID when we watched *Hamilton* in the theater. That experience was mesmerizing for us, and I remember him coming back home and just binge-watching more musicals. He has been hooked ever since."

Chen said, "Seeing so many people of color like me on stage really inspired me and made me realize that this was something I could do. That was the moment when I realized the whole goal of theater is to create beautiful things with beautiful people, which was something I wanted to be a part of."

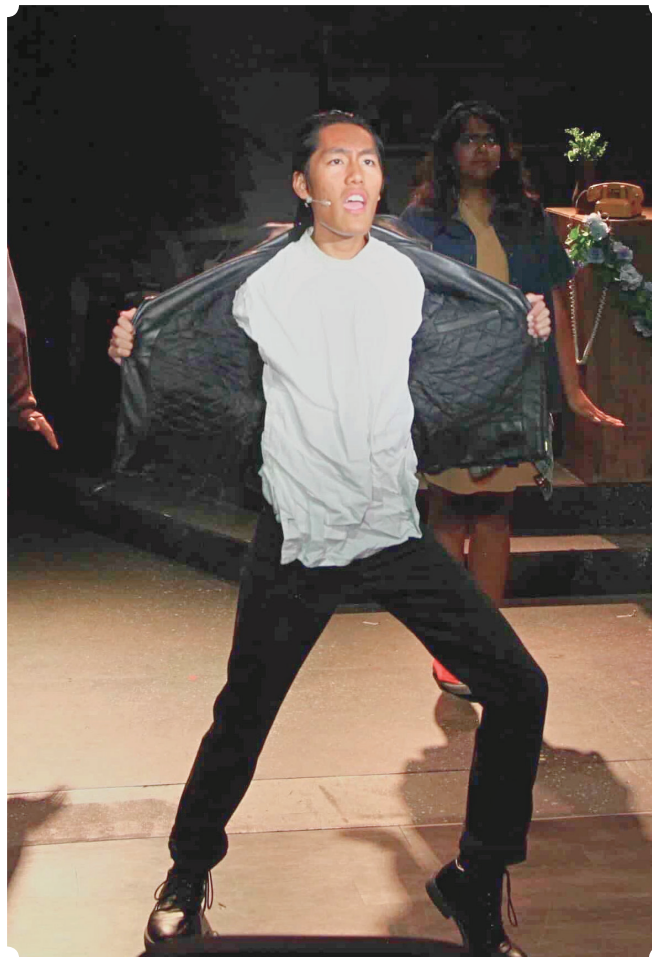
As he chose to pursue theater in high school, this passion became a part of who he is. As Ms. Benedetti, the AHSPA director, said, "Whenever Benjamin acts, you can tell that his whole soul is really going into it and that he puts in a lot of effort to make his characters strong."

Throughout his theater journey, Chen has participated in multiple shows including *Urinetown* and *Anastasia* and many more, including *Little Shop of Horrors* outside of AHS. He said, "I love theater because it allows me to explore different sides of myself. In embodying all these roles, I get to explore what it's like to be somebody else."

Theater is more than just acting, however.

It is being a part of a community, which he values deeply. His theater friend Ishaan Wakhande (11), said, "Whenever he is off the stage, he still carries that same passionate energy into interacting with our theater group, and he always finds one way or another to bring us all together and make us laugh."

However, Chen has also found his people within



Ms. Benedetti said, "Seeing Ben perform in Little Shop of Horrors was insane because he plays such an abusive character so well while being such a nice person overall. His talent really shone through with this performance" (Photo Credit: Benjamin Chen (12)).

the school band as well. His band friend, Avish Zindal (12), said, "Band has definitely become somewhat of a second home to him as whenever he is not doing band or maybe theater, he is hanging out with his band friends."

While Chen was head drum major this past season, it took him a lot of dedication and practice to get there. His mom, Elizabeth Ong, has seen his effort these past few years. "When I say the arts are his whole life, I'm not lying," she said. "For example, there will be times when he will be washing the dishes, and he will put his show's music on to go through it in his head. And then sometimes he'll stop in the middle of putting away dishes and start conducting in the middle of our kitchen."

Although Chen never faltered in his love for the band, he noticed that unsupportive leadership made it difficult. "I remember in my second year my section leader would constantly bully me and make remarks about how I was not good enough, not focused enough, or simple digs that embarrassed me in front of the entire section," he said. "Having that kind of experience made me want to make sure it never happened again to anyone else, which motivated me to try out for leadership positions and make sure the culture of our band got more fun and accepting."

All of this hard work has paid off, as Chen has shined as a leader. "Benjamin really puts his all into leadership and is always willing to do what is best for our band," said Mr. Wong, the band director. "For example this year, he created his own visuals for the band, which made our show so much better in so many ways. He is the best drum major we could have had last season, and his constant dedication towards the band never ceases to impress me."

One small step for Niru, one giant leap closer to a new school record

Sophomore Nirupama Balaji's determination pushes her athletic career to new heights

Angella Li | Staff Writer

Each week, PE students can be seen begrudgingly dragging themselves to the AHS track for their weekly mile, wondering who could possibly enjoy running laps around a large dirt-lined oval. However, running miles is simply another normal day for Nirupama Balaji (10). “My favorite part of track has to be the actual racing. You genuinely feel like you’re flying sometimes,” she said.

Balaji started her athletic career with basketball as an athlete in the Thornton Middle School girls’ basketball team and the AHS girls’ basketball team in her freshman year. “I’ve been playing since I was little, and I have a lot of fun doing it,” she said. “I joined the track team because I thought it would be aura-ful and it’d help me get better for basketball, but as I got to know the girls on the team, it just was a super great environment.” After joining the track and field team in her freshman year following the end of the basketball season, Balaji found a love for distance running and went on to join the AHS Cross Country (XC) team in the fall of her sophomore year.

As she transitioned into distance running, Balaji slowly made a name for herself within the running world, starting within the Mission Valley Athletic League. Despite being in her first year in XC, she was placed in the varsity division and qualified to race at the CIF North Coast Section (NCS) Championships, the primary deciding factor between going on to race at the state level. “Compared to others who would start running XC their freshman year, she started track her freshman year,” said Ishanvi Putta (11), Balaji’s teammate in XC and track. “She started really late, but now she’s one of the fastest people on the team. The way she pushes herself during every practice and race has led to her growth on the track and on the course, which is truly incredible.”

Balaji’s impressive athletic accomplishments largely stem from her eagerness to improve. This determination and drive has always been an important part of Balaji’s identity, even throughout her time in basketball. “She always wanted to improve herself, and she wouldn’t let anyone take her down. If someone had told her something from the other team, she’d go fight back. She’d always bring everyone else up too,” said Prisha Patel (10), one of Balaji’s basketball teammates.

Yet Balaji’s extracurricular activities do not end at sports. Along with juggling academics and athletics, she also does Mock Trial, MUN, and research at the Aspiring Scholars Directed Research Program (ASDRP). With such

a large activity load, Balaji eventually started to notice impacts on her academics. She said, “I’ve realized that discipline and time management is something you need if you play any sports and do all these extracurriculars. If you don’t have that, you’re literally just juggling a billion things and not getting good at any of it.”

Some of the biggest challenges that she has faced in balancing her busy schedule has been time and self-confidence. “With AP season coming up and practice right after school, I barely have 3 hours that I can use for my homework,” said Balaji. “I feel like it’s just *so hard*; I’m losing time and my own confidence because I’ve seen a drop in my academics, and that’s something that’s really important to me.”

Balaji has found that listening to music and confiding in her friends about her morale helps her push through the challenges. “I’ll talk to my friends about it, and that really helped to keep me motivated because I feel like, otherwise, I would have probably quit,” she said. “For track, it was really hard at first. I was like ‘Bro, I can’t run, there’s so much work, and it’s so painful,’ but over time I talked to my friends and I made friends in track, and that’s what really helped.”

Despite her intense dedication to the sport, Balaji

“SHE STARTED REALLY LATE, BUT NOW SHE’S ONE OF THE FASTEST PEOPLE ON THE TEAM. THE WAY SHE PUSHES HERSELF DURING EVERY PRACTICE AND RACE HAS LED TO HER GROWTH ON THE TRACK AND ON THE COURSE, WHICH IS TRULY INCREDIBLE.”

also makes sure to take care of her body to keep potential injuries at bay. “I try not to compare myself to my peers and what their training style is because my body hasn’t been built up to do certain things. I’m careful to manage that, because when I try pushing myself too far without listening to my own body, I end up really hurting my knees,” she said.

Sports often demand as much mental energy as physical. “If you do bad in one race, you have to brush it off and run again the next day. You just have to take it with the mentality that ‘I can grow.’ Running has really put things into perspective. I feel like I’ve learned how to take things not as deeply,” said Balaji. “With everything in perspective, I might be good at one level, but at the next level, I’m just another person. I feel like that really applies to my daily life. One thing can’t shut me down. If one thing goes wrong, in the bigger scheme of things, I’m going to have so many races and so many other opportunities in life to better myself.”

Balaji also does not let her struggles impact how she treats the people around her. “I would describe her as very joyful, curious, and energetic,” said Putta. “She is definitely one of the most genuine, sweet people you’ll meet on the team and will always be one of the first people to make you [feel] welcome.”

Many new runners on the team look up to Balaji’s warmth and kindness. Elyse Lovellette (9) is new to the XC and track teams and feels that Balaji has greatly encouraged her to improve her times. “I really look up to her sister-like quality. She’s always treating us like her younger siblings. She talks to us with a fun but gentle tone; she’s always supporting us and making sure we know that she’s there

for us,” said Lovellette. “She’s always encouraging me to do better and giving me new ideas for milestones I could reach.”

As she continues to chase increasingly faster times, Balaji hopes to continue her running career in college and help other kids with their sport. “I really hope athletics play a big part in my future, because right now, I genuinely don’t see a future without track,” she said. “I definitely think if I had not started running, even aside from basketball, I would not have grown as an individual. I feel like the person I am today—the way I think, the confidence I have, the people I hang out with—are all because of running. I feel like my life would have been completely different without it.”



Balaji raced in the frosh/soph girls open 1600 meter race at the track and field invitation- al, Castro Valley Relays, and won first place by 15 seconds. She walked home that day with three medals: second place for frosh/soph girls Distance Medley Relay, second place for frosh/soph girls 4x800 relay, and first place for frosh/soph girls open 1600 meters (Photo Credit: Julian Alfonso).

At the center

Senior Lahari Tatikonda's journey through student leadership

Keerthi Vasudevan | Staff Writer

High school is often framed as a 4-year sprint toward college, but for some students, what defines their experience is not just passive participation—it is leadership. For Lahari Tatikonda (12), leadership has been at the core of her high school career, as she has shaped the student experience in multiple clubs and teams beyond the classroom.

As prom commissioner since her junior year, Tatikonda has taken on one of ASB's most demanding leadership roles, coordinating large-scale events that require months of planning, communication, and problem-solving. From ensuring events run smoothly to organizing logistics, her work behind the scenes affects the entire student body.

"She does great work as our commissioner," said Vidushi Agrawal (12). "Though she hasn't been on for long, Lahari is super passionate about student leadership. She handles her responsibilities really well since she really loves what she does."

For Tatikonda, ASB leadership is about more than just executing events; she wants to create memorable experiences for the whole student body. "I love watching people grow and enjoy the things we create for them," said Tatikonda.

This same mindset carries across everything she does. A multi-sport athlete in cross-country and track, a Mock Trial captain, and a head science camp counselor, Tatikonda consistently steps into leadership roles. But unlike many, her reasons for doing so are rooted more in initiative than recognition.

"I do not really remember a time where I was not trying to juggle 3 things all at once," Tatikonda said. "It is packed, but I somehow managed to get through it all with the help of my friends and lots of energy drinks."

Though under pressure, Tatikonda actively seeks out positions where she can take charge. "The chaos is what makes it worthwhile, and I love seeing the impact I have on whatever small community I lead," she said.

This year, Tatikonda became captain of the cross-country team, which made history as the first time the team won MVAL finals. Over the past 4 years, Coach Javier has watched her grow as both an athlete and as a leader in both track and cross-country. "On days when she could not attend afternoon practices, she would go to morning practice, which starts at 5:15 AM, to keep up with the weekly mileage," said Coach Javier. "Lahari's leadership has been beyond influential. She has set a high standard for what senior night should look like as well as rallying behind and welcoming the newcomers on the team."



Tatikonda posed with cross-country seniors [top to bottom and left to right] Aneek Mandal (12), Romir Gandhi (12), Gabriel Wang (12), Konnor Tan (12), Alex Natividad (12), Benson Tang (12), Sophia Huang (12), Vivian Luu (12), and Tatikonda (Photo Credit: Phoebe Luo (11)).

Her leadership extends into Mock Trial as well, where this past year, Tatikonda guided her team through competition season as a captain. A close friend of Tatikonda's, Sage Gebrekidan (12), used to run cross-country with Tatikonda and co-captained Mock Trial beside her. "She's an amazing person to lead with and pushes the team to be its absolute best," said Gebrekidan.

To many people, Tatikonda's résumé might seem like a blueprint for success in today's competitive college admissions landscape. However, her experience with managing so many things at once reflects a growing reality: students increasingly feel compelled to "max out" their extracurriculars to the point of not even liking anything they do. "I do all the things I do because I truly love them, but I know not everyone does that. I'm able to manage everything because I have interest in the things I am involved in, but I have so many friends that do things just for applications," Tatikonda shared.

This perspective of choosing what she wanted to do shaped Tatikonda's leadership style. Her genuine interest in the few clubs and sports she participated in meant that her full attention was on being the best leader she could be.

However, leadership at this level comes with trade-offs. Balancing all these extracurriculars along with academics often meant sacrificing personal time and rest. "There were many days she would go directly from practice to a Mock Trial meeting, then come home and still have homework to finish," said Kavita Manava, Tatikonda's mother.

"I hadn't really slept over 5 hours regularly until senior year after applications were submitted," Tatikonda admitted.

Even so, she views these sacrifices as part of the responsibility that leadership requires. "I don't regret doing it all, and if I had to go back, I honestly wouldn't change anything." She said, "I never thought about it too much because I really love what I do."

Looking back, Tatikonda believes that she still left time to enjoy high school. "I think I definitely made the most of my time, but it wasn't easy," Tatikonda said. "My way of relaxing is hanging out with my friends. I rely on them a lot because they're like my support system. But it's hard to make time for fun when you know you have so much to do."

Kiara Cadelina (11), one of Tatikonda's closest friends, shared that these small sacrifices never really mattered to her, and that a few hours of hanging out would relax her enough to get back to her work. "She is so genuine in everything she does," she said. "If we wanted to go get food, or just hang out, it was so usual of her to say, 'I have too much work' and just not come. Somehow, she still found time for us, though, and we were always there for her when she needed some extra support."

Now, as college decisions have come out, Tatikonda is excited to continue her further education at UC Santa Barbara. For Tatikonda, high school was still a mostly fun experience despite the tremendous workload. "In the end, my 4 years have taught me about what my limits and priorities are and showed me how passionate I really am about leadership," she said.



Tatikonda, overwhelmed by all the work she must complete piled up around her (Photo Credit: Keerthi Vasudevan (9)).

Art at your fingertips

Inside junior Chealsie Nguyen's growing nail business

Marjan Nabizada | Staff Writer

At just 16, Chealsie Nguyen (11) has turned a simple interest into something much bigger. What started as inspiration from her aunt has grown into a business she's been developing for the past year.

Nguyen tried doing nails for fun and gradually turned the hobby into a routine of appointments. "I like the experience because I get to meet new people while doing something I enjoy," Nguyen said.

While doing nails may seem simple, it requires patience and precision. Each set can take up to 2 hours depending on the design, and even longer if the details are more complex. "I have to prep the nails, shape them, and then do the design, so it takes a while depending on what the person wants," Nguyen said. "Sometimes it can be stressful because I want everything to look perfect."

Friends say Nguyen's hard work shows. "She puts so much effort and creativity into every set, even though it can be stressful," said Jannet Fawad (11), a close friend.

For others, watching Nguyen has been motivating. "It's not easy, but it's impressive how she stays patient and still creates detailed work," said Sophia Dosanjh (11).

Balancing school with her work has been one of Nguyen's biggest challenges. As a junior, she

manages assignments while also scheduling clients. "I have to plan around school and make time for everything," she said. "I try to stay organized so I don't fall behind." Learning how to manage her time has become an important part of maintaining both her academic responsibilities and her work.

Nguyen creates a comfortable experience for her clients. She said she wants people to feel relaxed during their appointments; she believes her job is not just about the final result. That effort has made a difference for those who hire her. "She's really easy to talk to, and her space feels comfortable," said Leia Hernandez (11), a client. After trying other places, Hernandez said Nguyen was the first to meet her expectations.

At home, Nguyen's work has also been noticed. "I'm proud she found something she enjoys, and it's helped her become more independent," said her mom, Tracy Ho.

This business has helped Nguyen learn responsibility. "I've learned how to manage my time better and talk to clients," Nguyen said. These skills have helped her become more confident not only in her work, but also in how she interacts with others.

Despite the time and pressure, Nguyen

continues because she enjoys the work. "I like being creative and seeing how everything turns out," she said. Over time, she has built both skill and confidence, improving with each set she completes.

Nguyen said her work is also helping her plan for her future. "I plan to continue to do nails to help pay for college," she said. She explained that being able to earn her own money has made her more motivated to keep improving. With time, she hopes to build a larger client base and continue developing her skills while saving for her education.



Nguyen's nail work on one of her clients (Photo Credit: Chealsie Nguyen (11)).

MAY WORD SEARCH

Tegbir Kaur and Carolyn Baskar John | Co-Editor-in-Chief, Design Editor

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- chrysanthemum
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