

ARTS&CULTURE

Were you allowed to watch shows like “SpongeBob” as a child? Reflect on parental media restriction.

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TUTORING

Students at Branham provide and receive tutoring both within and outside of Branham. Explore the benefits of tutoring.

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SCIENCE&HEALTH

What’s happening with TikTok after the short-lived ban?

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BEAR WITNESS



PLANE CRASHES

FLIGHT OR FRIGHT



Recent plane crashes across the media create fear while students prepare to travel during upcoming breaks

13 fatal airplane crashes took place in 2025 as of Feb. 19, 2025. There were 18 fatal airplane crashes in 2024 by Feb. 19, 2024.

85 people died from a fatal airplane crash in 2025 as of Feb. 19, 2025. 42 fatal people died from fatal airplane crashes in 2024 by Feb. 19, 2024.

Source: National Transportation Safety Board

ENOCH SHIN
Staff Writer

With students returning from President’s Week break and spring break around the corner, Branham students are traveling worldwide. However, many worry about how recent plane crashes affect their travel. Airplane crashes have caught the attention of the media recently. Nationally, on Jan. 29, an American Airlines plane and an Army helicopter collided and crashed near Reagan National Airport in the Potomac River, leaving no survivors and labeled as the deadliest US aviation disaster since 2001. President Trump addressed this problem, saying that the country was in mourning over

the loss of 67 lives in the American Airlines plane and that this day was “an hour of anguish.” Other crashes have garnered international attention. The Jeju Air airplane crash at Muan National Airport claimed the lives of 179 people’s lives in December, leaving South Korea in mourning over one of the worst airplane crashes of the century. California also experienced two airplane crashes within the first six days of the new year, with a small airplane in Temple City, Calif. crashing into a home and a Fullerton Calif. crash resulting in two deaths and 15 injuries. Travel Club president Adam Orenstein

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CLASS CURRICULUM

Zooming in
Women and gender studies curriculum is implemented within Ethnic Studies class

EMMETT SPEAR
Staff Writer

The Branham Ethnic Studies course will implement a new curriculum for juniors and seniors focusing on women and gender studies, beginning in the 2025-2026 school year. The curriculum is the product of requests by students for a class focusing on gender-related topics within the ethnic studies framework, and is being developed by Ethnic Studies teacher Stefanie Menera, who will be teaching the course, and former Ethnic Literature teacher Michael Espinoza. Menera believes that the course provides a more focused discussion within the broader Ethnic Studies curriculum. “We look at, what is race, what is class? How do these things show up in our regular [schedule]?” Menera said. “How have these identities influenced people to start movements throughout history? That can be a lot to cover because there are so many people and communities, [and] unfortunately, they get pushed out to the margins.” The course currently has four tentative

Inside Ethnic Studies
Explore the new Ethnic Studies curriculum being implemented next year.
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SEE ETHNIC STUDIES • PAGE 3

COLLEGE BOARD

College Board bugs
College Board raises concerns due to crash on finals day

ALYX YOON
Staff Writer

On Dec. 18, 2024, the first day of finals, the College Board shut down for many classes, disrupting testing time. The College Board introduced digital testing for 28 Advanced Placement (AP) courses in the beginning of this school year. To accommodate the new testing formats, AP classes have switched to digital assignments, quizzes and tests throughout the first semester. However, platform bugs and crashes have raised concerns regarding the national AP exams in May. One of the classes that went digital is AP United States History (APUSH). Despite plans to conduct the three-part final digitally, the College Board AP Classroom platform stopped working and Branham’s APUSH teacher Christopher Mock had to improvise. Changing the testing format to paper not only caused students to unexpectedly hand write responses but also delayed the testing schedule, eliminating the previously planned short break in between testing segments. “I’ve been trying to be more mindful

SEE AP CLASSES • PAGE 2

RESTROOM RELOCATED

Gender-neutral bathroom moved to Wellness Center

ELLIOTT YAU
Science & Health Editor

The gender-neutral restroom, formerly located by the cafeteria, was moved to the single-stall restroom in the Wellness Center before the beginning of second semester.

This isn't the first time the administration decided to move the gender-neutral bathroom. In February 2022, Branham initially established a gender-neutral bathroom in the J building, but low visibility and vandalism led the school to deem it unsafe for students. In September 2022, it was moved to the location by the cafeteria, intending to make it safer and provide higher visibility.

The results were mixed. Principal **Beth Silbergeld** said overcrowding, especially during lunch, made the restroom unsafe for some students. Even though signs in the bathrooms displayed the maximum number of people allowed inside, monitoring the restroom and enforcing the limit was difficult for staff.

"We want a safe place for students who don't fit in a gendered bathroom, and the place where it was didn't serve that purpose," Silbergeld said.

With privacy in mind, the administration decided to designate the single-user restroom already in the Wellness Center as the gender-neutral restroom and revert the previous gender-neutral bathroom near the cafeteria back to a girls restroom.

The single-stall restroom will also continue to serve its original purpose as the health restroom, which is for students who don't feel well or have doctor's notes. With grab bars on the walls as well as an open space wide enough for wheelchairs and crutches, the restroom is set up to accommodate the needs of any student.

"The bathroom in the Wellness Center meets the need of being a safe place for students who don't fit into one of the gendered bathrooms," Silbergeld said. "Because it is a single stall, there cannot be more than one person in a stall, so it allows for privacy, [which is] one component of safety."

However, some students, like sophomore **Ash Diner**, disagrees with the decision to move the gender-neutral bathroom. Diner, who is transgender, only used that bathroom by the cafeteria and ASB room, and was surprised to find the signs switched without any prior notification, especially since she didn't consider overcrowding a major issue.

"I was angry about it because it was pretty much the only one I used and there wasn't really a point where I felt uncomfortable," Diner said. "I felt as safe being in there as compared to if I went to a gendered bathroom."

Diner said crowding could have been related to the fact that it was the only gender-neutral bathroom on campus and only had three stalls. Crowding could also have blocked peo-

ple who needed to use the bathroom from doing so, especially since Branham lacks other gender-neutral bathrooms.

According to Diner, moving the bathroom created more problems, especially since it's now located inside a separate building away from other bathrooms, and the awkward location may discourage other students from going to the gender-neutral bathroom.

"Anyone who might not be comfortable being in a gendered bathroom now [doesn't] have as comfortable of an option. The option is still there, but it's way less accessible," Diner said. "[It will deter people from using it, and people might end up going to a gendered bathroom because it's their only option.]"

The move comes with some trade-offs affecting other students as well. Health clerk **Ana Yescas** said the move will result in higher traffic to the Wellness Center.

"At times it may be a little busy and they'll have to wait a little longer," Yescas said, attributing longer wait times to higher traffic and some students' mobility needs.

Since there is only one stall, staff cannot keep track of what's going on inside, so the Wellness Center requires students to leave their phone and backpack outside to prevent long delays and illicit activity.

Diner offers simple solutions to these problems — return the bathroom to how it was, or create more accessible options.

"Switching the signage for any of the bathrooms somewhere across campus [is] all you need to do," Diner said, adding that changing the gender-neutral bathroom's location won't prevent students from misbehaving elsewhere. "People will vape or do drugs regardless. That's not gonna stop them. And if they [want to] crowd, they'll crowd. You can't make kids act [differently] if they want to act a certain way."

Senior **Paxton Burke**, who previously served in Branham's Student Senate and advocated for more gender-neutral bathrooms, also opposes the move.

"You can't punish a group of students for something they didn't do," Burke said. "The people who need gender-neutral restrooms aren't the people disrespecting them."

Burke acknowledged that having staff members stand outside the restrooms can be uncomfortable, but there is a better solution.

"The number one way to solve that is communicating with students that actually use the resources," Burke said. "Admin interaction or outreach to specific student groups [is] something that I'd really like to see because students want to be heard, and it feels like they're being abandoned. Now is especially a time when it's really hard to be a trans student, and so seeing admin essentially abandon people's needs, for what I presume is convenience for them, it's really disappointing."



Elliott Yau/Bear Witness

The new gender-neutral bathroom, a single-user bathroom in the Wellness Center previously used exclusively as the health restroom, is marked with a gender-neutral sign.

Gender-neutral bathrooms in educational facilities

In 2023, the California State Legislature passed Senate Bill No. 760, amending requirements for bathrooms in California educational facilities for all schools to implement before July 1, 2026. Senate Bill No. 760 Section 3, Subdivision (b)(1)(A) requires at least one-all gender restroom in California educational facilities.

Senate Bill No. 760 Section 3, Subdivision (b)(1)(A):

- Provide and maintain at least one all-gender restroom for pupil use that meets the following requirements:
- (i) Has signage identifying the bathroom facility as being open to all genders and in conformity with Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations.
 - (ii) Is available for pupil use, consistent with the requirements of subdivision (a), as unlocked, unobstructed, easily accessible by any pupil, and consistent with existing pupil access to sex-segregated restrooms.
 - (iii) Is consistent with the requirements pursuant to Section 35292.6.
 - (iv) Is available during school hours and school functions when pupils are present.

AP CLASSES | College Board bugs raise concerns

From PAGE 1

about making sure that [the class finishes] on time, even though we're giving them as realistic of a test as possible, and giving them some time to relax between tests, but I couldn't do that," Mock said. "I was scrambling to give [the students] paper [tests]."

Although Mock was able to find an alternative solution, he said he felt the worst for his students since they had to work past the bell due to lost time.

"A lot of students are more used to typing, and all of a sudden they have to hand write an essay," Mock said. "[There was an] uncertainty because some students were like 'Oh no, what are we going to do?'"

Some teachers, however, were unable to find an effective solution to the unexpected change. Another newly digital class is AP World History (WHAP). WHAP teacher **Sarah MacInnes** had to quickly think of another method for her students to take their final since she did not have paper copies. Students had to write down multiple choice answers on binder paper with the questions presented on the projector.

"I will always have paper copies as a backup because I don't trust College Board anymore," MacInnes said. "Throughout the year, it had always worked on other tests that I had done online, so I didn't have paper copies [this time]."

WHAP student sophomore **Wyatt Tapia** who had to take his final in the alternative format said it was a "pain in the butt" and experienced many difficulties from the sudden change.

"Anytime someone needed to see a question again, the whole class would have to stop their progress because the other kid needed to see that question, so it was a total pain," Tapia said.

The College Board crash created uneasiness about inconsistencies throughout the platform, especially for the upcoming AP exam in May.

"I'm a little worried something like this might come up again, especially since the AP exam has a lot more people and College Board can't handle a row of classrooms entering their website," Tapia said.

With the push to digitize AP classes, Mock said switching to online testing is not "necessarily the best idea."

"One of my biggest concerns was I didn't know if [College Board was] ready to do that," Mock said.

Students and teachers were concerned about the annotation feature, which is supposed to be on the exam but wasn't added to the testing platform until January, after finals. Along with the annotation feature, College Board introduced a line reader tool to help students focus while reading test content and a new secure testing format without alerting teachers and students.

"A lot of times with College Board, they make changes in the middle of the school year, and they don't tell us that it's coming," Mock said. "A lot of times they're not really prepared for it, and then they're trying to fix things in the middle of having students do it."

In late January, teachers attended a professional development session where they learned how to use the new tools and teach it to students.

"There's a lot of unknowns and outside factors that students in the school [don't] have much control over that could mess up the testing experience," Mock said.

New College Board tools introduced in January



Highlights: The highlighting tool allows students to mark up and highlight the text.



Notes: The notes feature allows students to leave notes and comments to revisit throughout the text.



Line reader: The line reader isolates lines of text to help students focus while reading passages.



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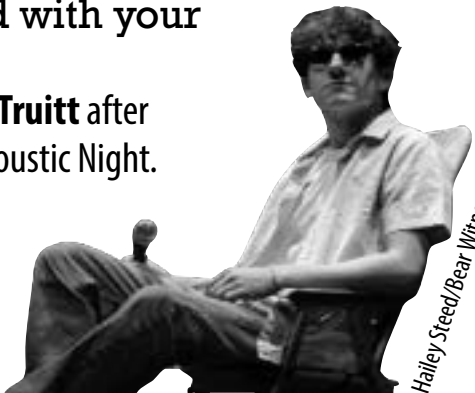
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The Bear Witness is committed to providing accurate, timely coverage of local and world news while connecting these events to the lives of our diverse student body.
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OVERHEARD | QUOTES OF THE MONTH FROM OUR ONLINE STORIES

“I love the spirit of performing and seeing everybody smile afterwards. It’s an opportunity to perform for [the audience] and with your friends. ”

Senior **Harrison Truitt** after performing at Acoustic Night.

Harrison Truitt performs “Hysteria” by Muse with The Leatherman.



Halley Steed/Bear Witness

“I have a lot of people I know who say, ‘I can’t draw’ or ‘I suck at this,’ but I really think that you can. You just have to be more confident in yourself.”

Sophomore **Charlotte Homer**, who won a silver prize for her animation in the Korean UCC Contest of San Francisco, when talking about art.

“Jamba Jamboree is about bringing together the music community around Branham.”

Band Director **Chris Nalls** after hosting Jamba Jamboree, a concert in collaboration with middle school bands.

Senior **Hari Srivatsan** performs a trumpet solo during the jazz band’s performance of “Alligator Alley” by Michael Daugherty.



Emmett Spear/Bear Witness

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Branham’s Got Talent showcases musical talent

On Feb. 10, Branham conducted their annual “Branham’s Got Talent” contest, competing for seven awards with the grand prize of \$100. The winners were seniors **Matsya Vinodh**, **Daniel Yarbrough**, **Gautam Khajuria** and juniors **Iker Estrada** and **Will Tischhauser** who performed “Funkytown”.

“There’s no way to get used to [performing] other than doing it,” Vinodh said.

Vinodh said he believes his repeated performance experience has helped him as a performer.

“I saw people really sad that they made a mistake on stage,” he said. “I can guarantee you that nobody cares if you make a mistake.”

Junior **Landon Allen** performed multiple times. One of the performances was of the song “Underneath the Lovely London Sky” from “Mary Poppins Returns” which he sang and played the piano to, along with a back track of 10 other instruments he played.

“It was hard,” he said. “I was definitely pressed for time in terms of getting it all finished. It took a bunch of recordings, and eventually came together.”

— Aidan Weiler

Bionic Bruins club hosts the Beat the Bay Vex Robotics tournament

44 robotics teams gathered in Branham’s gym in early February for the Beat the Bay tournament, a Vex Robotics V5 regional competition hosted by Branham’s Bionic Bruins club.

This year’s game, High Stakes, featured an autonomous park and a driver-controlled part in which two alliances of two teams competed to score rings on states, place mobile goals and climb the central ladder with their robots.

Bionic Bruins entered teams: 6374B, 6374X and 6374G.

Team 6374B advanced to final match as the Blue Alliance with the 1228S Maestro team losing by a score of 30-5 to the Red Alliance.

1806X Parallelogram, part of the Red Alliance, consisted of a team of all freshmen including team member **Ethan Huang**.

“Winning here honestly feels great,” Huang said, especially since Parallelogram lost a previous tournament. “It feels like a redemption.”

— Elliott Yau



Elliott Yau/Bear Witness

The Bionic Bruins and the Maestro team work together in the final round.

Eight grade family night showcases Branham clubs and programs

Branham introduced its incoming freshmen on eighth grade family night on Feb. 6. The students explored the campus and interacted with many stands advertising Branham’s clubs, courses and sports team, giving them an opportunity to experience a taste of Branham high school.

The event featured multiple dances and skits from clubs, demonstrating the diversity of Branham’s vast communities. The dances gave students the opportunity to witness many different aspects of life at Branham. The performances ranged from choreographed dances from the mandarin class to a sneak peek at backstage bruins newest production of Chicago.

Sophomore **Chloe Gao** introduced eighth graders to marching band during family night. She said that the event was a great opportunity for students to gauge what they want to participate in at Branham.

“I was able to help a lot of people,” Gao said. “If you’re passionate about advocating for a club or whatever you’re interested in, it’s a really good experience.”

— Nithya Karambakkam and Kianna Sanchez

ETHNIC STUDIES | New curriculum next year

From PAGE 1

units. The first unit will focus on the portrayal of gender roles in the media and how they can be challenged.

“The class is going to be new in this curriculum, so we’re going to build it as we go,” Menera said. “Hopefully the students who take the class can help me to help them and curate the class to what they’re looking for.”

Senior **Neil Karote**, a current Ethnic Studies student, believes the new curriculum will provide an opportunity to recognize the role of gender throughout history, an important component for creating change.

“The more we talk about it and the more platforms we provide, the more change we’ll see,” Karote said.

Menera observed a similar need for a gender-focused curriculum from students who shared their experiences with sexism and homophobia.

“[Sexism and homophobia] was a big part of the reason that these students presented the idea that a [gender-focused curriculum] could be really beneficial to understand how a small comment or joke to one student is actually rooted in a much larger system,” Menera said, “and that much larger system affects people in very specific and sometimes harmful ways.”

Junior **Avni Almal**, who plans to take the course next year, believes that the curriculum would be important in discouraging the dissemination of misinformed views on gender roles throughout society.

“Having a strong understanding of things like different interpretations of feminism and struggles of the queer community are really

crucial to being able to engage in meaningful discourse and make change in the future,” Almal said.

Menera plans for the class to expand further outside of women and gender studies into life skills, such as analysis or media literacy, which she says is a pressing issue for the upcoming generations.

“My hope is that we can watch films that students have seen before, listen to artists that make music that students are interested in, take something that we’re already consuming in our day-to-day lives and add that extra layer of analysis and try to understand what this could mean beyond what we might have understood it to mean before,” Menera said.

Karote says the new curriculum will offer new opportunities to learn about different marginalized groups and promote better recognition of their struggles throughout society.

“It helps us navigate social [and] political problems, and it’s important to talk about these stories



and people who don’t necessarily have platforms because this history is still important, but it’s often untold,” Karote said.

David Tran/Bear Witness

TRAVEL | How plane crashes affect traveling

From PAGE 1

thinks that the recent airplane crashes may create fear among his club members.

“Some club members could worry about this,” Orenstein said. “I have one Travel Club member who’s only been on a plane once, and I could understand how hearing the stories of planes having malfunctions, planes crashing and people dying could scare them and prevent them from traveling on planes in the future.”

According to Dr. Bob Baron, the CEO of the Aviation Consulting Group, one of the reasons why fear surrounds airplane crashes is because the news and media commonly sensationalize them through fear and shock value, and news channels report on speculation and factual inaccuracies.

A study conducted by Fast Company, an American business magazine, affirms this, with 43% of readers reporting feeling scared to go onto an airplane after reading a story about an airplane crash.

“It’s not good because these events are so rare,” Orenstein said. “But if you aren’t as comfortable and familiar with traveling via airplane, then these highly publicized negative events regarding planes could scare you.”

Sophomore **Arjun Rasha**, who plans on attending the school trip to France during spring break with other classmates, offers a perspective similar to Orenstein’s.

“If [plane crashes] get big enough in the news, it could affect some people that are scared of airplanes, and that could impact how much people travel on airplanes,” Rasha said.

Orenstein worries about how plane crashes will present obstacles for club members in the future.

“It’s a giant obstacle in my club because, despite these increasing stories about planes having malfunctions, my members are still traveling just as much,” Orenstein said. “They still love to travel just as much as they always have, but I’m just concerned that in the future, it might affect my club members’ desire to travel because of their own feelings of safety.”

While airplane crashes are jointly seen as rare, malfunctions and delays are more common to encounter.

Having traveled to four continents, Social Science teacher **Sarah MacInnes** enjoys traveling domestically and internationally. She chaperones school trips as a member of Education First (EF), a program that helps teachers travel with students together. She has helped over 20

students, ranging from groups of nine to 13, and has traveled internationally to South Korea, the Galapagos Islands, and other countries for educational purposes.

Although MacInnes thinks that she isn’t directly affected by airplane crashes, she has encountered delays from malfunctions and technicalities while chaperoning before.

“On my first trip, we [got] delayed for 24 hours in Miami because the airline delayed us from taking off for possibly a mechanical issue or the airplane staff just hadn’t fueled up the plane the night before,” MacInnes said. “They realized they had to fuel the plane when we were already at the airport. The plane delayed us by a couple of hours, which was not a fun experience because we should have been on the equator at that point.”

Despite being wary about recent plane crashes, her passion for traveling remains unaffected.

“It’s really unfortunate, and it does remind you of the not 100% safety of travel when you see these stories,” MacInnes said. “But for me, although there’s an obvious risk, especially like a plane or a train, ultimately, the experiences you get outweigh the fear of something going potentially wrong.”

OPINION

EXTRA MATH

EQUATION FOR SUCCESS

NITHYA KARAMBAKKAM
Staff Writer

Math is sometimes seen as an infamously difficult subject, even by those interested in science, technology, engineering and math. Some students struggle to grasp concepts and to remedy that, they often try to find tutors.

There are an abundance of private freelance tutors or tutoring facilities, and they are always in demand. However, there has always been a debate surrounding this practice: is math tutoring truly beneficial?

Yes, it is. Math classes and math tutoring outside of school are sometimes given a bad reputation for being very disciplined, but they can be very beneficial for certain students.

Private math centers such as Kumon, Russian School of Math and Mathnasium, as well as private small-group tutoring, have always been a popular choice for parents, due to their supposed positive effect on math education.

According to the research and education section at Annenberg Institute at Brown University, in 2022, around 6-7% of U.S. families with children between ages six and 17 had paid for private tutoring—and that number has not decreased.

Students are often sent to those programs to receive a specialized education in math and supplement school curriculums. Private program syllabi can vary, and sometimes, different methods of learning work better for students. For example, in San Jose, there are various math tracks and therefore, various learning methods. In the Campbell Union High School District, we use the Integrated Math system — topics are typically dispersed throughout a few grade levels, so we get a mix of concepts each year.

By contrast, some schools (both private and public) such as Harker and Archbishop Mitty, employ a more traditional path. Students progress from Algebra I to Geometry and so on.

They learn specific areas each year and have

a more concentrated focus, rather than learning a little of everything. Private math tutors and centers tend to follow the latter model, and some students and parents may prefer that curriculum.

Although many parents believe that the classes are ultimately beneficial for their children, numerous students regard their time in private math programs as unpleasant. One of the prime reasons for that is the added pressure to their schoolwork.

Math tutoring centers in particular often give out a lot of homework. This just adds to students' heavy load and may negatively impact their sleep and mental health. Math tutoring can also be stressful because private tutors often place more emphasis on speed than schools do. However, students will become very efficient and skilled in the long run.

Typically, schools don't place a lot of emphasis on solving problems quickly, other than putting occasional and generous time limits on exams. In comparison, many private programs put more emphasis on solving problems with speed.

In fact, many of them are geared towards preparing for math competitions like the American Mathematics Competitions, where speed is one of the main skills tested. Doing timed math problems can be a harrowing experience, but students should evaluate the long-term benefits of this practice before casting judgement: unlike schools, private math tutoring will teach students how to do math quickly, which can be useful in a variety of situations, even outside of school and work.

For example, being able to efficiently calculate your finances can be beneficial to a person when they have more finances to manage later in life. It can also help with better time management, problem-solving confidence and can improve decision making.

Private math tutoring is also beneficial because it encourages students to not become

Private math programs may be thought of negatively, but are ultimately beneficial for students' education.

David Tran/Bear Witness



complacent. Schools often permit students to use calculators when solving problems in class, and only restrict calculator use during exams. However, math tutors often don't allow calculator use unless absolutely necessary, because many of them train students for competitions where calculators are not permitted. This has the side effect of developing students' mathematical intuition and decreasing their dependency on outside tools.

Additionally, public schools in particular are known for having large class sizes. Private math programs have more targeted, specialized teaching with their small groups or one-on-one classes.

Harvard Graduate School of Education stated that weak math proficiency among U.S. students is a strong concern. Math programs outside of school can enrich students' knowledge and keep them up to par with education standards. In fact, Kumon math students tend to score 5.27 points higher on the math SAT section on average.

Regardless of whether or not students enjoy their time in private math programs, there is no doubt that rigorous practice over a long period of time improves their skill and understanding.

Students benefit from the discipline that pro-

grams offer, and many are in need of the additional assistance. They may later appreciate what they've been taught, but fail to see the benefit of programs while they are attending.

It's important to remember that the efficacy of private math programs and tutoring varies student-to-student. Every student is unique.

Math programs can definitely be detrimental in a lot of ways. Arguably, the worst possible negative impact is that students are pushed away from math. They start viewing it as a chore, rather than a beautiful subject.

However, this doesn't apply to all alumni of private math programs — some students enjoy the style that private programs employ. Disregarding students' level of enjoyment and whether or not they come out of the programs with a renewed interest in math, it is undeniable that their math skills increase. Programs have an overall positive impact, because they solidify mathematical understanding in students.

Many are reluctant to spend their Saturday being dragged to a two-hour math class that they never wanted to attend. Yet they will be thankful later when they have a strong grasp of the subject and are able to solve problems with ease.

THIRD PLACES

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

San Jose loses its charm after many third places go out of business

“The usual?” my barista asks, while simultaneously entering my iced vanilla latte with almond milk into the machine. There's something so comforting in that moment, handing over crinkled bills, in exchange for the feeling of comfort in your beloved place.

While it may seem small, having a place where someone remembers your name and being greeted with the occasional “how are you?” automatically brings a smile to my face during my (almost daily) visits to my local coffee shop, Spectra – my “third place”.

Third places are familiar, public hotspots outside of our homes (the first place) and our workplace (the second place) where you can informally connect with others and gain a sense of the community.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg first coined the term in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*. He argued that third places are essential to living a balanced and fulfilling life and often serve as the “societal glue” that binds a community together.

For example, in popular culture, a third place would be considered to be “Central Perk” from *Friends* or “Luke’s Diner” in *Gilmore Girls*.

A library, for example, operates as more than a physical establishment to access information and educational services. Libraries serve as a vital third place that welcomes all members of society regardless of race, gender and socioeconomic status. It fosters socialization and community whether it be through public guest speaker events, children’s play areas, group works-

paces or interior cafes.

These third places serve as the perfect space for such socialization. Third places provide a refuge from the pressures of work and home life, allowing individuals to recharge, engage with their community, and find joy in simple, everyday interactions.

Yet, despite their significance, in post-pandemic years, third places in San Jose have slowly slipped away. Our Boba Pub right next door, Barnes and Noble in Almaden Plaza and Mama Mia Bar in downtown San Jose, are only a few businesses that have shut their doors in the past few months, due to lack of foot traffic and financial strains.

The loss of these spaces fractures social bonds and relationships in communities, deprives people of their mental health support and contributes to a sense of disconnection, according to the National Institute of Health.

The benefits of these spots extend beyond socialization. A survey from Vail Health reports that brief interactions increase the release of oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine and endorphins which all improve our emotional and physical well-being.

Furthermore, the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health found that people who socialized everyday lived longer than those who socialized weekly, showing the tangible impact of third places on our emotional and mental well-being.

The National Library of Medicine also emphasizes that public places provide opportunities to improve social life, develop social skills and build confidence among children emphasizing

how pressing it is to have places like these.

San Jose should take note. By investing in initiatives that support third places, like small business grants, outdoor seating programs and community-driven events, our city can reinvigorate local businesses and bring life back into our third places. San Jose can thrive with both tradition and innovation.

When a neighborhood has thriving local businesses, it attracts foot traffic, boosts surrounding property values and fosters economic activity that benefits the entire city. The National Main Street Center reports that for every dollar invested in small business support programs, cities see a return of up to \$38 in economic benefits, including job creation and increased consumer spending. By prioritizing grants and incentives for small businesses, San Jose can sustain a healthy economic ecosystem where both large-scale developments and community-based enterprises coexist.

To start, city officials should prioritize funding for neighborhood coffee shops, independent bookstores and public parks, all of which allow for meaningful interaction. San Jose prides itself on their progress and innovation, but without lively third places, cities become desolate and sterile. Keeping these third places are essential. They act as more than just coffee shops or libraries – they are the heartbeats of our communities. When we prioritize these businesses, it will restore the essence of human connection in our city.

BITE-SIZED OPINIONS

Minor problems, minor solutions



Problem: Everyone is getting sick. How can I keep myself from getting sick?

Solution: Everyone should wear contamination suits

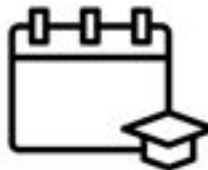
— Alyx Yoon



Problem: The wifi always runs so slow on campus. Its impossible to get any work done.

Solution:Install personal satellites for each student to ensure high speed internet recovery team will track you down and force you to come to class and work on the group project.

— Dylan Collisson



Problem: Now that school has entered the second semester, I no longer have the motivation to complete homework or any assignments.

Solution: Change the semester system into a singular year-long term so that students don't feel burnt out during the second semester.

— Yujin Cho



Problem: It's too cold in February and I'm forced to wear the same boring warm clothes.

Solution: Heat all the classrooms to April weather for the next month. will track you down and force you to come to class and work on the group project.

— Ava Stark



Problem: People who say they haven't studied at all for a test and then ace it because they studied every night for 3 hours.

Solution: Give punishments to people who lie to their friends about how much they've studied for a test

— Tibault Theon

YEARBOOK QUOTES

Restrctions on yearbook quotes

When the Branham Yearbook announced that they would be removing senior quotes, they were met with immediate uproar from students. In response, the yearbook agreed to bring back quotes, but with one caveat—if a single quote was deemed inappropriate, then every quote would be completely removed from the yearbook.

This means that one student could ruin this for the entire senior class. One person could think they are being funny and proceed to destroy a longstanding tradition. Additionally, a student could ruin it accidentally, not realizing that their quote would be considered “inappropriate.”

Given the extensive yearbook promotion on campus, it is a near

Editorial

The opinion of the Bear Witness editors

not valuing their peers. A vast majority of the students who submit quotes are doing it with good intentions—they have spent time thinking about their quote, choosing the right one and making sure it is school-appropriate. It is wrong to revoke these

guarantee that someone will go out of their way to submit an inappropriate quote. It is unfair to punish the entirety of the senior class because of one or two students

students' privileges for something they didn't do. Some students have been looking forward to quotes for a long time. They are a well established tradition, ubiquitous in yearbooks across the country. To not only take the opportunity away from seniors, but to potentially remove it again after bringing it back, is ridiculous.

While we acknowledge that maintaining senior quotes does require extra work from the yearbook staff, quotes are an essential part of the yearbook. It is the staff's job to ensure that the yearbook is the best it can be, and in order to do that, quotes must remain.

HAIR PROFESSIONALISM

UNTANGLING CURLY HAIR STIGMA

The media’s role in textured hair bias and its effect on professional opportunities

MISSY KERALAPURA
Staff Writer

With the rise of the ‘natural texture’ hair trend, many women have started to confidently sport their wavy, curly or frizzy hair in everyday outings and the workforce. However, while society has come a long way in embracing natural beauty, the stigma against textured hair remains deeply entrenched, particularly in the workforce and media.

Women in the workplace are often advised to wear their hair straight to come off more serious and no-nonsense, as those with curly hair are seen as wilder, unprofessional and frazzled, according to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Bell Magazine.

During a job interview, women wearing their naturally curly hair are more likely to leave a negative first impression, which can impact their chances in getting the job. According to a research study done with the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act in 2023, 66% of the 1,000 Black women surveyed said they changed their hair for job interviews and 25% said they were denied job interviews or sent home from work because of their hair. Because of this, women in the workforce risk serious hair damage simply to be taken seriously.

These statistics reflect broader systemic issues of bias by showing how appearance-based discrimination can affect professional opportunities. Although white women with textured hair are affected by these standards, women of color face additional pressure to conform to such Eurocentric beauty standards, which prioritizes straight hair and other features historically linked to European ideals, due to preexisting racial biases, according to the Legal Defense Fund.

This expectation from women with textured hair is not only felt in the corporate world, but also extends to political settings. For example, women make up around 28% of Congress, however, only few congresswomen sport natural hairstyles. The women who do wear their natural hair face intense backlash and scrutiny, even though they are accomplished political leaders.

For example, Democratic Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz has been mocked by the conservative media for her natural curly hair. Conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh said her hair “looks like mayonnaise.” She has also been called “Frizzilla” and “She of the Angry Perm” by Fox News commentators. Rather than discussing her political actions, they simply fixate on her hair. Due to it not conforming to the hair standard of a leader, which typically is neat, straight styled hair

to reflect professionalism, her authority is undermined and she is constantly demeaned for how she looks rather than what she does.

No matter a woman’s achievements or qualifications, their appearance—specifically their adherence to Eurocentric beauty standards—plays a significant role in how they are perceived and treated. This creates a double standard, where women in the workforce feel the need to alter their natural appearance to avoid criticism and be treated like a professional.

Beyond the workforce, the media plays a prominent role in influencing perceptions of women with curly, wavy or frizzy hair.

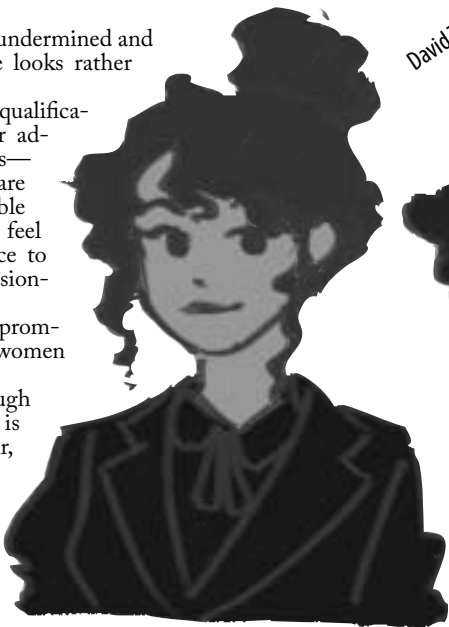
There is an assumption, perpetuated through the media and by society, that straight hair is more attractive than natural textured hair, as most protagonists are portrayed with straight hair or perfectly curated curling iron waves, while the crazy or evil characters have a mane of naturally bushy, curly hair. Additionally, a transformation of a female character emotionally also seems to involve their hair going from frizzy to a perfect, straight blowout.

A classic example of this is the movie “Princess Diaries,” where the main character, Mia Thermopolis, starts off as an awkward, frizzy haired teen. When discovering that she is a princess, she undergoes a physical transformation that takes place alongside her emotional growth, and involves a blowout. Her initial curly hair was part of the “before” makeover pictures, while the “after” was the conventionally attractive straight hair.

Additionally, in “Harry Potter,” an antagonist, Bellatrix Lestrange, is portrayed with frizzy unkempt hair to make her appear more evil and deranged.

The list goes on, from hair ads on TV to celebrity hairstyles to classic runway looks, the media degrades women with curly hair and makes them believe they have to conform to the standard of straight hair in order to feel beautiful.

Hair is a major part of personal identity, and being constantly pressured to change it to fit beauty standards is demeaning to



David Tran/Bear Witness



women with textured hair. Society has treated naturally curly and frizzy hair as something that is not beautiful, professional, or acceptable, and has made many women feel bad about their hair and

identity. However, regardless of what is said by others and the media, women should continue to embrace their natural beauty. Thanks to the rise of the natural textures trend, more and more women are learning to take care of their textured hair and feel proud to go out in it.

sumers originally switched to streaming services to cut down on costs and avoid the constant deluge of ads on cable channels, yet they're now dealing with the same issues that streaming promised to solve. Even as new streaming services pop up and promise ad-free, low-cost, high-quality entertainment, inevitably they revert back to their true priorities of making money.

These once-great alternatives to cable continue to inch closer and closer to cable's costs, abandoning their original purpose of providing instant access to quality entertainment at reasonable prices.

PRESIDENTIAL DECISIONS

FINANCIAL FIASCO

AVA STARK
Editor-In-Cheif

Newly elected president Donald Trump began his first month in office by implementing significant changes. Among them was a decision that raised concerns for the funding of the Department of Education.

In the 2024 Republican platform and the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, which Trump did not explicitly support but has appointed officials to his cabinet who do, it has been stated that the new administration plans to remove funding from the Department of Education, or get rid of it entirely.

This could get rid of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), other forms of financial aid, support for underfunded school systems and certain courses that are claimed to be “unpatriotic”, such as the teaching of critical race theory, ethnicity or gender.

FAFSA in particular, is a form for incoming and current college students to fill out, to see their eligibility for financial aid. It is based on their annual income and other circumstances that they report.

Each year, FAFSA distributes around \$120.8 billion to help make education more accessible to students.

This type of aid falls under control of the Department of Education, which the new Department of Government Efficiency, spearheaded by Trump and Tesla CEO Elon Musk, have made plans to attempt to remove.

The Department of Government Efficiency has made its purpose to remove supposed “waste” from the government in hopes to help taxpayers, even though what they may consider as

waste is debatable. This damage to the Department of Education could negatively affect the access to aid students are able to receive, unfairly keeping higher education out of reach for those who can't afford it.

According to the Tax Foundation, there have been rising prices on necessary goods such as groceries or housing. Despite this, new Trump policies are likely going to increase this disparity, with things such as tariffs on imported goods. Because of this, it'll be harder for students to have enough financial freedom to afford higher education.

This increases the gap in opportunity levels, making it harder for lower income families to have social mobility.

Despite the uncertainty of future financial aid, the state of California has been trying to do some damage control. According to the executive director of the California Student Aid Commission, Daisy Gonzales, the state is pushing applicants for the California Dream Act, Cal Grant and scholarships like the Middle Class Scholarship. These are state sources of financial aid that will not be affected by the federal government.

These efforts should be the priorities of state and local governments. Not having access to educational opportunities prevents social mobility in a society, which can decrease productivity in the workforce and lead to overall lower qualities of life for many, according to the National Institute of Health. It needs to be a priority for governments to continue to aid their education systems despite a lack of federal funding.

This Trump administration will pose many threats to the educational opportunities for many students, especially financially. These policies may not be beneficial to many students across the country and can set into motion many future issues.

The Trump administration leaves questions about financial aid for education.

Because of new federal policies, it's important for students to do research on how to support themselves in their education and seek aid where they can get it. Additionally, it's essential for governments to continue to provide the financial aid they can to school districts.



David Tran/Bear Witness

SCIENCE & HEALTH

FOOD

CONSTRAINED CAFETERIA

Students with dietary restrictions struggle to find diverse foods in cafeteria

NEVAEH GUTIERREZ
Staff Writer

Many students get their lunch from the school cafeteria, but not everyone is able to. In a poll taken on the Bear Witness Instagram, 20% of the 191 students who answered said they have some type of dietary restriction. Yet, Branham's cafeteria does not fully accommodate many of the different dietary restrictions that students have.

Branham's cafeteria has multiple different stations for students to get their food. At lunch, options typically include orange chicken, rice, pizza and cold items like sandwiches and salads. Cafeteria chef **Phyllis Perakis** said the chefs have no control over what options are made available on the lunch menu.

"Some kids [ask if] we can change it, but it depends on what [the district] gives us for the menu," Perakis said.

The cafeteria does offer some vegan and vegetarian options, like salads and sandwiches. Students can also substitute two scoops of beans instead of meat on their nachos.

A majority of the options include some type of meat or gluten, making them not accessible to some students. Junior **Sarah Osband**, a vegetarian, struggles to find diverse options for her diet in the cafeteria.

"There's not many good options. You have the pizza and the yogurt," Osband said. "It gets repetitive."

Students are able to get lunch either from the large cafeteria or the food carts around campus. However, the food carts have significantly fewer options than the large cafeteria and the options for people with dietary restrictions are even more limited.

"I would love to see some vegetarian salads added to the smaller carts," Osband said. "It's not as much of an issue in the cafeteria, but it's definitely harder to access those foods because of the large crowds that enter the cafeteria every day and the people who aren't vegetarian who take those foods first."

Sophomore **Meghra Somayaji** is also vegetarian, but she chooses



20%

of 191 respondents to a Bear Witness Instagram poll have dietary restrictions.

5%

of Americans follow a vegetarian diet. Common reasons for vegetarianism, the practice of not eating meat, include concern for animal welfare and personal health benefits. This does not include pescaterians, who add fish to a vegetarian diet.

4%

of Americans follow a vegan diet, which means they do not consume any animal products, including meat, eggs and dairy. Some vegans also follow vegan lifestyles and avoid using materials from animals, like wool and leather. Concern for animal welfare and the environment is the most popular reason for this diet or lifestyle.

Sources: Bear Witness poll, Statista and The Humane League

to bring food from home because of the limited options at the cafeteria as well as concerns over the limited healthy options beyond fruits and vegetables.

"A lot of the food is not really healthy. If it is healthy, it's just salad, and I [don't like] vegetables," Somayaji said.

While students can suggest new menu items by scanning a QR code in the larger cafeteria, ultimately it is up to the district to implement them. Osband suggested that instead of creating entirely new menu items, it may be possible to modify menu items that already exist.

The Caesar salad is one of the options offered by the cafeteria, but it only comes with chicken. Somayaji suggested offering a chicken-free version to better accommodate various dietary re-

strictions.

"Some people don't understand that you can't pick [chicken] out. That's not how it works. I can't have an essence of it either," Somayaji said.

However, preparing even more types of food will take longer for cafeteria staff, who start their shift at 6:30 a.m. and work until 9 a.m. to prepare food for brunch. But the cafeteria is already understaffed, and Perakis worries that adding more food may increase their already large workload.

"[If] they add more items to the menu, that's going to be more stressful for us," Perakis said, adding that more food may lead to more waste. "We have so many things to do."

CYBERSECURITY

Time ticks for TikTok
TikTok ban delayed, national security concerns still exist

TIBAUT THOEN
Staff Writer

On the first day of his second presidential term, President Donald Trump signed an executive order delaying the ban of the popular social media platform TikTok. The move follows a multi-year attempt by the U.S. government to ban the app over national security concerns related to data collection by its parent company, ByteDance, which has ties to the Chinese government.

The bill that introduced the ban received bipartisan support in Congress and was signed into law by former President Joe Biden in April 2024, giving ByteDance a year to sell the app.

After various legal challenges, the Supreme Court ruled that the ban did not violate the First Amendment, allowing it to take effect on Jan. 19. TikTok became unavailable to Americans for a few hours until President-elect Donald Trump promised to delay the ban. After being temporarily removed from app stores by Apple and Google, the app is now available for download in the U.S. again.

ByteDance CEO Shou Chew has denied allegations that the Chinese government uses TikTok to gather intelligence on the U.S. and its citizens. However, Congress continues to view the platform as a threat due to its abilities to collect personal information and influence citizens' views.

Former Boeing Defense Director and current Cisco employee **Jason Amanatullah** discusses why the United States is concerned about the potential national security risk.

"[For TikTok,] it's not clear what that data could be used for in the future," Amanatullah said. "Farming all of the data becomes a risk if we don't know what that data can be used for."

Beyond data collection, Amanatullah also pointed to TikTok's ability to control the content users see. He explained that the platform's algorithm can push certain narratives, allowing ByteDance to shape public opinion by influencing what appears on users' feeds.

"[ByteDance can] control a specific sentiment, or push political parties, or push even negative sentiment toward one party or another," Amanatullah said. "There's also the potential for this more dangerous espionage by influencing people to become agents of our enemy."

In 2015, hackers breached the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) of the U.S. government and stole background investigation data of over 20 million federal employees and contractors.

This incident is one reason why the U.S. government in recent years has become more proactive in carrying out antitrust efforts and detecting attempts by the Chinese government to influence the American public.

To many Americans, a TikTok ban might seem like an overreaction, but Amanatullah says that TikTok can pose a true danger to civilians.

"Your likeness is your intellectual property. You will not have that type of control over your property if you're dealing with a Chinese [company]," Amanatullah said.

The case has brought greater public attention to TikTok's data use, especially among students like junior **Amalia Pierce**.

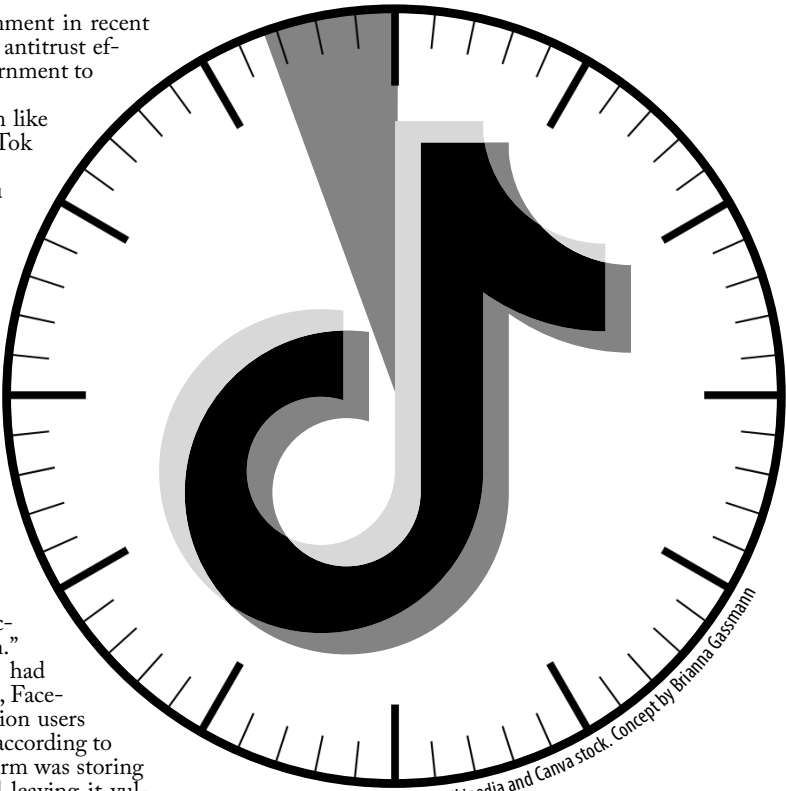
"I'll see something in real life, or talk about something, and later on TikTok I'll see a video about it. It makes you think that they're listening," Pierce said. "I don't like that. But are they doing anything bad with it? I don't know."

The exposure of this potential data collection and spying has led many parents to ban their kids from using the platform, such as psychology teacher **Jennifer McGrath**.

"Half the reason I don't let my kids use [TikTok] is because I'm concerned about security," McGrath said. "[Yet] that's with any online platform."

Previously, other social media platforms have had similar scandals with user data breaches. In 2019, Facebook faced a data breach that saw over 533 million users have their personal information and data leaked, according to Forbes. Many users were unaware that the platform was storing such intricate and specific data on its users and leaving it vulnerable to cyber attacks. The scandal ultimately ended with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) fining Facebook \$5 billion for mishandling user data and violating privacy regulations.

"They have this ability to influence," Amanatullah said. "It becomes a risk, no different than Facebook, where the goal is to drive your eyeballs on the platform for as long as possible. Despite what they say, that's their goal."



137.5 million

TikTok users are located in the United States. In 2017, ByteDance acquired Musical.ly, a Chinese social media platform with many lip syncing videos, and merged it with TikTok the following year.

Sources: Statista and Britannica

SCIENCE & HEALTH

SCIENCE & HEALTH BRIEFS

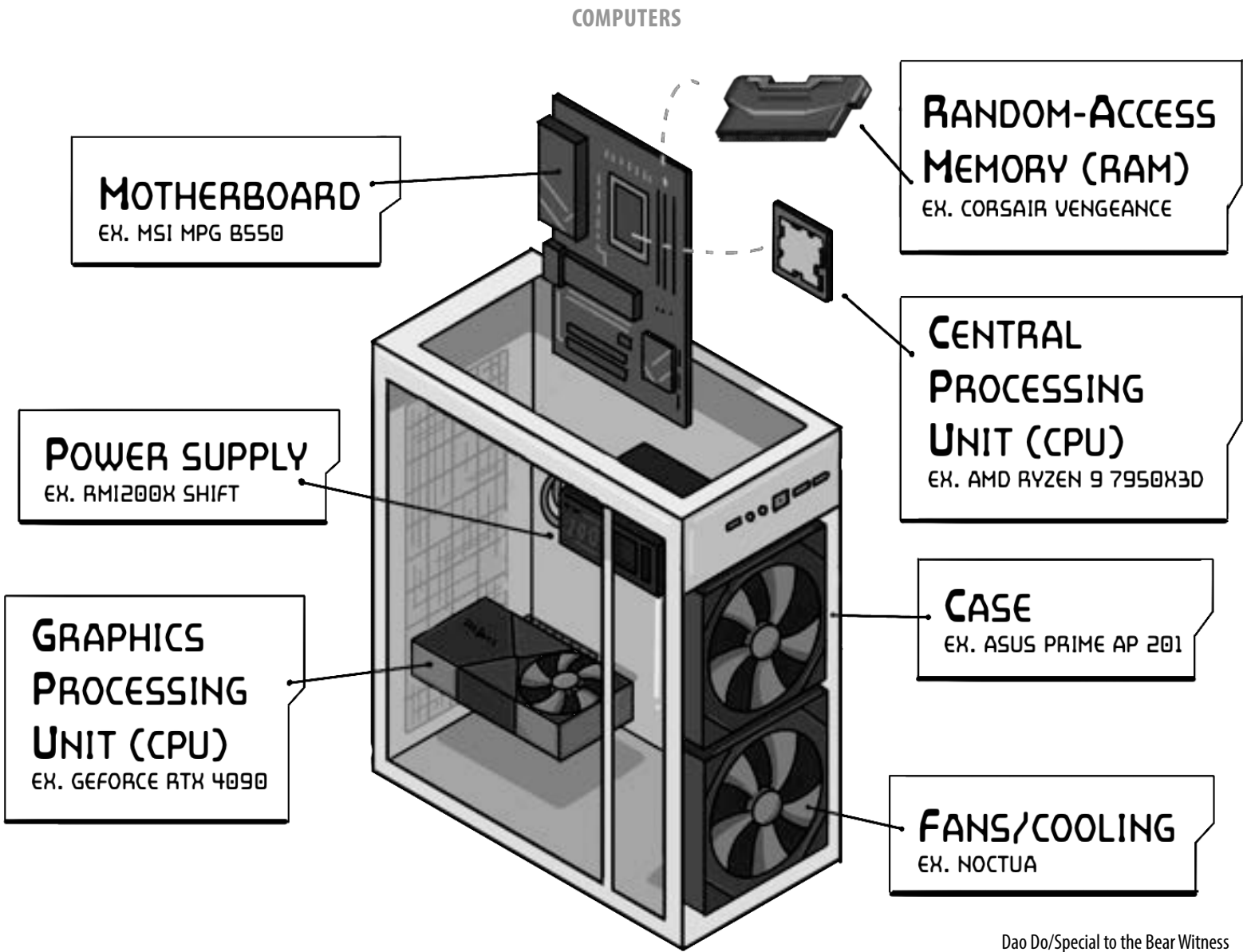
High-energy neutrino particle discovered in the Mediterranean
A subatomic particle known as a neutrino was caught using the Kilometer Cube Neutrino Telescope, known as KM3Net, in the sea off the coast of France this month. Neutrinos are particles that carry nearly no weight or electrical charge. They commonly do not collide with matter and instead flow through it. The neutrino was estimated to carry about 220 trillion electronvolts of energy, amounting to tens of thousands more energy than what can be achieved by the world's largest particle accelerator, the Hadron Collider. According to astrophysicist Naoko Kurahashi Neilson of Drexel University, the event is great proof of the effectiveness of the detector. Additionally, the discovery will contribute to further research on how these particles are generated and how they work.

Bird flu spreading across the US
Bird flu – caused by the H5N1 virus – has already infected 136 million birds in the U.S. since 2022. Recently, the outbreak has gotten worse as more than 900 cattle herds and dozens of people have been infected. While a pandemic is not inevitable, the disease is spreading at an alarming rate. In Idaho, the Department of Agriculture stated that herds had been reinfected with the virus – which suggests that the virus could circulate in farms indefinitely, giving it more opportunities to evolve into a more dangerous virus. Scientists worry that the outbreak could escalate further if bird flu finds the right combination of genetic mutations. H5N1 for the general public is low risk currently, but that could change as CDC research from samples collected in September and released February 13th has found that three veterinarians who worked with cattle have had antibodies to the H5N1 virus, indicating infection. None of the veterinarians reported having symptoms or working with cattle suspected of being infected. Health experts warn against touching sick or dead birds and other animals and eating raw milk or meat, advising people to get tested if they have flu-like symptoms.

President Trump orders US withdrawal from World Health Organization
Eight hours after taking office, President Donald Trump signed an executive order taking the U.S. out of the World Health Organization. Among reasons cited for the withdrawal were the alleged mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, failure to adopt needed reforms, and unfair payment demands. Leaving the WHO would mean the loss of U.S. access to the agency's global data, like the information released to the WHO by China that characterized the genetic sequence of COVID-19 in 2020. The WHO also takes part in wartime aid delivery and the tracking of emerging epidemics. It will take time to officiate the withdrawal, with joint resolutions adopted by Congress requiring the U.S. to give a year's notice and pay its fiscal year financial obligations prior to withdrawal.

NASA finds ingredients for life in Benu asteroid
Thousands of kinds of organic molecules, including 16 amino acids and four nucleobases, were found in samples from an asteroid. The OSIRIS-REx probe, launched by NASA in 2016, gathered rock and dirt from Benu, a near-earth asteroid, in 2020. The probe returned to Earth in 2023, allowing scientists to study pristine material that offers a better record of the early solar system than meteorites, which burn and break up in the atmosphere before arriving to Earth. The researchers discovered a variety of amino acids, which humans' cells use to make protein, and the four main components of DNA. They concluded that ice from Benu's parent body melted into a salty brine due to heat from radioactive elements, allowing for the development of those organic molecules. Ceres, Enceladus and Europa, other briny, icy worlds with similar conditions to Benu's parent body, may hold further clues to the origins of life in the universe.

—Compiled by Nevaeh Gutierrez, Emmett Spear and Elliott Yau with information from The New York Times and NPR



Dao Do/Special to the Bear Witness

PRESS START

Gamers build and upgrade PCs for better performance, flexibility and personalization

TOMER VARDI
Staff Writer

According to Grand View Research, the global gaming PC market was valued at approximately \$50.23 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow at a rate of 12.9% from 2023 to 2030. This rapid growth reflects a shift in how gaming personal computers (PCs) are perceived. No longer just tools for entertainment, they are becoming a lifestyle, a creative outlet and a passion worth both time and money. Whether built from scratch or modified from pre-built systems, gaming PCs offer opportunities for performance, customization and personal expression. A gaming PC is a collection of specialized parts, with each component essential to its functionality. The Central Processing Unit (CPU) acts as the brain of the system, processing instructions to keep applications running smoothly. The Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) is responsible for rendering the visuals of modern games. Additional parts that guarantee speed, capacity and stability include the random-access memory (RAM), storage and cooling systems. Gaming PCs stand out due to their vast range of customization options. According to PCPartPicker, there are over 44,000 unique parts available for sale, giving builders an immense level of choice. Whether it's a high-end \$2,000 NVIDIA RTX 5090 with 21,090 CUDA cores — optimized for handling graphics-intensive tasks — or a more budget-friendly \$300 NVIDIA RTX 4060 with 3,072 CUDA cores, users can tailor their builds to fit their exact needs and budget. This flexibility is a significant draw for gamers who value control and personalization. Senior **John Sandoval**, who has built multiple PCs, said that the hobby is accessible despite its technical nature. "If you have the ability to follow Lego instructions, it's just that easy," Sandoval said. For senior **Max Rosenberg**, PC building was a natural transition from console gaming. "All my friends had PCs, so I wanted to try it out," Rosenberg said. Initially accustomed to consoles, Rosenberg found that PCs offered not only better performance but also more freedom to upgrade and customize. Unlike consoles, where users are locked into specific hardware for years, PC gamers can continuously update individual components, ensuring their system remains up to date. Similarly, English teacher **Laura King** had primarily

been a console gamer before purchasing a pre-built Lenovo Legion T5. While she found the transition exciting, she quickly encountered limitations. "It's frustrating because I can't get the performance I want without completely overhauling the system," King said. For substitute teacher **Benjamin Klunpaitoon**, the appeal of building a PC came from the lack of value in pre-built systems. "Most of the pre-built systems I've seen have been overpriced with subpar parts," Klunpaitoon said. "It made more sense to build my own. I just asked my friends to help me pick the parts." Sandoval, who initially started building PCs out of necessity, also faced struggles with hardware limitations. His gaming laptop couldn't handle the performance requirements of a VR headset, pushing him to explore custom-built solutions. Over time, he came to appreciate the level of control that building a PC provided. "It feels like your [personal] machine. You get to pick all of the parts, how it performs," Sandoval said. This sense of ownership resonates with many hobbyists who appreciate the ability to troubleshoot and upgrade as needed. Beyond performance, many builders also consider aesthetics when designing their systems. While Sandoval prioritizes performance, features like RGB lighting and sleek designs often come as a secondary focus. Klunpaitoon opted for a more compact case. For him, the main advantage of a custom build is the freedom it provides. "I can play almost any game and run a triple-monitor setup," Klunpaitoon said. "Everything works exactly the way I want it to." Building a gaming PC isn't cheap, with even the most affordable pre-built options, such as NZXT's \$829 model, remaining out of reach for some. However, many enthusiasts see it as an investment. Klunpaitoon spent around \$2000 on his first build, which has remained powerful over the years. King, while not overly concerned about budget, aimed for a balance between affordability and performance. "I didn't go for the cheapest option, but I also didn't want to spend \$4,000 or more," King said. "I chose something moderate that felt like a good starting point." The world of PC building is as diverse as its participants. Some modify pre-built systems to improve

performance, such as King upgrading her Corsair Vengeance RAM. Others, like Sandoval and Klunpaitoon, prefer to build entirely from scratch, tailoring every component to their needs. According to Sandoval, online forums, YouTube channels, and subreddits provide many resources for both beginners and experts, fostering a strong sense of community. He follows YouTubers like Linus Tech Tips and Marques Brownlee, who are well known for their technology reviews and educational videos on PC building. King reflected on the cultural perception of gaming as a hobby, acknowledging that some still see it as unproductive. "There's this idea that hobbies need to be productive to be valuable," King said. "Gaming, like any other hobby, is valid and worthwhile as long as it brings joy. It's okay to be a gamer." As technology continues to evolve, so does the PC building hobby. Innovations in AI-enhanced graphics, modular designs and affordable components make it easier than ever to create powerful systems. "Building your own PC saves money and gives you a sense of ownership," Klunpaitoon said. "When you're done, you can say, 'This is mine.'" "There's this idea that hobbies need to be productive to be valuable. Gaming, like any other hobby, is valid and worthwhile as long as it brings joy. It's okay to be a gamer." English teacher **Laura King**, who primarily played video games on a console before buying a gaming PC.

WHAT'S NEW IN AI

—Compiled by Emmett Spear

The January release of a new artificial intelligence model known as **DeepSeek-R1** caused stocks of tech giants like NVIDIA to plummet in value. Created by a Chinese-based AI start-up, the new AI model can match current leading American-based AI using second-rate chips that are a fraction of the cost of the current NVIDIA chips used by many American companies. The emergence of an AI made without billion-dollar costs in chips and data centers means that more AI companies will be able to acquire powerful AI at a much lower cost, possibly allowing greater investment and competition with smaller AI start-ups. DeepSeek's ties to China have also stoked fears about the risk of data security and censorship associated with the Chinese government, as well as the start of a further global AI arms race.

Image from DeepSeek and information from The New York Times.



IN DEPTH

THE TIMES

FAMILY

SIBLING SUPPORT

Despite their differences, the Gassmann siblings have become closer through shared experiences

From New Year’s handshakes to makeup pranks, sophomore **Brayden Gassmann** and freshman **Brianna Gassmann** have continued to grow closer over the years as siblings.

When Brayden started his freshman year at Branham, he found himself in a new environment, an experience he reflected on as he helped his sister adjust to high school this year.

“I didn’t really know how the culture or the environment was, and I feel that really helped Brianna become more comfortable here,” he said. “She had a lay of the land, instead of going into it blind.”

During the pandemic, the siblings found themselves in constant disagreement. Now, as Brianna’s volleyball schedule has become more demanding and Brayden has adapted to high school life, they’ve learned to appreciate each other’s company, bringing them closer together despite their increasingly different paths.

“Being with each other every single day was definitely why we fought so much,” Brianna said. “But [last] year, when I was still in middle school, he came to Branham, and we never saw each other. The separation for that year brought us together in a way, and that’s why we’re so close.”

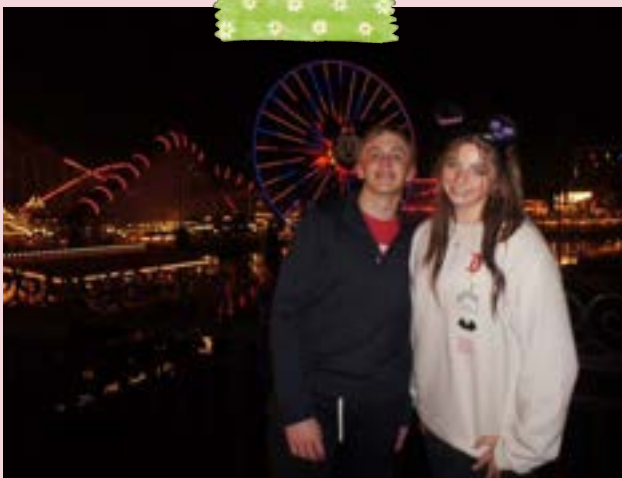
With their parents separating early on in their lives, the two developed a reliance on each other, adding an additional layer to their sibling bond.

“Through [our parents’ separation], we’ve [relied on each other]. That helps keep our relationship together,” Brayden said. “If our parents aren’t going to like each other and we aren’t going to like each other, then we basically have no one.”

In those moments of need, they are able to lean on each other, offering comfort and support that reinforces their connection.

“I play volleyball, but I thought about quitting multiple times,” Brianna said. “One time, I was really close to quitting. I came home super upset after practice, and he was [reminding me] about my dreams of playing in college and high school. He always has some way of getting me to flip a switch in my head to keep going with the things I enjoy.”

One memory that holds a special place in both their hearts is their experience with their cousins.



Courtesy of Brianna Gassmann

“They decided to fully give me a makeup routine, and I trusted them,” Brayden said. “I thought that they were going to do me right, and I was gonna look good if they did my lashes. My face ended up being colored with powder, and my lipstick was all over the place.”

Brayden and Brianna’s relationship as siblings has flourished over the years, yet their typical sibling bond remains untouched.

“She definitely [bugs] me about things,” Brayden said. “She’ll come over to my friends, and she’ll come bother me, but it’s just how siblings behave and function.”



RELATIONSHIPS

Homework to homecoming

Five years of shared experiences have strengthened Carla and Tylar's bond, with trust and communication at the heart of their friendship

From helping each other with math problems to matching at high school dances, seniors **Carla Granados Perez** and **Tylar Williams** have grown up together over the past five years.

“We got closer because we both had online school together,” Perez said. “He needed help with homework, so I started helping him with it.”

The two were able to rely on one another throughout their initial interactions in middle school to the transition to being in high school together.

“High school is a big part of your life. So just [having] a person that’s been there for four years, we have always been together,” Williams said.



Both Perez and Williams have been able to create forever lasting memories with traditional high school experiences.

“[My] favorite memories are definitely going

to homecoming and buying dresses and fits for each other,” Perez said.

The seniors have been able to figure out what is successful for their relationship. Specifically, communication with each other remains important.

“It’s good to be open and clear about your thoughts and feelings,” Perez said. “When you understand each other, it makes the relationship a lot stronger.”

Courtesy of Carla Granados Perez
Carla Granados Perez and Tylar Williams (12) match at Homecoming in the fall.



SPORTS

A timeless bond

A true friendship transcends time, distance and grade level

Maintaining friendships with people you don’t hang out with every day or who are in different grades can be difficult. However, junior **Logan Nguyen** and senior **Jamison Nguyen** challenge this idea.

The two became friends in elementary school and grew close after playing games together at recess. When Logan Nguyen arrived at Branham, he was fortunate to find a familiar face helping with the transition.

“I remember it was my first day of school, and I didn’t really have any friends,” Logan said. “I saw Jamison play[ing] basketball, and he wanted me to go play with his friends. I was like, ‘yeah,’ so I started playing basketball with them every day.”

Basketball has been a vital part of their friendship, giving them the opportunity to not only be friends but also teammates.

“We’re friends, both off and on the court,” Jamison said. “We can put in work in the gym and then also goof off.”

This camaraderie allows them to seamlessly transition from hard work to play, creating a balanced and supportive friendship.

“We can see the problems on the court, and we can help each other because we know each other well, so it’s easier to communicate,” Logan said.

After being friends for so long, Jamison and Logan have been able to create fun memories with one another. One of these times involved a Sprite bottle.

“We tried to do the Sprite No Burp Challenge with a two liter



From teammates and siblings to meaningful bonds — formed through support, and trust — transcend

by Aryella Finkel
Illustrated by

FAMILY

PERFECT PAIR

The Martorano siblings reflect on the unique bond of being twins

Having an identical twin is unlike any relationship. From being in the same classes throughout the entirety of elementary school to enjoying similar extracurricular activities such as theater and ASB, sophomores **Isabella Martorano** and **Amelia Martorano** continue to grow closer.

When they were children, the twins never knew life without one another as they were always side by side.

“In elementary school, our parents always requested for us to be in the same classes,” Isabella said. “So when it came to middle school and being in different classes, it was hard to kind of branch out and be socially independent.”

In addition to being together in classes and learning to grow as individual people, the twins realize their compatibility and their opportunity to participate in activities together.

“We’re very connected, and we do everything together,” Isabella said. “We have the same interests and just in general being twins sometimes it feels like dependency.”

Unlike having a sibling which is more common than having a twin, the Martorano twins realize the importance of their relationship and the ability to count on one another.

“As twins, we have a different lifestyle compared to people who are either an only child or even have siblings,” Amelia said.

As they grew up they continued to maintain their close friendship and acknowledge their gratitude for one another.

“Obviously she’s gonna be my best friend for my entire life,” Isabella said.



Courtesy of Isabella Martorano



Courtesy of Isabella Martorano

bottle of soda. Then his sister went to pick us up, and they decided to get Jack in the Box,” Logan said. “[We were] still doing the no burp challenge. So we were in the drive through, and [she was] ordering and we were trying to hold in our burp. We couldn’t do it. So we started burping really loud, and we just started laughing.”

Although they both experience different lives, they still remain closely knit with one another, even though they are not constantly in contact.

“We’re always just friends,” Logan said. “It’s not one of those things where you need to hang out with a friend or talk to them every day. It’s more like you’re able to trust in the other person for a long time, and you’ll know that they’re going to be your friend forever.”

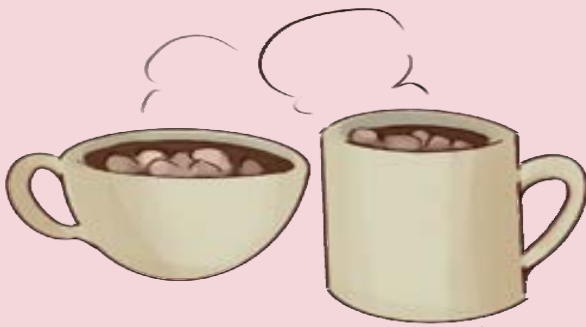
THAT BIND

to teachers and twins, though shared experiences, in the classroom, the field and beyond.

Hozer and Anabelle Walker
Interviews by David Tran

SPORTS

BEYOND THE FIELD



How field hockey sparked an unbreakable friendship

Many athletes are quick to say friendships with their teammates are unlike those with anyone else due to the time spent together and a shared love for playing.

Senior **Lilia Chatfield** and junior **Lark Brownie**'s friendship instantly sparked three years ago after Brownie joined field hockey as a freshman.

"Lilia was older and I couldn't drive yet. She ended up driving me to a lot of games and practices," Brownie said. "Having a sport where you're really close, you spend a lot of time together, [and it] creates a really strong bond with all the players."

Beyond field hockey, the duo connected over shared humor and similar interests.

"Bonding over playing the same sport and having the same visions, ideas or thoughts about our team or how we were playing really helped [our friendship]," Brownie said.

One of the most memorable moments in their friendship took place at a tournament on a rainy day which ended in a sweet surprise.

"It was pouring rain. I had never played in [rain] that bad ever. We weren't even [on the] same team," Chatfield said. "Finally, when our tournament ended, we sprinted to the car and we were soaking wet. My car was totally soaked. We were freezing [and] shivering. We went to Starbucks and finally got our hot chocolate."

The two said that their friendship shows how sports can foster connections that extend beyond the field.

"People who meet friends in sports can look beyond and [be] able to be open with anybody," Chatfield said. "Even for incoming freshmen or no matter what grade you're in, you can always look to make friendships in sports and go beyond just being on the field."



Courtesy of Lark Brownie

TEACHER FRIENDSHIP

LINKED

A strong partnership and collaboration can transform the workplace, fostering growth and support

For science teachers **Ryan Matthews** and **Kori Reynolds**, teaching is more than just a job — it's a partnership built on trust, collaboration and a shared commitment to students' success. As educators, they have cultivated a dynamic working relationship that fosters both professional growth and a sense of community within their classroom.

"The classes that we teach and the Link Crew program we run really benefit from a lot of collaboration and working together," Reynolds said. "We're able to bounce ideas off each other and come up with the best [solutions]."

One key aspect of their partnership is the seamless movement between classrooms, creating an open and stress-free environment for both students and teachers.

"There's no anxiety of, 'Why are you in my room? You're interrupting my space,'" Reynolds said. "We have an open door policy that makes it really easy to not feel like you're gonna step on someone's toes."

Beyond convenience, their collaboration allows them to learn from each other and improve their teaching methods.

"One of the biggest benefits is that when you have a good rapport with somebody, then you're not afraid to mess up or talk through your mistakes," Reynolds said. "To have somebody that you trust to be like, 'I completely messed up this lesson. What did I do wrong? Can you go over this with me?' You have a whole other set of perspectives and strengths and ideas to help refine your own work."

Matthews echoed that sentiment, explaining that their friendship strengthens their professional dynamic.

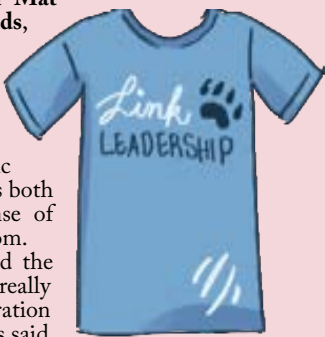
"It's not a requirement [to be friends], but it makes the job easier," Matthews said. "We've had times where we've seen how we might go about a situation or grading [differently]. If you don't know the other person well, it can make you feel really insecure."

Their connection goes beyond the classroom, allowing them to be more considerate.

"When you know another coworker at a human level, and what's going on in their life, you also know how to support each other better," Reynolds said. "If I know they have a bunch of family in town this weekend, or if their car broke down, and they're dealing with other stuff, I'm going to step up and take on extra work to help them out."

Matthews emphasized that this sense of camaraderie extends to their entire teaching team. They celebrate the end of the school year together and bring their kids to each other's birthday parties.

"I would say for us, it's our whole team," Matthews said. "[David Mackey], who was in here, [is] just as close [with us] as we are with each other. The more you can get a team to buy into that, the better."



TEACHER FRIENDSHIP

Chemistry

A shared love for learning fosters connections between students and teachers

Juniors **Livia Roder** and **Aubree Rosenblum** shared science teacher **Alex Johnson**'s chemistry class during their sophomore year, a time filled with laughter, learning and valuable mentorship opportunities.

The students quickly became fond of Johnson as he was able to show patience towards them.

"We sat together in chemistry, and we were always really loud and annoying," Rosenblum said. "Then we started bothering Mr. Johnson, and he tolerated it."

Their playful dynamic in class not only made chemistry more enjoyable, but it has also fostered a supportive learning environment, according to Johnson.

"They are enthusiastic about the subject, but also enthusiastic about helping each other and learning and being part of the classroom environment," Johnson said. "[It] is always nice as a teacher to have that type of student in the class to build off of and hopefully motivate other students."

Roder said a positive connection with a teacher can enhance the overall classroom experience.

"If you like the teacher, and you're friends with the teacher, then it makes the class more fun," Roder said. "It makes learning more fun. It makes you want to go to class, and it helps you just put more effort into school."

Beyond the classroom, Roder and Rosenblum found creative ways to show their appreciation for Johnson, often through playful antics.

"We threw him a baby shower. We bedazzled his head," Roder said. "We hid 100 little babies in his classroom



Courtesy of Aubree Rosenblum

Juniors **Livia Roder** and **Aubree Rosenblum** pose with science teacher **Alex Johnson** after bedazzling his head.

just for fun."

Overall, creating an inviting environment and fostering a sense of comfort and connection that allows students to be themselves is a goal Johnson strives for in all his classes.

"I want to be able to be that person for all my students, and I think it is displayed in a different way for every kind of connection and relationship that teachers have with their students," Johnson said. "[To connect with students on] what they are interested in outside of class, and then also sharing a little bit about myself so that they feel like they know me too, and I'm not just the person up here teaching them."



Yujin Cho/BearWitness

Junior **Livia Roder** throws a pie at science teacher **Alex Johnson**'s face on last year's national Pi Day.



TRANSFER STUDENTS

ABROAD TO AMERICA

International students reflect on the differences between high schools in the US and abroad



ABIGAIL MEDEIROS
Staff Writer

Branham is a diverse campus with people of many ethnicities and cultures, including students who have transferred from schools abroad. Many of these students have gone through the motions of learning a new language and adapting to a different culture while keeping up with the typical curriculum. With 264 students born outside of the U.S. attending Branham, this topic is ever-present in the community.

Transitioning to high school in the United States can be difficult for some due to the culture shock and the need to learn English. However, students like senior **Daniel Lee** have found ways to adjust to a new environment through actively participating in Branham activities. Lee moved from Korea to America in August of 2022, and has continued with his love of soccer by joining the school team.

“What helped the most was joining a school sports team,” Lee said. “I play soccer, so playing sports with the other boys helped me improve my English and build friendships.”

But while the transition may be difficult due to language barriers and cultural differences, some students find an academic environment in America easier to adapt to compared to their home countries.

Lee highlighted the competitive culture of high schools in Korea due to the nature and pressures of their relative grading system that allows only a certain number of students to earn each grade. This means their grade is based on academic ranking.

“In Korea, even if you did good, if the person next to you does better, then you get a B instead of an A,” Lee said. “It’s just like competing constantly.”

The culture at Branham is different from some schools outside of the country, especially where diversity is scarce. According to the American University School of Education, diversity is crucial for fostering creativity and different perspectives in the school setting because it allows people from different backgrounds to collaborate.

“In Korea, there’s only one race,” Lee said. “[But in] America, you really have a variety of races or ethnicities, so there’s different culture and languages and I really enjoy that.”

Senior **Dan Dagne**, who moved from Ethiopia to America in

Sept. 2024, noted the variety of options at Branham, which not only offers academic opportunities, but a wide variety of extracurricular possibilities like sports, clubs and community options. This contrasts with Dagne’s old school in Ethiopia, which was focused solely on academics.

“Back in Ethiopia, they didn’t support sports,” said Dagne, who is on the basketball team now. “I have a lot of opportunities to do what I want [at Branham].”

Similarly to Lee, Dagne noticed the major contrasts in diversity from Branham to his school in Ethiopia. In addition to the diverse population, Branham is also different due to its large population.

“Branham is way bigger than the school I went to,” Dagne said. “And it’s more diverse and has a lot of people from different backgrounds.”

Dagne also noted that academics in America seem to be less challenging than in Ethiopia due to the more exam-intensive curriculum there.

“Ethiopia is harder because it’s different curriculums,” Dagne said. “It’s not like here with classworks and homeworks, but there it’s assignments, working and [more] exams.”

Teachers are another instrumental factor in a student’s ability to transition with ease. Korean language teacher **Sunyoung Jeon** supports her students, including those who have moved from abroad.

“I myself as an immigrant can empathize with their experience,” Jeon said. “So I share my experience [and] give them tips I have

for adjusting to the new setting.”

Not only are transfer students welcomed at Branham due to the diverse populations and cultural identities, but they can also find comfort in their various classes, especially world language classes. “In these courses [of world languages], we are ready to embrace the linguistic and cultural differences,” Jeon said. “They don’t need to be intimidated about their differences. They can be confident to share their own diversity in this class setting.”

Overall, the transition to an American school can be easy or difficult, but the support from admin, teachers and students alike can make a big difference.

“As soon as I moved here, the principal talked to me, and then she introduced me to one of my classmates,” Dagne said. “And [my classmate] just gave me a tour around the school and introduced me to other people.”

Peers can be a helpful resource for assistance, especially during class.

“People in America are really kind and positive,” Lee said. “Whenever I ask them questions, they answer them politely. Whenever I have something that I don’t know, they teach me. That really helped overall.”

Lee recommends to all people moving here from abroad to reach out to others for an easier time adjusting.

“[Reach out] to people,” Lee said. “People want to help you, so just go up to people and ask them questions and be positive.”

TUTORING

Tapping into tutoring

From boosting grades to building patience, tutoring offers benefits beyond the classroom.

KIANNA SANCHEZ
Staff Writer

Tutoring offers personalized assistance for students to help improve areas they are struggling in, allowing them to understand the subject better.

According to the Center for American Progress, high-quality tutoring can increase a student’s learning in around three to 15 months, bringing a student from the 50th percentile to the 66th percentile.

Sophomore **Charlotte Homer** is a private tutor. She tutors a student in math in her free time, but wishes to tutor through Bruin2Bruin next year, the student-to-student tutoring organization offered at Branham, next year.

“[I hope] to join Bruin2Bruin because I enjoy tutoring in itself,” Homer said. “I feel like Bruin2Bruin offers a great way to network [tutoring and] to find opportunities more easily.”

Homer believes being a tutor, although meant to educate tutees, also helps her with comprehension as well. As she teaches the material to her students, she also strengthens her own understanding of the subject.

“[Tutoring has] taught me to think of teaching from the perspective of how [it would be if I were] in their shoes and I’m learning the material,” Homer said.

There are other benefits to being a tutor besides educational purposes. Being a tutor can also improve social and general life skills.

Sophomore **Annika Jain** echoed Homer’s thoughts on tutoring. She is also a private tutor, outside of the Bruin2Bruin organization.

Jain and Homer both noticed how being a tutor has impacted them as individuals.

“[Tutoring has taught me] to help other people and develop myself as a person [It has helped me] to be more patient, more calm with people,” Jain said.

Beyond the personal development that tutoring brings, Jain hopes to become a role model for others.

“My mom inspired me to tutor because she’s been my role model,” Jain said. “She’s taught me everything I know. So [I would like to] pass it on.”

Tutoring can help students improve their grades and understanding in the subjects that they are struggling in.

For students receiving tutoring, like senior **Ayush Iyer**, private tutoring has been a game-changer.

Iyer describes how the personalized tutoring environment offers more attention and flexibility than typical class time. There is a lot more focus on the individual student rather than an entire class when learning, which allows the student to gain a larger understanding of the content.

“Classes have a very strict schedule they have to follow. [Tutoring] is more flexible,” Iyer said. “For a whole private tutoring session, you can focus on one thing, but in class, you have to move on.”

Iyer noted that tutoring has also helped improve his studying strategies and learn more efficiently.

“[Tutoring taught me to] read the question properly and not over answer,” Iyer said. “If you [don’t] over-explain yourself you [will] have more time.”

Tutoring provides the support many students need to comprehend misunderstandings in classes. Tutors and tutees alike grow through the experience and boost to the top of their class.

“Having someone that can privately help you with what you’re not doing so well in helps with repetition and practice and it really translates [to what] you’re actually [doing] in class,” Iyer said.

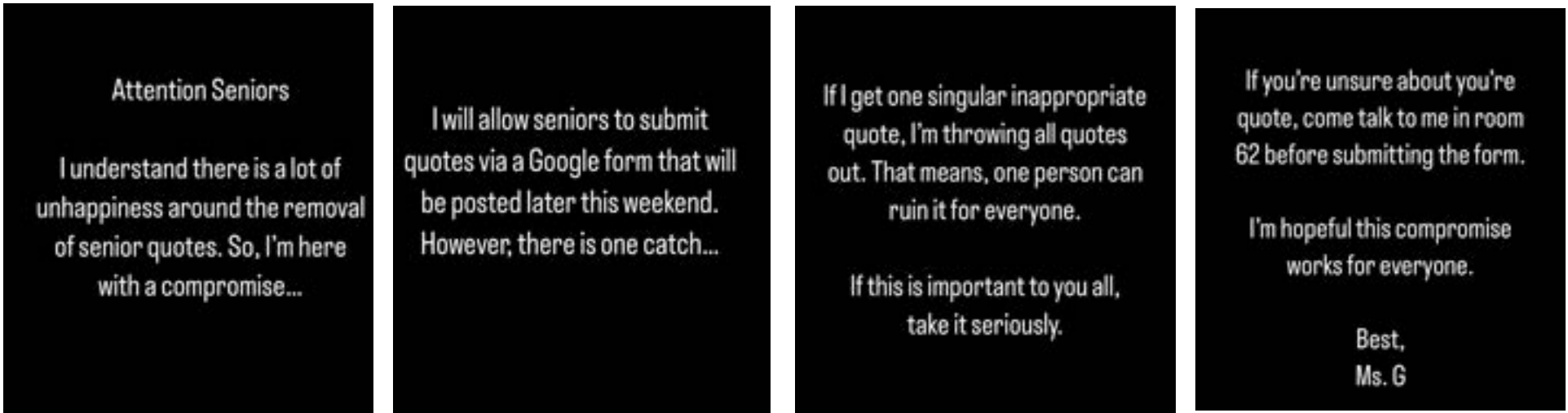


7%
Higher success rate for students who receive tutoring compared to the average student.
Sources: Valley College and NEA

SOCIAL MEDIA

INSTAGRAM INSPIRATION

Instagram accounts impact Branham community both positively and negatively



The Branham Yearbook Instagram account announced the conditions for bringing back senior quotes in a post made on Jan. 24.

AIDAN WEILER
Arts & Culture Editor

From classes to clubs and bad parking to posture, Branham has its fair share of Instagram accounts that contribute to its community, in both positive and negative ways.

On campus, one of the most common uses of Instagram accounts at Branham is as a tool to spread awareness about programs, such as classes or clubs, which can use the platform to spread information about fundraising and events.

One such class is Yearbook, which tries to use its page to increase student engagement and support, according to junior **Angelina McCormick**, a yearbook editor.

“We hope that students are able to feel included in the design of the yearbook,” McCormick said.

McCormick said using social media to reach students is essential in today’s digital age day.

“Social media is really important to the students,” McCormick said, “Almost everyone is on it. You just have to have other things that will help them find the Instagram account.”

McCormick said that the yearbook account helps contribute to the Branham community, especially with posts like the recent “Best and Most” superlatives, where students voted for winners in categories such as “best sense of humor” or “most likely to go broke in a casino.”

While superlatives have always been a Branham yearbook tradition, this was the first year they posted the results of the “best and most” voting on their Instagram account. As a result, the post received lots of attention from the students.

“It allows students to see people that are very involved in the community and do their best in this school,” McCormick said. “It allows them to have the spotlight for a bit.”

When the Branham Yearbook Instagram account made a post announcing that they would be getting rid of senior quotes for the class of 2025, they were immediately met with protests from many seniors before a deal was made to reinstate them.

Many students left comments on the announcement post, including senior **Avishawd Yarisaid**, who decided to reach out to yearbook teacher **Gabrielle Gramegna**.

Together, they worked out a deal. Seniors would be allowed to submit quotes, but if there was a single inappropriate submission, all quotes would be thrown out.

“I really appreciate it,” Yarisaid said. “I know a lot of seniors were happy that they were reinstated.”

However, on campus, Instagram accounts are also used in a more negative way. There are many unaffiliated accounts such as Branham Bad Parking or Bruin Bad Posture, which post photos of people or their cars, often without their permission.

These accounts are frequently created and taken down, never lasting long. But once one is removed, another is quickly createdW to fill the void.

Junior **Daniel Cheyer** had his photo posted on Bruin Bad Posture, without his permission and was hurt by the fact that it was a photo sent in by one of his friends.

“[It was a] little bit of a betrayal,” Cheyer said. “I don’t want my photo out there on random Instagram pages for everyone to see.”

Cheyer said that it hurt at the moment and that he wished it hadn’t happened, but eventually he was able to move on.

“People laugh at you,” Cheyer said. “It’s unfortunate that it happened, but the best thing we can do is just try to move on with

“It’s a culture killer. We want to make sure everybody feels safe and welcomed.”
Assistant Principal Scott Savory

our lives and not let it hold us down.”

However, he still believes that accounts like this should not exist, and had some words for the owners of the account.

“I hope that you listen to people like me,” Cheyer said. “Don’t make accounts to purposely laugh at people.”

Cheyer pointed out the severe effects that being posting on these types of accounts without permission can have on people, such as decreased self-esteem and potential bullying.

“For those who care a little bit more about what’s said about them on the internet, this could have had a really negative effect on their emotional state,” he said.

According to Assistant Principal **Scott Savory**, the administration aims to prevent these accounts from ever being created in the first place.

“We try to do our best, but unfortunately, there’s a bunch of accounts being made all the time,” Savory said. “We’ve talked to other schools and school districts, and they’re going through the same exact thing.”

Savory mentioned that the administration does have steps to take once they find out that an account like this exists.

“When we find that there are accounts, we do everything that we can to try to block them or get them taken down,” Savory said.

The school administration mostly learns about these accounts through student reports.

Savory said that many of these accounts started without much thought into their possible consequences.

“[Eventually the students that ran the account] realized that it wasn’t even funny,” Savory said. “They were doing it out of boredom.”

Savory expressed that he believes that these accounts are negative for the Branham culture, and wishes that they would stop being made.

“It’s a culture killer,” Savory said. “We want to make sure everybody feels safe and welcomed.”

TECH-FREE TUESDAY

New Policy, Same Issues

FRANCISCO PHAM
Sports Editor

Running from Jan. 14 through Feb. 14, Tech-Free Tuesday was a new program where students could turn in their phones for a whole school day in exchange for being entered in a raffle. Each week, one winner was selected per grade, winning a delivered drink or gift card.

Tech-Free Tuesday builds on Campbell Union High School District’s current phone policy, which mandates that phones be put away during instructional hours, in an attempt to promote a distraction-free learning environment.

However, the Branham administration decided that providing optional incentives for students to put their phones away would be more effective than handing out punishments, according to Principal **Beth Silbergeld**.

“The admins were looking for ways to celebrate a positive culture around eliminating cell phone use throughout the school day,” Silbergeld said.

Assistant Principal **Scott Savory** says the activity is meant to get Branham ahead of the game on a new state-mandated phone policy outlined in the Phone Free School Act, which will require schools to create policies limiting phone usage during school time by July 2026.

“Tech-Free Tuesday is an incentive to get students on board with saying no to phones,” Savory said.

ASB Secretary **Sarah Osband** said the activity will make students more aware of their phone usage and its impact on their learning.

“It’s very important to remember that this phone policy is optional,” Osband said. “You don’t have to turn in your phone on Tuesday, but if you do, it’s meant to help you.”

Osband notes that participating in Tech-Free Tuesday has increased her productivity in class now that her phone is gone.

“I’ve definitely been more focused in class,” Osband said. “It’s nice not having that distraction there.”

Despite this, there is a general reluctance by the student body to participate in the activity. A recent Bear Witness survey of 291 students revealed that 93% of students do not participate in the activity. Senior **Hari Srivatsan**, similarly to many other students, he sees the activity as a good idea, but is hesitant to participate.

“The idea itself is a great thing, but the hassle of dropping off my phone is something I’m not so open to,” Srivatsan said.

More broadly, the idea of an activity promoting a whole-day ban on phones has raised some concerns for students who believe it may become fully implemented in the future. Junior **Mylic Hancock** said a permanent ban would be too excessive.

Administration implements Tech-Free Tuesday to reduce phone usage at school



Francisco Pham/Bear Witness
Charlotte Homer (10) turns in her phone to counselor Juan Lopez on Tech-Free Tuesday.

“If it was one day a week, I would be okay with it. I wouldn’t mind at all, because that’s easy to manage. But if it was every day, then it would be really frustrating and really difficult,” Hancock said. “I enjoy listening to music and being able to contact my parents and friends during school.”

Many teachers believe that stricter enforcement of the phone policy would benefit them, with teachers having to deal with phones used during tests or an overall lack of attention to the classwork. In fact, a survey by the Pew Research Center found that 72% of U.S. high school teachers believe phones pose a significant threat to learning.

Math teacher **Tiffany Ylarregui** said that phone use inhibits

learning for all people, so everyone should participate.

“It’s a wonderful idea that each of us, including teachers and staff, should do,” Ylarregui said. “There’s a lot of research showing that having a phone nearby you, even upside down, sucks away your mental capacity and cognitive load.”

As the initial phase of Tech-Free Tuesday comes to a close, Silbergeld remains optimistic about the impact of the program.

“It’s been successful and has allowed us to get the conversation about phone usage up and running,” Silbergeld said. “It depends on how you measure success, but I think the program has been successful in getting the student population thinking about phones.”

SPORTS

ATHLETE PRESSURE

STARTING FROM THE TOP

The pressures and challenges of being a freshman on varsity

TAMARA RESTREPO
Staff Writer

Playing a varsity sport poses a difficult challenge. Now add on the pressure of being new to the team and having to play opponents four years older than you, which is the reality for many freshmen players who make varsity in their first year.

Senior **Deegan Waldorph** was one of those freshmen. Waldorph originally did not make the cut for the varsity team and played for junior varsity for the first two months of the season. Yet after a varsity player was injured, Waldorph was moved up.

“I played two JV games, and all of a sudden, I was playing on a Friday night,” Waldorph said. “That was a lot for me, and I was not ready for it at all.”

Waldorph felt the pressure as he had no choice but to adapt to the sudden increase of expectations.

“At the JV level, it’s very simple. [At] the varsity level, you get everything thrown at you,” Waldorph said. “The first play of the game was something that we never ran in practice, and I messed it up. There was no time for me to learn how to do things. I wasn’t allowed to have growing pains. I just had to do it and figure it out.”

Adapting to skill level differences in a varsity sport can be difficult for anyone in any grade. The support of the returning players is essential for newer players to successfully adapt into the rigor of a varsity sport. This was apparent in freshman **Gunjan Joshi’s** experience with playing varsity volleyball as a freshman.

“The players around the court [had a] mentality of keeping it positive,” Joshi said. “Whenever I got a chance to play, you could hear my teammates just cheering me on. It was very nice.



Francisco Pham/Bear Wltness

Goalkeeper Lilly Murphy (11), who is currently in her third year as the starting varsity goalkeeper, kicks the ball downfield to one of her teammates.

They’re like another family.”

Waldorph also shared a similar experience his freshman year as the older football players and coaches came together to mentor and support him. Waldorph was appreciative of the mentor-

ship he got from **Paul Villarruel**, a senior on the football team when he was a freshman.

“He took me under his wing and taught me how to learn things on the fly,” Waldorph said.

Additionally, Waldorph attributes his success to his offensive line coach, **Kevin Taylor**, his freshman year.

“I credit to him all my success and everything that I do. He was with me every step of the way,” Waldorph said.

Another struggle that many freshmen on varsity might face is feeling like they are not worthy enough to be on the team. Junior **Lilly Murphy**, the girls soccer goalkeeper and the youngest on the team, experienced feelings of doubt when she was promoted to varsity.

“I felt like I wasn’t good enough for the position simply just because of my age. When I went into the first couple games, I was going against 18-year-olds as a 14-year-old,” Murphy said. “They are a lot bigger in not just age, but body-wise too.”

However, Murphy also felt her doubts were more about her mentality rather than her skill level.

“Outside of that mentality, I never really felt like I didn’t belong,” Murphy said. “I felt like I’d earned the spot and I worked really hard to get there.”

That year, Murphy went on to win Goalie of the Year. She received a piece of advice from her mom that resonated with her as a freshman on varsity.

“My mom always told me to be a duck, because ducks have waterproof feathers. I had to let the mistakes roll off my back and focus on what was

ahead of me,” Murphy said. “Throughout the season, I stuck with that. As a goalkeeper, confidence is the most important thing.”

“Obviously its a tough situation no matter what sport you play, but the team is there for you and they always have your back. They’re like another family.”

Freshman **Gunjan Joshi**, a varsity volleyball player



Francisco Pham/ Bear Witness

Deegan Waldorph (12), who has been the starting center for varsity football for all four years of high school, celebrates a touchdown.

SPORTS BRIEFS

Boys Basketball
The Bruins finished the season 7-17 (2-10 in league play), with the departure of key seniors from last year playing a huge role in their record. Despite having a down year, the team was able to give valuable playtime to their younger players. Juniors **Daniel Wells** and **Aiden Vietvu** led the way, contributing points on good efficiency. Senior **Carlo Marinucci** led the team in scoring, averaging 10.5 points per game on the season. The Bruins will look to bounce back next year and return to CCS.

Wrestling
Wrestling put together a season of consistent wins. Younger wrestlers gained valuable match experience, building momentum for next year. Meanwhile, seniors finished their season with a victory on senior night.



Girls Basketball
The girls basketball team ended the season going 12-10 (6-5 in league play), finishing in fourth place in league play and making CCS. Seniors **Jade Rugnao**, **Gina Shim** and **Ollie Decker** spearheaded the Bruin offense. Their consistent scoring pushed the Bruins to their current record and kept them in the game. The team will look to their younger players to continue their upward trajectory.

Senior guard Carlo Marinucci
Francisco Pham/Bear Witness

Girls Soccer
The Bruins finished the season 12-4-4 (5-4-1 in league play), placing fourth in the league and earning a spot in CCS. Freshman **Ciara Kroum-Bruno** led the team with 10 goals and six assists. The Bruins’ defense was anchored by junior goalkeeper **Lilly Murphy**, who recorded 105 saves and 11 shutouts. The team aims to continue building on thier success in the coming seasons.



Sophomore forward Junior Parra
Francisco Pham/Bear Witness

Boys Soccer
The boys soccer team finished the season with a record of 6-11-2 (4-8-1), finishing 7th in the league and missing CCS. Juniors **Michael Murphy** and **David Kim** led the team in goals with four apiece. Senior **Rocco Dressler** led the team in assists with four. With this season being the last for long-time coach Danny Kadah, the Bruins will look to usher in a new era of success.

Traditional Competitive Cheer
The cheer team had a successful season, earning consisten wins in local meets and qualifying for nationals. At nationals, they finished third and will aim to build on this preformance next year.

WRESTLING

STUDENTS TAKE TO THE MAT

Branham students embrace California’s fastest-growing sport

COLIN KALANGES
Staff Writer

In the winter of 2021, coach **Greg Stefani** began his journey with Branham’s wrestling team, fielding 17 students to participate with the program. Now, four years later, the wrestling team has a roster of more than three times what they started with.

Branham isn’t the only school that is experiencing growth in its wrestling team. Wrestling was named the fastest-growing sport in the state for both boys and girls last year, according to the California Interscholastic Federation’s year-end survey.

Branham has experienced state-wide acclaim in the past years, with alum **Clarence Moore Jr.** earning a state championship in 2023. The team, coached by Stefani and **Ryan Matthews**, has seen this success, further contributing to the team’s growth.

“That’s just a testament to myself and Coach Matthews. [We] are both teachers on campus that see a lot of freshmen, so we’re able to get to know students and pull them in that way,” Stefani said. “Our athletes enjoy the sport a lot. We’ve done a lot of the work to help grow our team.”

In addition to the wrestling team’s coaching, numerous other factors also contributed to Branham students’ increased interest in the sport.

Compared to other winter sports like basketball, cheer and soccer, wrestling stands out for its emphasis on the individual and its unique physical nature, which makes it an appealing option for many students who play other sports but still want to stay in shape during the winter season.

Sophomore **Cali Carson**, who plays field hockey and softball, initially took on wrestling as an opportunity to keep training in between seasons, but she soon developed a love for the sport.

“I needed a filler sport for winter, and I decided to do wrestling because Mr. Stefani convinced me to take it,” Carson said. “It’s definitely become one of my favorites among the sports that I do because of the community and my friends in it.”

Matthews says that a primary motivation for him when coaching is fostering a community of support and growth by being a part of his players’ journeys and encouraging them.

“When I was an athlete, I didn’t have my dad come to wrestling tournaments. I didn’t have a lot of family involvement. So for me, I feel very invested in being there for them,” Matthews said. “I can’t think of a more exposing failure than someone holding you on your back and you didn’t get away. That’s what I really love, being there, to encourage them to keep going.”

Wrestling presents a unique physicality that is not seen in many other high school sports. Matches can often result in players injuring themselves and bleeding on the mat. Matthews said that its physical nature is an aspect that many students find desirable.

“Your job is to control a human being that does not want to be controlled, and in turn, is trying to control you,” Matthews said. “It’s more than just putting a ball in a hoop or putting a ball through a net. I’m not trying to say that those sports aren’t tough, but there’s just something so personal that I find alluring.”

Wrestling has allowed players and coaches to develop a bond not as commonly seen in other sports, according to Stefani.

“We’re almost fighting each other, but at the end of the day,



Francisco Pham/ Bear Witness

Sophomore Cali Carson wrestles with a Lincoln opponent during one of Branham’s home meets.

you become much closer with these people because of those experiences,” Stefani said. “You end up bonding with these people.”

The different weight classes give players whose stature might exclude them from other sports the opportunity to excel in wrestling. “[In high school] I was originally a football player, but I realized that I enjoyed wrestling more because I was a smaller kid,” Stefani said. “With the weight classes, I was able to compete against people my size instead of people that were much bigger than me on the football field.”

However, the rapid development of the sport has presented some challenges for coaches Matthews and Stefani, who have been spread thin with the large increase in players. Matthews’ main con-

cern has been the lack of space in the small gym for practices given the large number of players.

“The larger we grow, the harder it makes to hold a sustainable program. If I have over 40 athletes, that’s a 20 to one ratio,” Matthews said.

Despite the pressure that the growth of the sport has brought on to the wrestling team, Stefani said that the team would continue in their commitment to their students.

“We like to think we know how to make this the best experience for everybody,” Stefani said. “Even if we had 10 more kids, we would make it work, because at the end of the day, we just want as many people to experience the sport of wrestling as possible.”

COLLEGE SPORTS

Game Changer

New junior college eligibility ruling impacts Branham students hoping to continue in athletics

LUCAS SETSER
Staff Writer

High school athletes around the country are enticed by the dream to continue their respective sports in college. Given that, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has long stated that all collegiate athletes have a total of five years of eligibility within their given sport.

However, that eligibility rule has been marred in controversy. Vanderbilt quarterback **Diego Pavia** has won a recent court case

against the NCAA, claiming he retained an extra year of athletic eligibility as he started off his career at a junior college. This precedent has opened doors for the possibility of all junior colleges (JUCO) not counting toward NCAA eligibility.

This ruling will become very important to athletes who want to play sports at the next level.

Students may be able to enter a junior college and play their sport for up to two years, and then simply transfer to an NCAA school. Usually, these athletes would lose two years of eligibility

due to playing at a junior college; however, with the precedent set by Pavia, these athletes could still play all five years of NCAA sports.

This means that current high school seniors will have more opportunities to play in an NCAA school. Senior running back **Richard Martin** said junior college could give him the extra training and tape necessary to transfer to a Division I university.

“I would go D1 but other than that, [I would go to a] JUCO,” Martin said. “They’re going to try and push you out to get into a better college afterward, so I think that’s better.”

This ruling will also give athletes in high school more of a reason to continue their sport and play at a junior college instead of walking on at a bigger program or giving up their sport in general.

“It will give more of an incentive to go to JUCO if they’re not wasting their years at a big school, and it’s just extra years of training,” Martin said.

Despite this, this change could result in potential drawbacks for some students. Senior baseball player **Ryan Field** said the likelihood of being recruited straight out of high school will decrease.

“It’ll probably negatively impact high school seniors,” Fields said. “There’s a six-year time period instead of the four-year time period, which increases the amount of players that can play at any level of college.”

By having a longer period for new athletes to compete in sports, current NCAA players will see an increase in competition because these newer athletes will have more time to improve.

“In general, sports will be more competitive in college because higher level high school athletes will go to JUCO,” Field said.

This means that there will be older athletes who have already had six years of experience competing against younger athletes who have just entered the NCAA portal.

However, the choice between going to a four-year NCAA school right away and choosing a junior college depends on what each athlete is looking for, whether it be a few more years to develop or wanting to go straight to Division I sports.

“It depends on the person, but if you’re fully physically developed and you have good grades, I think going to a four-year is better,” Field said.

This ruling gives players more time to develop both athletically and academically before moving on to a bigger NCAA school.

“The ruling is positive towards guys who aren’t fully developed and that are on the brink of going to high-level D1, but there’s more time for them to get better,” Fields said. “But for guys who just want to play straight out of high school [at a high level], the ruling is worse.”



Getty Images

Photo of Vanderbilt Quarterback Diego Pavia. Pavia sued the NCAA on the grounds that his two years at JUCO didn’t count toward his eligibility for the NCAA. He would end up winning the court case and open the door for changing the eligibility rules entirely.

ARTS & CULTURE

MINI REVIEWS

MOVIE



Nosferatu
Directed by Robert Eggers
Focus Features

What is it: Nosferatu is the newest adaptation of the Gothic classic, released in 1922. Loosely based on Bram Stoker's "Dracula", the 2024 film features Lily-Rose Depp as a lonesome wife who calls to the supernatural world for help. Unbeknownst to her, her longing releases an age old creature who will stop but nothing to get what he wants – her devotion.

Liked: The movie is beautifully shot, each scene providing depth and brilliant color grading that adds to the world building in 1839 Germany.

Disliked: The pacing is a little off, as towards the end it loses some of its intensity. The runtime is also a bit long, and maybe could have been cut down to sustain its momentum and finish without any awkward pausing in pacing.

—Dylan Collisson

ALBUM



DeBÍTIRAR Más FOTOS
Bad Bunny
Rimas Entertainment

What is it: DeBÍTIRAR Más FOTOS is Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny's sixth studio album, which, upon release, rose to number one on the US Billboard 200.

Liked: This album is a beautiful tribute to Puerto Rico. Bad Bunny mixes his modern reggaeton with traditional Puerto Rican songs to create a refreshing new twist.

Disliked: There are a few songs that feature collaborations with other artists, that I feel weren't necessary. The songs would have been better with just Bad Bunny.

— Tamara Restrepo

MOVIE



Mufasa
Directed by Barry Jenkins
Walt Disney Studios

What is it: A prequel to "The Lion King", telling the story of a young Mufasa.

Liked: I really enjoyed the stunning visuals and immersive world-building. Disney's photo-realistic visuals bring the African savanna to life with unparalleled detail.

Disliked: The Disney magic that was so prevalent in the original films is nowhere to be seen in this movie. The storyline is repetitive, with a predictable villain. The atmosphere and mood are not comparable to The Lion King, and the art direction is nowhere to be found in Mufasa. This film lacks in every way the achievements of the original animated film.

— Tomer Vardi

ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

MEDIA, MEDIA, MEDIA!

Modern media, particularly movies, face criticism for their similar nature.

HAILEY STEED
Staff Writer

Whether it's constant sequels or reboots, the same actors in every movie or similar plots, many people have an annoyance with the media's seemingly repetitive nature.

In a Bear Witness poll, 84% of 178 respondents agreed that modern media can be repetitive.

English and English Language Development teacher, **Stuti Arora**, echoes this sentiment as an avid moviegoer.

"The movies that most people watch are not very interesting and derivative," Arora said.

According to Arora, sequels such as "Moana 2" or "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" are representative of the industry's repetitive nature. Both movies were financial successes, yet they received mixed reactions from audiences. Moana 2 received a 61% critic review on Rotten Tomatoes, and Beetlejuice Beetlejuice garnered a 6.7/10 rating on IMDB. Arora describes such sequels as repetitive and of poor quality.

Other sequels that tend to revive a more negative feedback include sequels like "He's All That" (2021), which received a score of 4.4/10 on IMDB and 29% critic review on Rotten Tomatoes. This was remade from the original movie She's All That (1999) which received a 5.9/10 on IMDB and 41% critic review on Rotten Tomatoes.

Arora believes that this issue is a side effect of the industry's streaming-focused shift.

"With a lot of TV shows [or movies], they're meant to just be put on without being paid attention to," Arora said. "In that sense, the quality is declining."

Nine out of the top 10 highest-grossing films of 2024 were continuations of existing franchises, according to Box Office Mojo.

Sophomore **Christine Ha** points out how it seems to her that studios' only motive is monetary gain, which can result in repetitive results. By focusing on a specific formula for a "good" movie, it prevents industries from taking risks and trying out more creative ideas.

"I know that companies do try to profit off of one franchise, and they try to do it over and over again," Ha said.

However, Ha explains that she enjoys movies based on existing media, such as "Wicked", a 2024 film adaptation of the Broadway musical of the same name, when it's done in a creative way.

"Turning Wicked into a movie was one of the best things they could have possibly done," Ha said. "I could tell that they put a lot of effort into it, and that they made it original. They also added new elements that didn't divert too much [from the plot], which made it really interesting and new."

Wicked has received immense praise and gained widespread popularity, trending on social media. With a large fanbase, it has now become the highest-grossing film based on a Broadway musical. The



Hailey Steed/Bear Witness

Two similar posters for movies with similar plots, both realeasd in the same year

film also earned multiple Oscar nominations, including Best Picture.

The film adaptation of Wicked, according to Movie Rant, was first announced in 2012, which raised anticipation and audience excitement for its performance as a remake-style adaptation. Ha praises the producer's execution, specifically the director's vision.

"You can tell when they're really putting their soul into it and they're making it because they enjoy [making something new]," Ha said. "Whereas they're milking out the same franchise and they're just doing it to make money, and that just seems shallow, inauthentic and just boring."

Sophomore **Maurvi Pathak** shared a similar sentiment, emphasizing the importance of artistic and meaningful stories, contrasting the recurring stories she describes.

"Instead of focusing on making remakes, [they need to be] trying to come up with new, elaborate and more creative plots," Pathak said.

Arora believes something similar applies when it comes to casting. Actors are a central part of movies, serving as the face of their work. Their performances can shape a film's reception, and their ability to bring characters to life can draw in audiences. However, Arora argues that certain actors frequently play similar roles, leading to this monotony on the screen.

"I feel like there are some actors that just play the same characters over and over again," Arora said.

Some movies stand out because of their unique stories and the versatility of their actors. Arora believes films like this are more engaging, especially when actors take on a range of challenging roles.

Arora praises "Dune: Part II", specifically highlighting performances of Zendaya and Timothée Chalamet, who are both younger actors.

"I do think there's a new generation of actors that are coming up, like Zendaya and Timothée Chalamet, who are taking on more challenging roles," Arora said.

Both actors' diverse roles, Arora believes, represent a generation of performers that audiences enjoy watching because they avoid repetitiveness.

"There's really good stuff out there to watch if people seek it out," Arora said.

Ha, on the other hand, sees the audience as a key force in shaping how movies are produced.

"Consumers are kind of feisty, and they will say their opinion on social media," Ha said. "If they keep saying what they believe in, I'm sure it'll eventually [reach] the director."

Arora believes the industry's originality could be improved using the suggestions of audiences, and focus more on meaningful and innovative storylines instead.

"There's too many sequels or remakes," Arora said. "Sequels are cool when it feels necessary and it's a new story, but they are often completely unnecessary."

MUSIC TASTES

Recognizing Talent

Students find deeper appreciation in underground artists

YUJIN CHO
News Editor

Music fills the lives of many people—whether it's for casual listening or deeper, emotional connections. "Mainstream music," or popular and trending music, often receives recognition from large audiences while "underground music" on the other hand goes more unnoticed and garners less attention from listeners.

In a poll of 182 Bear Witness readers, 64% of students reported that they listened to mainstream music while 36% listened to underground music.

Junior poll respondent **Sophia Heo** believes that music helps her connect with both other people and her own emotions.

"Music has been such a foundation of all my emotions [that] helps me truly understand what I'm feeling and know what other people are going through," Heo said.

Heo, who believes that artist recognition or popularity is not determinative of music quality, naturally gravitates to music that she has emotional connection with. One of her top artists is Cool, a South Korean band that produces songs in the K-pop genre and does not receive a lot of recognition in America.

Heo thinks that because most mainstream artists started small, every underground or unknown artist has the potential to grow.

"There are popular musicians now who started off with low quality productions and rose to fame. d4vd

made music in his closet [before] and became really popular, and his production got so much bigger," Heo said. "It's about talent and the connection you make with people and finding people that relate to you."

David Burke, known professionally as d4vd, is an alternative musician who began his career in a small home-scale production as a 15-year-old teenage boy. Starting as an underground artist, he quickly met success, with three singles charting in the Billboard Top 100 since 2022.

Similar to Heo, English teacher **Lauren Cellini** creates emotional connections with music.

"Music can be something to connect to," Cellini said. "Music tells a story, and there are so many different topics that are covered. Anyone can find something that they relate to, and can attribute an emotion or an experience to it."

Cellini claims the popularity or recognition of an artist doesn't determine the quality of the music they produce. She believes there can be some benefits from listening to smaller artists.

"It's cool to listen to more underground artists because they're trying to establish their careers, and it is something different," Cellini said. "[When you're] sharing [a smaller artist] with someone else, you're spreading the word about someone new, which could be cool."

Senior **Ryan Fields** listens to popular rock music from the '90s. His top artists include Nirvana, The Smashing Pumpkins and Green Day. Fields also does not think artist recognition or popularity is determinative in the quality of their music.

"What makes you feel good listening is what [should matter]," Fields said. "I don't think any stigma should exist on if it's popular music or not popular music. [Your music taste] should be what makes you happy [and what] you enjoy listening to."

Spotify's top artists, songs and albums of 2024		
Most-streamed artists globally		Most-streamed songs globally
	Taylor Swift Genres: pop and funk	 "Espresso" by Sabrina Carpenter
	The Weeknd Genres: R&B and soul	 "Beautiful Things" by Benson Boone
	Bad Bunny Genres: Latin trap and reggaeton	 "BIRDS OF A FEATHER" by Billie Eilish
		Most-streamed albums globally
		 THE TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT: THE ANTHOLOGY by Taylor Swift
		 HIT ME HARD AND SOFT by Billie Eilish
		 Short n' Sweet by Sabrina Carpenter

Source: Spotify

ARTS & CULTURE

CARTOONS

WATCH OR BOTCH

Students reflect on not being able to watch certain cartoons as children

NOA MUYYAL
Staff Writer

If you’ve ever had to sit on the side-line of a conversation, awkwardly laughing at a reference someone made to a show everyone else apparently watched when they were seven, then you may have experienced, for better or worse, what parental media restriction is like.

According to a BuzzFeed article about controversial shows, many kids weren’t allowed to watch certain shows because parents didn’t want their kids to learn the behaviors shown in shows, such as inappropriate jokes or personal values.

Other parents, however, believe that certain fast-paced and over-stimulating shows, like *SpongeBob* and *Co-Comelon*, can damage their child’s development and cloud concentration. The National Library of Medicine tested this theory and found that just nine minutes of fast-paced shows can damage a child’s executive functioning skills. Those skills include organization, emotional control, task initiation and memory.

A Bear Witness Instagram poll of 206 respondents revealed that 75% were allowed to watch “controversial” shows such as “*SpongeBob Squarepants*,” “*Caillou*” and “*Dora The Explorer*”. In comparison, the other 25% had more restrictions on their media content.

Some parents, such as math teacher **Daniel Winsor**, feel that the maturity level of these shows doesn’t line up with the demographic they are marketed for.

“The jokes and humor [in *SpongeBob*] were just a little more mature than the age of my kid,” Winsor said. “If the content, the theme and the conversations are above the level of the kid, then you just have to think if you’re going to [allow them to watch it] or not.”

Instead of monitoring their kids’ TV content all the time, parents like Winsor set age limits on their devices. However, with multiple kids comes the struggle of maintaining age-appropriate films for each child’s maturity level.

“With my first kid [I was] extra careful,” Winsor said. “By the time we got to the youngest one, he was watching [more hardcore cartoons] partly because I wasn’t worried about it as much anymore and his older brothers were watching it already.”

Sophomore **Jackson Kuljis** didn’t have many restrictions on his television content and largely got to watch whatever he wanted.

“[My parents] would have probably let me [watch R-rated movies] if I asked,” Kuljis said. “They normally got mad if [movies] had swear words, but they didn’t care about violence.”

However, Kuljis also mentions that he had some media limitations when he

Grace Ngo/Special to the Bear Witness

was younger like many other Branham students.

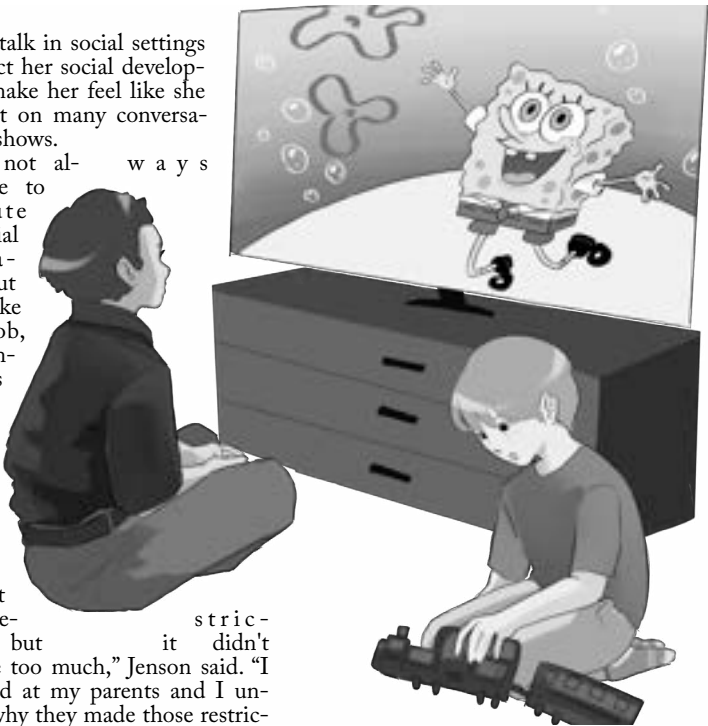
Sophomore **Lily Jensen** had stricter limits. Jensen mentioned that if there were conversations about shows she couldn’t watch, she would listen to what others said but wouldn’t be able to contribute. She states that being

unable to talk in social settings didn’t affect her social development or make her feel like she missed out on many conversations and shows.

Despite not always being able to contribute to social conversations about shows like *SpongeBob*, Jensen understands why those restrictions stood in place.

“I was annoyed [about some restrictions] but it didn’t bother me too much,” Jensen said. “I wasn’t mad at my parents and I understand why they made those restrictions because some shows were bad for younger kids.”

Furthermore, students like Jensen agree that they will place similar rules if they have kids in the future, especially with social media. Since social media apps are another way to get entertainment in a variety of ways, many people fear it is the source of new problems for kids today. For this reason, Jensen believes limiting social media access is



not a negative thing. “Social media can ruin a lot of things and can create insecurities, so I would place similar restrictions like the ones I had,” Jensen said.

MOVIE REVIEWS

Oscar Reviews

2025 Academy Award for Best Picture Nominees, Reviewed

AIDAN WEILER
Arts & Culture Editor

With the Academy Awards just a few weeks away, I have taken the opportunity to watch and review the nominees, to help you decide what is worth your time and what isn’t.

Before I start, I do have to point out that I was unfortunately unable to get out to the theaters to catch **I’m Still Here**. Additionally, remember that all of this is my own opinion.

Anora is the best film of the year. When a sex worker marries the son of a Russian oligarch, his parents do everything in their power to break off the marriage, resulting in both the funniest and most emotionally devastating nominee. Director Sean Baker continues to focus on less depicted members of society, with his same deft touch and empathy. The film is a masterpiece of mixing genres – while not a straight forward comedy, this film has some of the funniest scenes I’ve seen this year. But this movie is never scared of dipping into deep drama, depicting the ups and downs of the lifestyle of its main character, played by Mickey Madison. This film is not for everyone – it is extremely intense and explicit, but for those who can handle it, they will be well rewarded with a modern masterpiece. *10/10*

The Brutalist is a modern epic. The film revolves around holocaust survivor Lazlo Toth, who immigrates to America in order to further pursue his architectural career. The film is epic in scale, with a vast story, beautiful cinematography and unbelievable scope. The film is over three and a half hours, but earns every second. The Brutalist is split cleanly in half by an intermission, with the more optimistic first half perfectly setting up the downer second half. Every performance in the films is fantastic, but Adrien Brody and Guy Pearce are the clear standouts. They are absolutely deserving of every piece of praise they have received. The film is a large commitment, with a very long runtime and emotionally draining story, but it certainly worth your time. *10/10*

Nickel Boys is the most unique film of this batch of nominees. It tells the story of two African American boys, who are forced to go to an abusive reform school in the 1960s. What makes this film so special is the fact that it is shot entirely from the first person perspectives of the two main characters. This conceit could easily turn into a gimmick in the hands of lesser filmmakers, but director RaMell Ross and cinematographer Jomo Fray use it to its fullest potential. The film hits hard emotionally and tells a powerful story, even if it is a bit too long. *8/10*

The Substance is an extreme, visceral experience. Body horror is not a genre one would typically expect to be awarded at the Oscars, but *The Substance* received a total of five nominations. The film tells the story of an aging actress, played by Demi Moore in an indelible performance of deep emotion, who undergoes a sketchy scientific process that results in the creation of a younger clone of herself, played by Margaret Qualley. This film is not subtle – its messages about how Hollywood treats aging women is blatantly obvious – but doesn’t necessarily need subtlety for the film to hit. As to be expected, the effects are great. I am pleasantly surprised that the academy is recognizing a film as gross, intense and over the top as this one. *8/10*

Conclave is engrossing, if not entirely essential. The film tells the story of the power struggles that occur within the Catholic Church during the election of the next pope after the death of the previous one. Ralph Fiennes gives an incredible performance as the leader of a more progressive faction of the church, trying to prevent the church from falling into the hands of a less forgiving leader. While the film is about the church on its surface, it is still enjoyable to non religious viewers like myself, who are able to appreciate the intriguing story and striking cinematography. However, I did not love the ending, which felt like it cared about being a twist first and a satisfying ending second. *8/10*

Dune Part II is a technical marvel. Denis Ville-

nueve continues his adaptation of the *Dune* saga, once again bringing grand spectacle and thrills to the screen. I saw this film in the theater when it came out, and let me tell you, on the big screen, the visuals are incredible. Villeneuve continues to prove that he is one of the best working blockbuster directors. However, the story did not engage me as much as his earlier films; Chalamet’s performance is good, but the emotions failed to hit. Still, on a purely technical level, *Dune II* is an incredible film. *8/10*

A Complete Unknown is nothing special. It is yet another musical biopic, this time focusing on Bob Dylan, and is exactly what one would expect. It hits nearly every beat in the formula that every musical biopic seems to follow. Everything about this film is merely adequate – Chalamet is good, but not Oscar worthy in my opinion. The film is not ugly, but not exactly visually striking. Director James Mangold does a fine enough job, but there are no choices made that particularly stand out. Obviously, the music is great, but I feel like I barely learned anything substantive about the the man behind it. *6/10*

Wicked is a populist hit, but not exactly awards worthy. I don’t hate *Wicked*. Musicals are clearly not my favorite genre, as shown by the fact that the two on this list occupy the bottom two spots. Some part of me feels a little bad about that. There was clearly care put into this film; the costuming and especially set design are stand out elements. It’s for me, musicals have extra barriers they have to jump to get me to like them, and I acknowledge that that’s on me, not film. There are some more objective faults I have with the film. For one, the lighting is bad. Nearly every scene is blown out and bathed in overwhelming backlights, which ends up making the film look flat and dull, something that should not be said about a musical inspired by “*The Wizard of Oz*.” Additionally, even though the film is only the first half of the musical, *Wicked* is over 2 hours and 40 minutes. Unlike *The Brutalist*, I do not think this movie earns its exaggerated run time. *5/10*

Emilia Perez is the most controversial film on this list. Emilia Perez is a musical that tells the story of a Mexican cartel leader, who undergoes gender re-assignment with the help of a famous lawyer. The film aims to put forward positive representation for the Mexican and trans communities, but from what I have read, both groups seem to have their reservations with the film. But that isn’t the only issue here – the filmmaking here, quite frankly, is awful. The cinematography is ugly, the story is bad, and even I, a non-musical fan, could tell that the songs were badly written. Why this terrible film got 13 Oscar nominations is beyond me. The only redeeming factor is that the performances are (mostly) bearable, and the fact that the film is never boring, if only to marvel at all the awful decisions being made. *2/10*



Neon A24 Amazon Studios Mubi Focus Features

My five favorites of the nominees

ARTS CALENDAR

IN SCHOOL

Multicultural Night
Mar. 7
Cafeteria
What is it: Branham will celebrate the different cultures across campus with language classes and various clubs.

Backstage Bruins

Chicago
Mar. 20- 22, 27-29
Performance Arts Center
What is it: Nightclub sensation Velma murders her philandering husband, and Chicago’s slickest lawyer, Billy Flynn, is set to defend her. But when Roxie also winds up in prison, Billy takes on her case, turning her into a media circus of headlines. Neither woman will be outdone in their fight against each other and the public for fame and celebrity.

OUT OF SCHOOL

97th Academy Awards
Mar. 2
What it is: The 2025 installment all of the annual Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars, which will award films released in 2024. Hosted by Conan O’Brien, the ceremony, airing on ABC, will start at 4pm.



Movies

Paddington 3
Feb. 14
Directed Dougall Wilson
What it is: When Paddington discovers his beloved aunt has gone missing from the Home for Retired Bears, he and the Brown family head to the jungles of Peru to find her. Determined to solve the mystery, the family soon stumble across a legendary treasure as they make their way through the rainforests of the Amazon.



Captain America: Brave New World
Feb. 14
Directed by Julius Onah
What it is: Sam Wilson finds himself in the middle of an international incident after meeting with President Thaddeus Ross. He must soon discover the reason behind a nefarious global plot before the true mastermind has the entire world seeing red.

Music

Short n’ Sweet (Deluxe)
Sabrina Carpenter
Feb. 14
What it is: American singer-songwriter will release the deluxe version of her sixth studio album. It will feature four new songs and a new version of “Please, Please Please” with singer-actress, Dolly Patron.

Mayhem
Lady Gaga
Mar. 7
What it is: Lady Gaga is set to release her eighth studio pop album, featuring singles like “Disease,” “Abracadabra,” and Grammy Award-winning song “Die with a Smile.”

—Compiled by Noa Muyyal

THE

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—Compiled by Naomi Bergman and Dylan Collisson

Take this quiz to find out which up-and-coming artist you are! Use the space at the bottom to keep track of your score.

Favorite song of 2024? Saturn - SZA (A) Not Like Us - Kendrick Lamar (B) Espresso - Sabrina Carpenter (C) Chasin' You - Morgan Wallen (D)	Where are your go-tos for buying clothes? Thrift Stores and Depop (A) Arc'teryx and Carhartt (B) Brandy Melville and Hollister (C) Levi's and Boot Barn (D)	What is your go-to order at a restaurant? Tacos (A) Burger and Fries (B) Pasta with Red Sauce (C) Steak with Mashed Potatoes (D)	Which app do you open first after coming home from school? Spotify (A) TikTok (B) Instagram (C) Snapchat (D)	Favorite movie genre? Thriller (A) Action (B) Romance (C) Old-Western (D)
How would you rather spend a Friday night? A night out with friends in the city (A) Taking a night drive (B) Reading a good book (C) A music festival (D)	If your 2024 was turned into a movie, which famous actor would play you? Zendaya (A) Will Smith (B) Scarlett Johansson (C) Matthew McConaughey (D)	What word is most commonly used to describe your personality? Chill (A) Intense (B) Friendly (C) Energetic (D)	Which of the following travel destinations is at the top of your list? Los Angeles, Calif. (A) New York City, N.Y. (B) O'ahu, Hawaii (C) Nashville, Tenn. (D)	Favorite color? Blue (A) Black (B) Pink (C) Red (D)



If you chose mostly A's...

You're most like PinkPantheress. R&B music is the way to go. You like the smooth, sultry vibe that comes with this genre and likely seek depth and connection in your music.

Recommendations:

"Feel Complete" by PinkPantheress, "Diamond Boy" by SZA, "Favour" by Avenoi

If you chose mostly B's...

You would love listening to rap music, including music by Kendrick Lamar. You like to listen to music that's outside the box made by new and innovative artists.

Recommendations:

"Beef FloMix" by Flo Milli, "Hunnid" by 100 Days 100 Nights (Lucki), "Chapter Six" by Kendrick Lamar

If you chose mostly C's...

Claire is the artist for you, and pop music is probably more your style. You enjoy keeping up with the times and singing along with your friends.

Recommendations:

"Add Up My Love" by Claire, "PUSH 2 START" by Tyla, "Real Man" by Beabadoobee

If you chose mostly D's...

Your vibe is country music, and you'd love tunes by Treaty Oak Revival. From road trip sing-a-longs to bluesy guitars, you enjoy this rustic genre.

Recommendations:

"Missed Call" by Treaty Oak Revival, "Unrung" by Turnpike Troubadours, "Tattooed Roses" by Treaty Oak Revival