

In the digital age, young generations strive to attain a golden lifestyle made of physical standards, parasocial relationships and more — all carefully crafted by societal expectations.

the new generic

CONFORMITY

Beauty standards popularized on social media lead to conformity.

Pg. 2

LOOKSMAXXING

Extreme self-improvement promotes dangerous practices.

Pg. 3

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Students grab onto the illusion of connection with influencers.

Pg. 4

NONCHALANT PERSONA

Mirroring people online, students adopt casual, unconcerned attitudes.

Pg. 5

GYM RATS

Students go to the gym to attain the perfect physique.

Pg. 6

55%

of teenage girls feel at least a fair amount of pressure to look good.

39%

of teenage boys feel similar amounts of pressure.

Source: Pew Research Center's 2025 Report on "The Gender Gap in Teen Experiences."

Kailey Fu and Emi Mohanrao/Bear Witness



facing the truth

Students grapple with the troubles of conformity in the modern age

NOA MUVAL
Student Life Editor

Scroll long enough on Instagram, and faces begin to blur together into one. Today, more than ever, the pressure to meet idealistic beauty standards presented on an app causes people to turn to plastic surgery.

With the growth of social media, ideal beauty standards have become stricter and more singular. In an article for *The New Yorker*, writer Jia Tolentino dubs this standardized look "Instagram Face," created through the artificial, unrealistic standards produced through procedures, filters and editing on social media. This "single, cyborgian face" consists of features like plump lips, small noses, high cheekbones and slim eyes.

Junior **Naima Chetverykova**, who responded in support of getting cosmetic surgery in a Bear Witness Instagram poll, stated how consistently seeing these standards on social media can normalize the idea of plastic surgery. She mentions how it can make people want certain procedures to look a certain way.

Now, younger generations see the beauty standards on social media. Spanish teacher **Jessica Martinez-Gallardo** comments on how wanting cosmetic procedures has become prevalent in modern media. She believes it can be hard for people not to get caught in the middle of influencer content that can impact how individuals view themselves.

"The most important part is acknowledging that you have to step away from idolizing celebrities. It's hard to do that because with trends, there's going to be a 'leader,'" Martinez said. "But it also gets to a point where you have to be your own person, and I think that doesn't come until you're 18-19 when you have that realization [that] you are an adult, [and] you have a sense of freedom."

When viewers see the same features and similar faces every day, it normalizes the idea that individuals have to look a certain way. Chetverykova says this contributes to the rejection of individuality, since many are used to seeing similar features.

"If you see it that much, and it's pushing [the idea that] 'You have to look this way,' that's a negative because we need to accept the individuality between different people," Chetverykova said.

With this current trend, Martinez thinks society should consider the effects harsh beauty standards have on teens and young adults. According to Pew Research, around 47% of teens stated they feel pressured to "look good," and 41% feel pressured to "fit in socially." Rigid standards can influence young people to get procedures they don't need without being properly educated on them.

"[Beauty standards] can either serve students with a realization of something that they do want or something that they absolutely don't want," Martinez said. "In both cases, it makes students think about the effect it would have on their own lives. There's a certain power that social media has over students, so it's really hard [to] not

let it influence you."

Like Chetverykova, sophomore **Parker Higley** mentions how frequently seeing social media creators with cosmetic surgeries normalizes the idea of needing to undergo procedures to "fit in."

"[Influencers are] trying to be relatable to people, so when they have plastic surgery, it feels like maybe [viewers] should too," Higley said. "Whenever I talk to people and they've been watching a celebrity or an influencer, it's almost like they pretend they know who they are. I guess you could compare it to your friend getting plastic surgery. It might make you feel more pressured [to do] that too."

Some people also get procedures to improve health, such as to improve breathing with deviated septum surgery or correct minor misalignments with veneers. While these types of procedures address physical health, Chetverykova mentions that general procedures can also impact a person's mental health by improving their self-esteem.

"A lot of times when people choose to do cosmetic surgery when they don't have health problems, they do it for mental health reasons — if they're feeling insecure, [for example]," Chetverykova said. "That's just as big of a health concern as physical health. If [cosmetic surgery] helps your health, whatever kind of health that is, you should do it."

No matter the reasons for a surgery, senior **Chloe Teil** says unnecessary procedures can't always fix a person's body image.

"Doing things purely for aesthetics doesn't necessarily make your life better because you aren't really changing your mindset," Teil said. "You're still the same person, but just with the new something."

Teil notes that this "norm" of Instagram Face is being pushed by popular celebrities and people at the forefront of social media. Often, people who undergo procedures tend to erase ethnic features to fit the Eurocentric beauty standards, which consist of fair skin, double-lid eyes, small noses and a defined facial structure. Multiple members of the Kardashian family have gotten nose jobs in order to change their Armenian noses to a more westernized look.

Teil believes this norm can pressure people to conform to societal standards. Chetverykova mentions how she's noticed this trend among those who get certain surgeries to appear more westernized.

"It's really unfortunate when that happens because everyone should be happy with how they look and how they are and how they're born," Chetverykova said. "It's upsetting, but again, if that's what is going to make them happy at the end of the day, then who am I to say what they should and shouldn't do?"

As someone of Persian descent, junior **Sevin Sabei** has considered getting a nose job in the future, primarily because she has been mocked for her ethnic features. Growing up, she mentions people have used language with negative undertones such as prominent, to describe

her Middle Eastern features.

"A lot of people, especially from the Middle East, tend to have larger noses, and over the years, people have mocked me for it," Sabei said. "Even in social media or movies, you always see people who are depicted as evil have that type of structure, and that all has fed into that mentality that I don't like my nose and that I want [to change it]."

Higley agrees that it's unfortunate people erase ethnic features to fit the standard beauty norms.

"It is sort of disappointing that we don't have a great representation of all different cultures and features that come with ethnic groups, and we need to shift away from a Eurocentric position to embracing all people," Higley said.

Sabei adds that seeing wider representation can allow people to be more accepting of others and themselves, but it might not solve the problem altogether.

"Insecurities will probably always be there, but more representation — which I have seen popping up more lately — of people accepting different noses, representing their nose, being proud of it and showing that it is beautiful as well can definitely help minimize the insecurity and make me feel like I can accept my nose more publicly."

Martinez thinks that being more educated on the outcomes associated with surgery can alter people's perspectives about undergoing certain procedures.

"There are, like with any medical procedures, risks, and there's unfortunately some consequences that we can see," Martinez said. "Part of that is the constant feeling of not being satisfied with yourself, and I think that's the most important one — that there's nothing you won't do to look your best by doing medical procedures."

Higley believes every individual deserves to feel pleased with their body and not let beauty standards set by influencers shape the way they view themselves.

"Everybody should feel comfortable with their own body and feel comfortable enough for their self and their personalities that they don't really care as much as trying to look [like other people]," Higley said.

"The most important part is acknowledging that you have to step away from idolizing celebrities. You have to be your own person."

Spanish teacher **Jessica Martinez-Gallardo**

#bbl

3.1 million posts on Instagram
831,000 posts on TikTok

#kimkardashian

14 million posts on Instagram
1.2 million posts on TikTok

#instaface

1.1 million posts on Instagram

THE NEW GENERIC

Looksmaxxing

An online subculture that promotes maximizing physical attractiveness to improve dating and social success.

Misogynistic values are often heavily promoted within these communities due to the influence of the blackpill ideology. Ideas like female hypergamy promote the theory that women pursue unrealistic standards in men.

Hardmaxxing & Softmaxxing

Extreme procedures known as "hardmaxxing" include bonesmashing, jaw surgery, "starvemaxxing" and more, all aiming to significantly change one's appearance. On the other hand, the supposedly healthier alternative, "softmaxxing," includes procedures like gymmaxxing, groommaxxing and stylemaxxing, which change appearances in less radical ways.

PSL Score

Much of looksmaxxing's culture involves complex rankings of facial and body features to determine sexual attractiveness in a system known as PSL (an acronym denoting the first initial of the first three online looksmaxxing forums). PSL typically runs on a one to eight scale. Rankings can also be influenced by one's ability to attract members of the opposite sex, often dubbed "Sexual Market Value" within the community. Individuals at the bottom of the

PSL spectrum may be deemed as "subhuman," or as having below average physical features. Those who are able to "ascend" above that ranking may become "low-tier normies," "mid-tier normies," "high-tier normies," "Chadlites" and finally "Chad." Resting at around seven to eight on the PSL scale, a Chad is someone who has greatly above average physical features.

However, this level of attractiveness is generally unachievable, only applying to a select few people determined to be of peak attractiveness.

at face value

Prevalence of online "looksmaxxing" practices poses possible issues for Branham

EMMETT SPEAR
News Editor

DYLAN COLLISSON
Arts and Culture Editor

Self improvement may involve beginning a gym routine, rereading a book or eating a healthier diet. In online spaces, however, self improvement has morphed into a newer, more extreme and possibly more dangerous practice — looksmaxxing.

In looksmaxxing culture, physical looks are the exclusive source of success in dating, relationships and career opportunities. Due to the creation of the looksmaxxing.com forum in 2019 and more recently the propulsion of looksmaxxing culture in social media apps like TikTok, looksmaxxing has been experiencing a resurgence of interest among millions of young, impressionable teens.

Branham's Self-Improvement Club, run by sophomore **Kibum Park**, aims to disseminate advice focused on improving health and looks to Branham's community. Park does not see the club as a looksmaxxing group, but believes that some aspects of the club align with some of the healthier and less drastic forms of looksmaxxing. Lunchtime discussions revolve around improving confidence, nutrition, style and socializing in an effort to achieve a better lifestyle.

"It's first impressions: better socializing with people, knowing how to live your life better with more purpose and maybe even getting better grades," Park said.

Park finds that though looksmaxxing carries a negative connotation today, its rise in popularity has increased awareness about self-care practices and how they can improve a person's self image.

"I always used to be insecure about how I looked," Park said. "Going on this journey helped me a lot in building my social life, my confidence and trust in my everyday life as a human being."

In particular, Park values those who spread positive advice but places special emphasis on making sure people are wary about the media they consume. Though a follower of looksmaxxing, Park has spent little to no time on the online forums, denouncing the harmful hardmaxxing procedures the sites promote.

"It's just a term I use to better yourself — how you look and the way you come across to people," Park said. "I wouldn't recommend anything like surgeries, but scientifically, [self-care] has [been] proven to improve on how you look."

On the "healthier" side of looksmaxxing, ideas such as "gymmaxxing" promote exercising to improve one's physique. Though junior **Johnathan Barrientos** does not subscribe to the looksmaxxing ideology, he has become a long-time fan of the content creator Santa Cruz Medicinals, also known as Brendan Ruh. Barrientos recognizes that content like Ruh's can be beneficial so long as a person is able to find balance between focusing on appearance and managing mental health.

"The content from Santa Cruz [Medicinals] is mainly just health and caring about the body and what you eat and consume," Barrientos said. "I like how he cares for the youth's health and reveals the true harm that some common foods bring."

Overall however, Barrientos finds that the overarching message behind looksmaxxing content promotes ideas that can damage people's self-image and make them overly hateful. Specifically, the PSL scale can bolster the idea that people's appearance is more important than their personality.

"I feel like it makes people overly observant about others' appearances," Barrientos said. "Truthfully, you never know what other people are going through, and it definitely promotes outside appearance over inner personality."

In fact, Barrientos has found that this toxic looksmaxxing culture has seeped its way into the social media feeds of teenagers, impacting the health of his friends. In particular, Barrientos has a friend from Leigh High School who is taking peptides, most commonly injected for skin, muscle and hormonal health, at the age of 17.

"I think that's a bit extreme because you're underage still," Barrientos said. "To be taking stuff like that where

you don't even know the true long-term effects. The way that they're promoting it as something just to look better, it makes it seem so normalized to do these things. He only speaks on the positives, but there's definitely going to be some sort of negative."

Though doctors never recommend performing risky procedures at home, looksmaxxing influencers, such as the controversial Clavicular, have created content operating on themselves and others in the name of self-improvement. In addition, there is an abundance of videos online explaining the best ways to bone smash, providing guides as to areas to hit and damage to reshape your face. On the extreme side, Clavicular recently livestreamed a video in which he injected a 17-year-old girl with Aqualyx, a fat solvent, by himself. Reflecting on this, Barrientos wants people to consider the long term effects these practices can have on one's health and safety.

Looksmaxxing culture has not only infiltrated Leigh, however. Barrientos explains that these practices are also becoming familiar talk amongst students on Branham's campus.

"There's kids in my physics class, math class, tutorial, and you hear it around when you're just going about your day," Barrientos said.

Junior **Winston Middlebrook**, who considers himself very familiar with the looksmaxxing community, acknowledges social media's role in turning the concept into a less serious and trendy topic.

"I think its popularity is due to its meme-ability," Middlebrook said. "There's more people involved now more than ever in the actual community, but there's also exponentially more memes about it. It is growing, but it's also becoming a joke."

While looksmaxxing culture has become a joke among Branham students who casually poke fun at the extreme ideas and measures people go to, Barrientos emphasizes how these jokes only fuel the fire and spread it onto more and more social media feeds.

"I think it's one of those things where people take it as a joke, but underlining, they take it seriously, and they're interested," Barrientos said. "All jokes have meaning because it comes from somewhere. It's not just coming from nowhere."

After considering how the spread of looksmaxxing culture as a joke can conversely keep it trending on social media, Barrientos recognizes that the content can warp the minds of not just teenagers, but children. Specifically, Barrientos is concerned about the long term effects consuming looksmaxxing content can have on younger generations.

"It's not just high schoolers on TikTok," Barrientos said. "There's fifth graders, elementary, middle schoolers, and if they're seeing it at such a young age — let's say there's an elementary kid that wants to start smashing their face with a hammer — that's really bad, especially because they're still developing."

Barrientos posits that looksmaxxing ideals are easy to fall into at young ages due to higher rates of insecurity and mental health issues. In fact, he finds this content prays on younger audiences, abusing their consumption to promote beauty standards.

Due to its birth in the depths of incel culture, many of looksmaxxing's principals of attractiveness promote Eurocentric beauty standards. These ideals have become so extreme in fact that Barrientos believes they borderline on eugenics.

"[Looksmaxxers will] compare natural characteristics for ethnic groups and your stereotypical European and say [Europeans] look better," Barrientos said. "I feel like that's more of a personal standpoint of what you like and what you don't like, so it could be some underlying racism. It promotes this one idea, and if you don't fit that one idea, it says you have to change yourself."



Emi Mohanrao and Kailey Fu/Bear Witness

Nevertheless, Middlebrook finds that only a minority of people involve themselves with looksmaxxing ideologies.

"I think for most, it is genuinely just trying to look better, and that's often just hygiene and becoming the best version of yourself," Middlebrook said. "But there is a group of people who are taking it too far, like bone smashing and then also singling out black people or just latching on to ideologies that are harmful."

As the looksmaxxing community continues to grow in popularity, physical education teacher **Greg Stefani** believes it becomes difficult to distinguish between personal goals and the expectations of the group.

"You're kind of chasing somebody else's approval, and I don't think that's always the best solution to things," Stefani said. "If that's something you want for yourself, I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but if you are just doing something to please another group, then that's not the best option."

Many use looksmaxxing as a tool for social and romantic connection. However, Stefani emphasizes that looks are not as important as they may seem. Stefani adds that having a sense of compatibility with a partner and shared interests may in fact play a much larger role in sustaining a healthy relationship than just appearance alone.

"Who do you get along with? What do you guys have in common? Just things that come naturally," Stefani said. "Looks are very superficial things. Looks will come and go. People that might be insecure — your body will change so much naturally, so I don't think that [looksmaxxing] should be our main focus."

Additionally, Middlebrook believes that rather than focusing on regulation, looksmaxxing must be addressed at the root of the issue. Many young men face pressure from peers or families to meet the traditional ideas of masculinity, and some may also have limited spaces to talk openly about their own insecurity or self worth.

Skeptical of the entire looksmaxxing industry, Middlebrook suggests never taking any information at face value. "What you're seeing on social media, it's all a product and you can't believe anything you see," Middlebrook said. "You have to think, how is this benefiting the person who's making it? How is my attention being sold right now? Be aware."

#looksmaxxing

343,000 posts on TikTok

444,000 posts on Instagram

THE NEW GENERIC



Emi Mohanrao and Kailey Fu/Bear Witness

fantasy bonds

Students form parasocial relationships with online creators in the age of influencers

TAYLOR URQUHART
Staff Writer

BRAYDEN GASSMANN
Staff Writer

Viewers have become increasingly invested in the lives of digital personalities, which, in extreme cases, lead to the development of parasocial relationships — a one-sided relationship in which a person develops a strong sense of connection with someone they don't actually know, most often celebrities or media personalities.

Senior **Chiho Moriyama** started posting content on TikTok in 2022, amassing over 200,000 followers after a few viral videos. Over time, Moriyama started getting video requests from her followers, and now mostly posts makeup tutorials.

"I started posting videos because I really liked anime, and I just wanted to post videos about it to find people with similar interests as me," Moriyama said. "People in my comments would be like, 'Makeup tutorial' or 'Hair tutorial,' so I started focusing more on that."

From the perspective of a follower, senior **Reese Hickey** finds inspiration, motivation and entertainment from following her favorite creators and influencers on social media like Ruby Cruz and Maya Hawke.

"What first drew me to them was their TV shows, and I stayed because I became emotionally attached to their life," Hickey said. "They give me motivation to get up every day because they're hot, and I think they're fun and pretty to look at."

Hickey frequently DMs celebrities and talks to them as if she knows them personally.

"Sometimes I'll swipe up on their story and be like, 'Yeah, work it,'" said Hickey. "They don't respond to me unfortunately, but that's my friend, like that's my close personal friend."

When it comes to people commenting on her videos, Moriyama's perspective has shifted after spending more time on the app as a creator.

"The first video that went viral, I read every single comment. If I didn't like it, I deleted it," Moriyama said. "I used to filter comments. I used to ban so many words, but now, I don't care because [I] take it with a grain of salt. They don't know me."

Despite Moriyama's rational perspective on online hate, some comments still stand out to her.

"A lot of people are like, 'You don't know it yet, but you and I are best friends in my mind.' I think people say that because they have similar interests as me and just assume I'm the same person as them," Moriyama said. "I'm like, 'Wait, you don't even know me.'"

With a social media presence comes the opportunity for people to spread hateful comments and messages without repercussions.

"There's this one DM that I got that I can't forget about," Moriyama said. "I made a video that was like,

'How I think I sound because I don't cuss,' and I got a DM being like, 'Do you think you're cool for not cussing? Just because you don't cuss doesn't make you better than anyone else. That doesn't make you a good person.' They sent different paragraphs to me on two different accounts. I just deleted it and blocked them. It made me realize that people view me based on one video."

Sophomore **Hawoul Shin** had a similar start as Moriyama and began posting dancing videos on TikTok for personal enjoyment.

"I just [wanted] to share my content for the world to see," Shin said. "When my first video did pretty well, I got motivated to keep posting every day."

In contrast to Moriyama's experience, Shin expresses a more positive relationship with his followers.

"I might not know who they are, but I think about my supporters all the time," Shin said. "They really matter. I really appreciate them."

Moriyama's carefully curated online presence gives her insight into the lives of people with an even bigger following.

"This is such a tiny portion of my life. They think of me as the persona I created, which is a cute, innocent Japanese girl that doesn't cuss," Moriyama said. "I just think, 'Oh, I bet everyone's hiding everything about themselves' because if I'm hiding so much about myself as a micro influencer, that means celebrities... we don't know anything about them. Online, you can hide anything."

When asked about her opinion on parasocial relationships, Moriyama says they're unhealthy, weird and delusional.

"I feel like it affects your real life," Moriyama said. "They don't even know you. They'll never know you. They don't care about you at all. They never think about you, and you're thinking about them all the time."

Occasionally, these parasocial relationships cross over into real life in potentially frightening incidents. Strangers have come up to Moriyama after recognizing her from TikTok. One fan found her at a track meet.

"She was like, 'Oh, my God, I watch you all the time. You're so pretty,'" Moriyama said. "The second time, I was at Valley Fair, and this group of girls started yelling at me. They were like, 'I think I know you.' After I got home, one of them DM'd me, and they were like, 'I'm so sorry that I yelled at you. I should have just said hi to you. I love your videos.'"

Although Hickey finds enjoyment in interacting with creators online, she keeps her relationship with social media personalities healthy and cautions against intense infatuation with celebrities.

"I love them so much, but they don't even know I exist," Hickey said. "If you're addicted to a parasocial relationship, you need to do some self-reflection and calm down. That's just insane."

Moriyama provides perspective on influencers' relationships with their fans through her own relationship

with her followers and the "bean soup theory."

"I read [the comments] as the same voice. I don't think of them as this person with this life. They're just my viewers," Moriyama said. "There's a video about this woman making bean soup, and one comment said, 'What if you don't like beans?' Basically, people are always going to think about themselves. They're always going to think everyone owes them something."

Student creator spotlight

13.6 million

people viewed senior **Chiho Moriyama's** most-viewed TikTok. In the video, Moriyama showed a step-by-step makeup tutorial.

1.6 million

people viewed sophomore **Hawoul Shin's** most-viewed TikTok. In the video, Shin, who primarily posts dancing videos, danced to a trending audio.

"I love them so much, but they don't even know I exist. If you're addicted to a parasocial relationship, you need to do some self-reflection and calm down. That's just insane."

Reese Hickey (12) when talking about parasocial relationships. Her favorite creators are Ruby Cruz and Maya Hawke.

#influencer

8.6 million posts on TikTok
53.5 million posts on Instagram

#grwm

22 million posts on TikTok
9.6 million posts on Instagram

#ootd

61.5 million posts on TikTok
466 million posts on Instagram

THE NEW GENERIC

calculating character

The glorification of nonchalance on social media encourages younger generations to take on the persona

YUJIN CHO
Editor-in-Chief

Have you ever enthusiastically greeted someone in the hallway only to get a quick nod of acknowledgement in return? In recent years, teenagers have paid increasing attention to their actions to uphold a “nonchalant” personality.

Characterized by indifference and a relaxed demeanor, a nonchalant person rarely displays vulnerability and often appears uninvested while a chalang person is warm, responsive and engaged. A nonchalant person might choose to avoid unnecessary interactions in group settings and stick to superficial conversations in relationships. The word “nonchalant” is frequently found thrown around in the classroom or on social media as the younger generations assume this persona, with the hashtag reaching over 575,900 posts on TikTok.

Sophomore **Lilia Borokhovich** has encountered numerous nonchalant people throughout her day-to-day life and noted a surge in the persona in the past few years.

“If I’m working in a group with someone, and they’re acting nonchalant, they zone out and don’t listen to the teacher, don’t contribute a lot and just feel like they have to stay in place and keep their image perfect,” Borokhovich said.

Heather Lyons, who holds a Ph.D. in counseling psychology, theorized in an article published on Baltimore Therapy Group that the modern nonchalance epidemic can be attributed to social media. With the prevalence of social media rapidly rising among younger generations, the trendy nonchalant lifestyle’s reach is magnified. Additionally, the rise in people’s online presence — which is accompanied by lasting digital records through posts, comments and photos — increases performance anxiety, making individuals afraid to show vulnerability out of fear of social rejection and coming off as “cringe.”

Junior **BeEmnet Amare** shares a similar perspective when it comes to social media’s involvement in the rise of nonchalance.

“[As] teenagers, we care a lot about how our friends and our classmates think of us. Now that we have this new term, ‘nonchalant,’ everyone’s aware of it, so they try to implement that term into their everyday lives,” Amare said. “It also brings us back to social media — we’re on our phone so much, so if it’s in front of you for so long, you tend to move your way towards that term and the lifestyle.”

Additionally, Amare thinks the desire to be nonchalant can be related to adolescents’ inability to realize that others’ thoughts and actions don’t revolve around them.

“In psychology, we’re learning about egocentrism, where adolescents feel the need to act a certain way because they feel like everyone’s watching them,” Amare said. “Now that we’re at this stage of life, we feel like whatever we do, whatever we wear, the way we act — everyone pays attention to it.”

Sophomore **Ryan Wang** also emphasizes how social media has contributed to a rise in the popularity and critique of nonchalance. Wang believes that social media glorifies ideal personalities, and some people choose to adhere to the popularized personas.

“Some more chalang people probably have stronger opinions towards nonchalance nowadays, with the rise of social media and with people aiming for an ideal persona,” Wang said. “It’s pretty two sided — there are people who really like listening to trends and stuff they like. They want to be the ideal that is described in social media trends and also popular creators while some people just don’t care.”

Amare believes that social media plays a role in shaping users’ opinions, and people perceive nonchalance positively, negatively or neutrally based on the type of content they see.

“It depends on which side of social media you’re on,” Amare said. “If you consider yourself as a nonchalant person, you’d get a lot more positive reactions. If you’re like me and you’re against nonchalant people, you would get a lot of negative responses.”

Additionally, freshman **Briana Kearney** noted that social media can indirectly popularize different personalities and ideas by spotlighting certain topics.

“Being nonchalant is definitely a bigger [personality commonized online], but also being friendly has gotten a lot more popular as a personality because of mental health and how much that’s being broadcasted out on social media,” Kearney said.

Kearney also noticed that nonchalance has developed a mixed connotation among students.

“Some people take it as negative. Some people take it as neutral. It’s just the certain way that you see it,”

Kearney said. “I see it as negative personally because I feel like it’s not showing who you actually are.”

Similarly, Borokhovich agrees that nonchalant people portray an inauthentic persona by not saying anything.

“I know some people are naturally just ignorant and kind of shy, but I think specifically a lot of boys try to put on this persona that they don’t care about anything, and they act all tough,” Borokhovich said.

Wang cares less about how others choose to portray themselves. Because he doesn’t like to engage in conversational topics he doesn’t feel strongly about, he thinks he comes off as nonchalant sometimes.

“Anyone could have their own personality,” Wang said. “Some people could choose to care more about stuff. Some people could choose to care less.”

Oftentimes, shy people may be viewed as nonchalant. While Borokhovich acknowledges this, she emphasizes how it’s become a way for some people to mask their true self.

“I’m sure there are some people who are just naturally quiet and introverted, or they just don’t have a big personality, but I think among certain groups of boys, it’s more of a trend, like something they take on rather than who they truly are,” Borokhovich said.

Borokhovich and Kearney have both found nonchalance to be more common in men than women. In 2009, Neill Korobov, who holds a Ph.D. in developmental psychology, analyzed numerous psychology studies that examined heterosexual white males’ behavior when talking about their romantic relationships. Korobov noted that instead of straightforwardly displaying traditional heroic masculinity, the men would utilize nonchalance and irony, suggesting that the alternative persona is rearticulation of traditional masculinity.

Senior **Brady Smith**, who says his laid-back nature can be interpreted as nonchalance, believes that expressing character correlates more with comfort rather than the desire to convey an inauthentic personality. “Everyone is different around people they’re close to versus people they don’t really know. I don’t think that’s you not being your true self,” Smith said. “You’re not going to be talkative all the time, and you’re not gonna be quiet all the time.”

Borokhovich acknowledges people’s individual choices but takes issue when nonchalant behavior affects others.

“I try not to let it affect me because they’re their own people,” Borokhovich said. “They can do whatever they want, but in moments [where] I have to depend on them for something, and they just care about how they come off, that bothers me.”

Smith thinks that while nonchalant people may be perceived as “cool,” they are often stereotyped as egotistical or unfriendly for being closed off, which isn’t objectively true. Additionally, Smith doesn’t care a lot about how he’s perceived by other people.

“To an extent, everyone [cares], but I wouldn’t say I’m worried about it,” Smith said. “If people say I’m nonchalant, I’m not gonna complain. It’s cool, but it’s not something I’m stressing about.”

For Smith, being naturally shy has made it hard to build relationships quickly. Around people he’s more



Kailey Fu and Emi Mohanrao/Bear Witness

nonchalance

[noun]: calm behavior that suggests you are not interested or do not care.
 Source: Cambridge Dictionary

#mysterious

309, 100 posts on TikTok

#nonchalant

575,900 posts on TikTok
 221,000 posts on Instagram

comfortable with, he’s louder and more energetic. “If you’re more closed off and less willing to talk to people that you don’t have that connection with, then you won’t make friends as quickly,” Smith said. “I made a lot of friends that, if I talked more or been more open, I would have become friends with them sooner.”

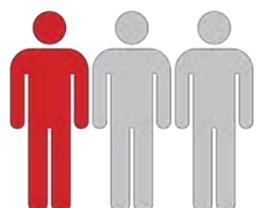
Wang doesn’t notice a difference when establishing connections with diverse types of people, regardless of their character.

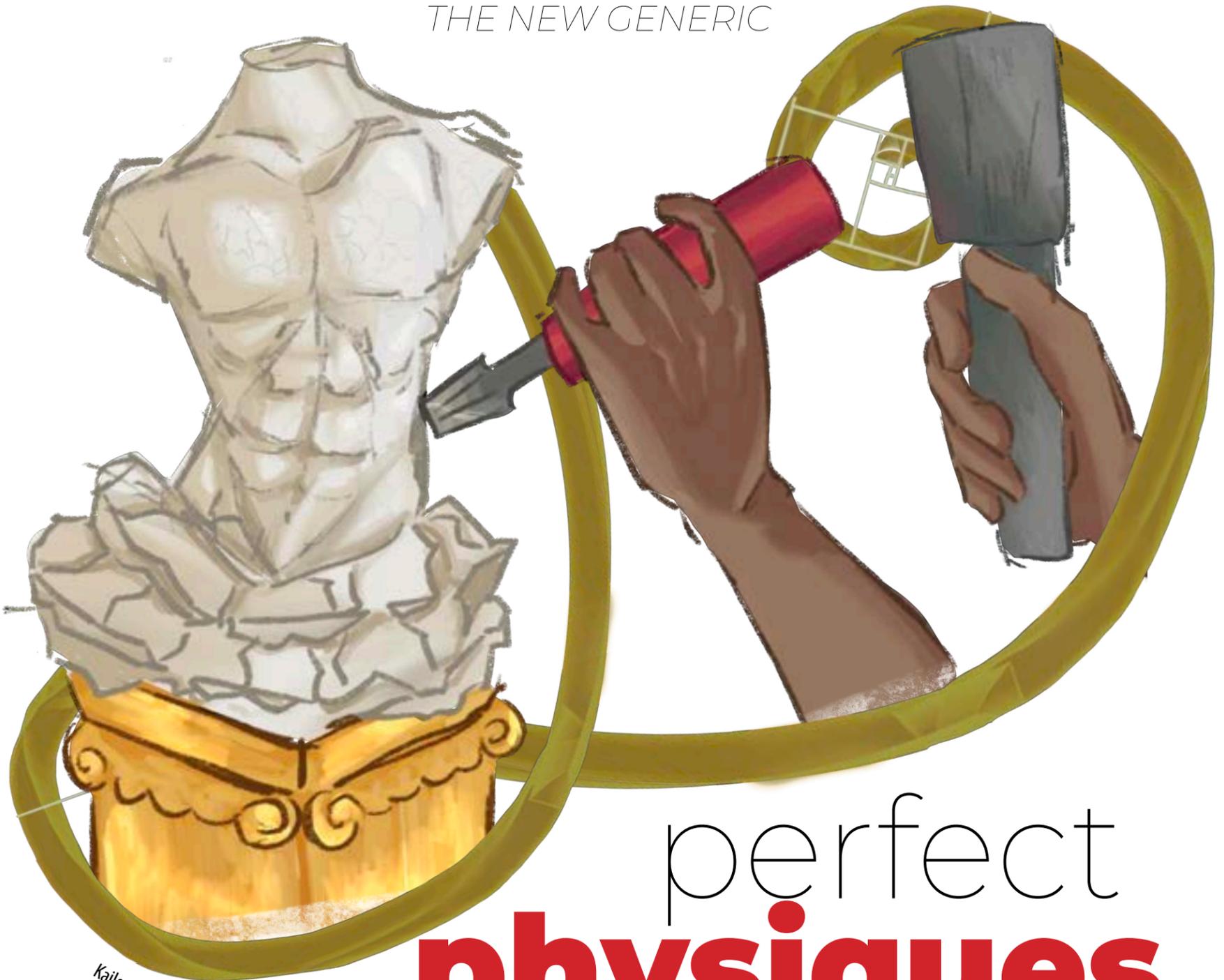
“I just like making friends with people in general,” Wang said. “I don’t really care much about their personalities, unless they’re just straight up toxic.”

As high school students navigate an impressionable period of their life — especially with the presence of social media — they are vulnerable to social expectations. Amare hopes that people are true to themselves and feel comfortable with the person they are.

“I value individualism, so I think people should be acting the way they want to act and shouldn’t be changing the way that they do things because they want to gain approval from people,” Amare said.

1 in 3
 Branham students try to appear nonchalant, according to a Bear Witness Instagram poll of 205 readers.





Kailey Fu and Emi Mohanrao/Bear Witness

perfect physiques

Gymgoers aspire to form their “perfect” physiques with influence from social media

ARYELLA FINKEL-HOZER

Sports Editor

ELLIOTT YAU

Managing Editor

Content warning: This story contains references to body dysmorphia.

Too big? Too small? Too fat? Too skinny? It often seems like modern body standards change continuously. A gym rat, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is “someone who spends a lot of time exercising in the gym, and who cares very much about the shape and condition of their body.”

The gym rat uprising has achieved prevalence among high school students, influencing their exercise, eating habits and self-esteem.

After two years of regularly going to the gym, senior **Logan Nguyen** has gained about 20 pounds of muscle and nearly doubled many of his lifts. However, his dedication to going to the gym in pursuit of reaching his weight and strength goals has taken a toll.

“I’ve developed a kind of body dysmorphia, but it’s not a terrible thing because I think that as long as I’m working towards a goal, I’ll eventually feel happy about myself later,” Nguyen said. “Part of it is from being chronically online and seeing people my age lift double the weight or look two times bigger than me. [For] the amount of work I put in, I feel like I should be getting results like that.”

Body dysmorphia, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), is a “pre-occupation with one or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are not observable or appear slight to others.” Muscle dysmorphia, a subtype of body dysmorphia, mostly affects men, according to the DSM-5. Affected individuals who believe their bodies are too small or insufficiently muscular might avoid social activities, exercise excessively and take anabolic steroids due to concerns about their appearances.

In an article for the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, Jennifer J. Waldron, Ph.D wrote that cultural influences including “action figures, men’s magazines, television shows, and movies often portray the ideal body for men. The ideal body for men is ‘V-shaped’ with muscular arms, a broad chest, and a narrow waist.” The entrance of bodybuilding, a sport focused on enlarging muscles for aesthetic purposes, into mainstream Western culture promoted this, according to Philip Mosley’s 2009 article titled “Bigeorexia: bodybuilding and muscle dysmorphia.”

In modern times, the prevalence of gym content on social media further amplifies this effect: 104 million TikTok posts have a #gym hashtag, and 14 million TikTok posts have a #bodybuilding hashtag.

Softball coach and Intro to Weight Training teacher **Christopher Jensen** added that gym content on social

media doesn’t reveal the full picture.

“The one thing you’re not ever seeing on social media is how much work they’re doing behind the scenes,” Jensen said. “You’re maybe seeing a 30-second video of a person doing a certain lift, and you’re like, ‘Wow, if I do that, I’m going to have muscles like that.’ But what you’re not seeing is the 20 hours a week that person’s putting into being able to look like that.”

Social media often elevates extreme gym goals, according to senior **Hannah Soetaert**.

“For a lot of gym influencers, it’s about lifting as heavy as possible — they blew up because they’re really good at lifting extremely heavy weights, or they’re insanely muscular, and they’re fun to watch in the gym,” Soetaert said.

Soetaert is committed to the University of Nebraska, Omaha for Division I swimming, and she began going to the gym after being inspired by videos of college and professional athletes lifting weights.

Although she is passionate about weightlifting, she notes that it can interfere with swimming, especially since she is committed to the collegiate level. Social media content that focuses on gaining extreme amounts of muscle can be hard to watch for her.

“To a certain point, weightlifting is good because obviously, you’re getting stronger [and] able to pull more water and go faster,” Soetaert said. “But at a point you can get too bulky and have too much muscle, and then almost you’re not hydrodynamic anymore. Also, certain movements are not as good for swimming, and it can lead to more injuries than benefits, so I try to think about it more as trying to get faster.”

In addition to exercise, Jensen said nutrition is another important element of building muscle that isn’t shown often online.

“You’re not seeing the boringness of the meal that that person is eating every single day in order to have that kind of physique,” Jensen said. “We just get that 30 seconds, and we’re like, ‘I can eat McDonald’s, and then if I do that exercise, I can be big like that.’ That’s not how it works.”

To manage his nutrition, Nguyen uses the Cal AI app, which automatically estimates the calories and macronutrients of meals from photos as well as tracks workouts and weight progression. The app helps Nguyen stick to his goals for protein and water, sometimes going to extreme lengths.

“Sometimes I would force feed myself. If I didn’t hit my protein for the day, I would stay up to eat as much food as possible, and I’d have to stop myself from throwing up,” he said. “Or if I didn’t drink all my water, I’d stay up to drink my water.”

The opposite is also true. When he’s cutting weight, Nguyen has to limit his food intake. To him, carefully managing what he eats is worth it.

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes,” Nguyen said. “I

don’t want to sound like I need this, but it’s something I’m working towards, and I really, really want to achieve it.”

A wide variety of supplements are marketed towards gym-goers as a way to enhance performance and recovery. Staying away from steroids and peptides, Nguyen takes creatine monohydrate, a dietary supplement that “increases muscle performance in short-duration, high-intensity resistance exercises,” according to Cleveland Clinic.

With impressionable teenagers being influenced on social media, it can be valuable to acknowledge and fully be aware about what individuals are putting inside their body.

“People are just like, ‘Oh, take this [supplement]. You’ll get huge,’” Jensen said. “You don’t really know what you’re putting in your body. Always my recommendation is wait until you’re 18. Wait until you’re 21.”

Like Nguyen, Soetaert also takes creatine. Although her main goal is to get faster for swimming, building muscle is still important to her. Soetaert’s love for the gym has positively impacted her own body image.

“I feel like going to the gym and following influencers, specifically girl influencers, has really changed my mindset on women and being ‘bulky’ per se,” she wrote in an email. “I never really thought about it, and I never really initially had a stance on whether women could look ‘too muscular,’ but I think going to the gym has made me love my body way more as I’ve noticed gaining more muscle.”

After getting more involved with the gym, Soetaert found herself constantly looking at herself in the mirror in positive and negative ways.

“I’m always paying attention to what my body looks like — not just how skinny I am, but what my muscles look like and how I can get bigger,” Soetaert said. “That’s obviously a drive for being in the gym, but [it] also can be a little bit detrimental because in the mirror, I always look at my muscles when they’re not flexing. I’m like ‘You can’t even tell they’re there.’ That definitely has shaped me.”

Despite this, Soetaert made sure to highlight the positive impacts on her self-confidence and mentality, a result that Nguyen has also observed.

“I fell in love with [going to the gym] because it made me feel good about myself — being able to look in the mirror and be proud of something that I’ve worked for,” Nguyen said. “It went from something boring [that] I used to neglect to something I look forward to every day.”

Choosing to focus on his own progress, Nguyen tries to avoid comparing himself to others.

“People need to realize they need to be comfortable with themselves and their bodies,” Nguyen said. “As long as you realize how much work you put in and progress you’ve made, I think that’s the key to being happy.”

#gym

324 million posts on Instagram
104 million posts on TikTok

#weightlifting

25 million posts on Instagram
2.1 million posts on TikTok

#bodybuilding

153 million posts on Instagram
14 million posts on TikTok

ARTS & CULTURE

Students comment on the rise of book-to-film adaptations like television series "Heated Rivalry."



PAGE 14

BRANHAM BREAKDOWN

An overview of the campus with fun facts about each location — in Monopoly Board form.



BACKPAGE

SPORTS

Branham sports witness a rise in the amount of student photographers.



PAGE 9

BEAR WITNESS



@bhsbearwitness

FEBRUARY 2026

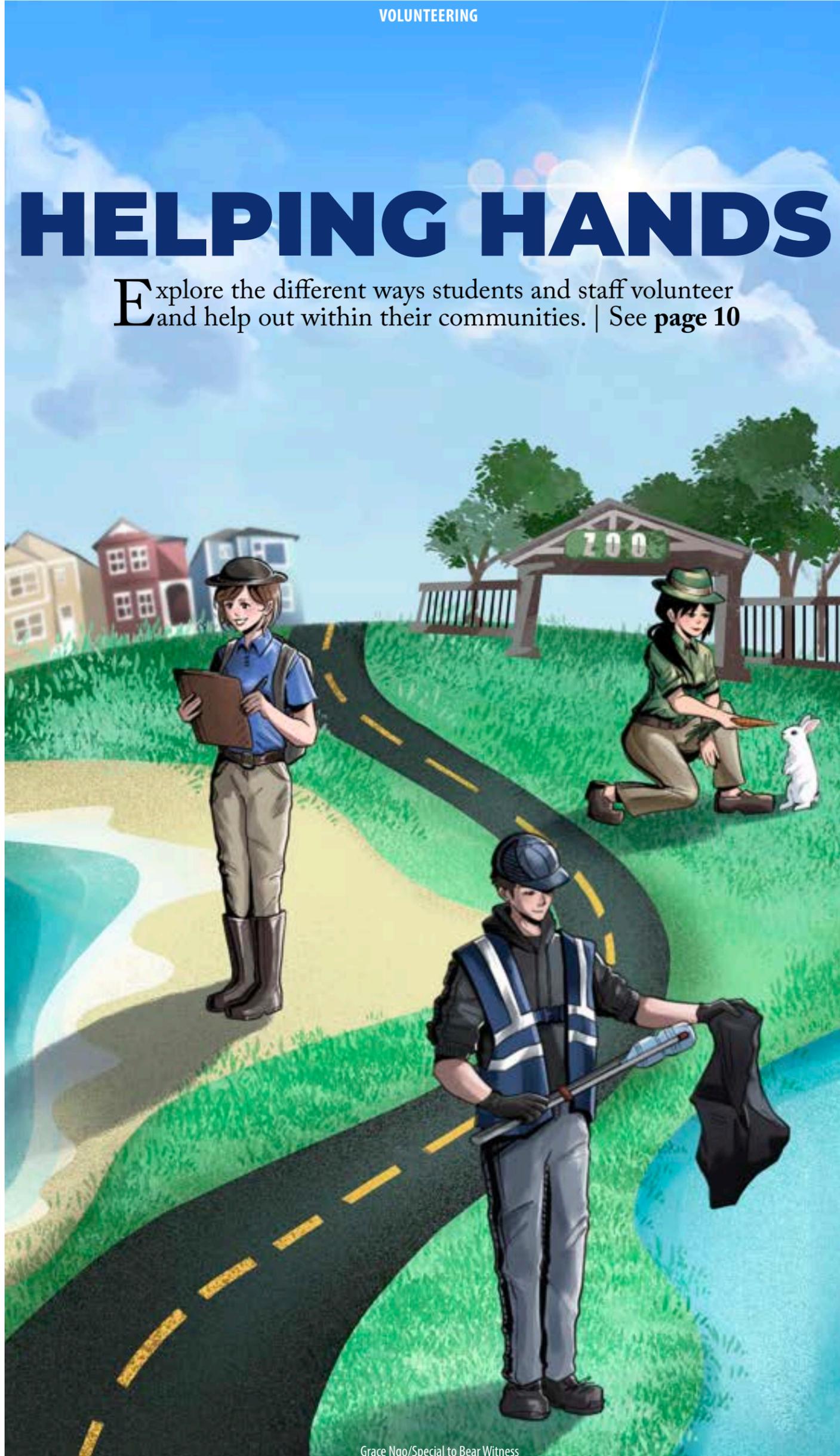
BRANHAM HIGH SCHOOL

BHSBEARWITNESS.ORG

VOLUNTEERING

HELPING HANDS

Explore the different ways students and staff volunteer and help out within their communities. | See page 10



Grace Ngo/Special to Bear Witness

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE

Lesson to remember

Holocaust survivors tell their stories to Branham community

YEONWOO OH Staff Writer

Branham hosted three Holocaust Survivor Speaker Events in conjunction with the Jewish Family and Children's Services Holocaust Center on Jan. 27, allowing students to directly engage with survivor stories on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Sophomores were required to attend presentations hosted by the speakers during fifth and sixth period English classes. One presentation was held after school and open to all students and family.

The event allowed students to interact with three different speakers: George Rothman, Jeannette Ringold and Herbert Barasch. Principal Beth Silbergeld said the goal was to help students connect classroom learning with real human experience.

"We hosted three survivors from the Holocaust to present their stories and give their testimonies about their experiences as children during the Holocaust," Silbergeld said. "We focused primarily on 10th graders because there are direct ties to the curriculum in the 10th grade."

Beyond academics, the event aimed to strengthen empathy across campus, particularly in the wake of the antisemitic hate incident that occurred in December, where eight students formed a Nazi swastika with their bodies on the Branham football field and posted it on Instagram. The incident gained attention within the community and globally as international news outlets like The Guardian and The Times of Israel covered it.

"The goal is for every student to have the experience before they graduate from Branham to hear testimony from survivors so that they understand the impact that hatred and unchecked prejudice can have on individuals and families," Silbergeld said.

English teacher Barbara Arduini played a key role in introducing the idea for the event to Branham, drawing on her memories as a student from survivors speaking at her school. Arduini had also previously taught the book "Night," Elie Wiesel's autobiographical account of the Holocaust, at other schools. This year, she's teaching the book in her English 2 class at Branham.

"I emailed the principal because we were teaching 'Night,' which is a Holocaust survivor story," Arduini said. "When I was in high school, we always had survivors come to my school, and I thought it was really powerful."

During the after school event, the audience listened as Rothman shared his story alongside his daughter, Liz Isaacs, who helped guide the presentation. Rothman began by asking students to think about their own lives and childhood.

Rothman was a child during the war in France and survived by being hospitalized when his parents were sent to Auschwitz. He was then passed between friends of his family and a Catholic orphanage before being sent to family in the United States following the war. Despite surviving, he went through a lot of devastating moments during the war.

"I'm going to begin by asking you a question, 'Where were you on your ninth birthday?'" Rothman said during his retelling. "This is where one of the important turning points of my life took place, on my ninth birthday."

Rothman recounted one of his last memories with his parents before they were deported.

"My parents came to visit me, and my mother started crying, and so I started crying too because whenever my mother

SEE REMEMBRANCE - PAGE 8

NEWS

REMEMBRANCE | Holocaust survivors speak

From PAGE 1

cried, I cried," Rothman said. "I don't know why she was crying, but I cried because she was crying."

Rothman also described the complex adjustments of his post-war life in the United States.

"Now, I'm 12 years old, and I have to do four things," Rothman said. "I have to learn a new language. I had to get used to a new way of life because Paris is not the same as living here. I have been going through adolescence, so that's not easy, and the fourth thing is [that] I had to deal with the Jewish aspect of where I was now because now, I'm in a Jewish environment."

Rothman experienced many problems reconnecting with his Jewish identity throughout the war as he had converted to Catholicism while hiding in the orphanage during the war.

"I didn't know anything about being Jewish," Rothman said.

Rothman felt that his survival was not because he was braver or more deserving than others.

"Nothing spectacular [happened, but what] was spectacular is that I did it," Rothman said. "I had a chance to live and carry on my life and just be somebody."

He ended with a message directed at the students in the room, shifting from the past to the present.

"Each one of us is very important. It's very stunning," Rothman said. "But just if [even] one of you is missing, we're not here. You're changing this whole room because you're not here. That's how important we are, each of them are."

Many students found the testimonies emotionally challenging, particularly when learning how organized and systematic the Holocaust was. Arduini said this realization often reshapes students' understanding of this event and encourages a greater level of empathy.

"Most students know the Holocaust happened,

and they know it was bad," Arduini said. "But I don't think they're fully aware of how methodical it was."

Arduini emphasized the need to complete such reflections in order to recognize the emotional effect without minimizing the horrible reality of disaster.

English 2 Honors students read the graphic novel "Maus" by Art Spiegelman, which depicts a character's experiences during the Holocaust, while exploring thematic topics, discussing emotions and answering higher order thinking (HOT) questions. Students were able to compare and contrast between the book and the speech they attended.

"It's appropriate to be upset when learning about something horrible," Arduini said. "But we also need to focus on the resiliency of people who survived and the bravery of those who tried to help."

Although students missed a period of class to attend the event, Silbergeld said the experience was comparable to a field trip and worth the instructional time. Both Silbergeld and other staff members viewed the speaker series as one step toward encouraging a more respectful and informed campus climate after the incident.

Following the event, students were encouraged to reflect on the testimonies and consider how the lessons of the Holocaust apply to current events and modern forms of discrimination.

"I would advise students to hold the story they heard near to their hearts," Silbergeld said. "[They should] let it inform how they view events today that aim to dehumanize people, especially marginalized groups."

Silbergeld emphasized the importance of hosting the event at this particular moment, both because the number of living Holocaust survivors continues to decline and because of the recent



Yujin Cho/Bear Witness

Survivor Herbert Barasch speaks to a group of sophomores about his life during the Holocaust.

antisemitic incident on campus. She stated that hearing firsthand testimony enables students to better understand how hatred affects the real world.

"It is crucial that we take the time to hear direct testimony from Holocaust survivors," Silbergeld said. "In the next 10 years, we may not have any more living survivors of the Holocaust."

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

The Cal State sitch

CATHERINE CARTER
Staff Writer

Under California Senate Bill 640, all applicants in the fall of 2027 will be eligible for automatic acceptance to 16 out of 22 colleges that make up the California State University system.

The CSU Direct Admission Program will guarantee admission for these colleges for California students who complete A-G coursework requirements, complete an application to their desired campus and maintain a 2.5 GPA or above.

Counselor **Juan Lopez** believes that the introduction of this system will have benefits for both students and schools.

"A college acceptance is significant for young adults and for them to know that attending college is possible," Lopez said. "It's also a good opportunity for CSUs to promote their universities and various programs available to students."

Sophomore **Amanda Stratman**, who is planning on applying to some CSUs, agrees that this law will have promising effects.

"It was a really great idea to offer that opportunity to kids," Stratman said.

On the other hand, senior **Lauren DeWeese-van Schooneveld** — who applied to the Bakersfield, Los Angeles, Chico, Monterey Bay, Sacramento, Stanislaus and Humboldt colleges — believes that if acceptance is guaranteed, some students may feel as though the sacrifices they made in high school are not recognized.

"There should be a little bit more of a filter because people work really hard," DeWeese-van Schooneveld said. "If it's automatic, it doesn't feel like my hard work paid off. What am I doing all this for?"

Contrarily, Lopez feels that the implementation of this system will have positive impacts that reach beyond the students themselves, especially because parents will be certain their children can be accepted into college and will be able to start saving for the \$27,000-\$35,000 cost of attendance.

"For parents [or] guardians, having an idea that their student can attend a CSU is incredibly important to support their students' success while in high school and also to prepare financially," Lopez said.



Courtesy of San Francisco State University
San Francisco State University is one of the 16 schools that will switch to automatic acceptance.

According to the Princeton Review, 76% of high school students feel high amounts of stress regarding the college application process, but Stratman feels optimistic that students will feel less pressure from their parents due to this program. However, she acknowledges that students may not feel as driven to excel since they know they have a safety net as long as their GPA is high enough.

"If you're the type of kid that needs that push, you're not going to get that push anymore because you're going to [think] I can do the bare minimum and still get into a really great state school," Stratman said.

Although DeWeese-van Schooneveld believes that including students' personal qualities and extracurriculars in the evaluation process could validate applicants' comprehensive efforts, she does not think it would be a good idea if colleges added more requirements.

"It would put [at] a disadvantage communities who are impoverished," DeWeese-van Schooneveld said.

Stratman believes that all people deserve to be educated, no matter their circumstances, and this system will help make that happen.

"Education should be open to anyone who needs it," Stratman said.

TRUANCY

MERCY ON TRUANCY

California law decriminalizes child truancy for parents

ENOCH SHIN
Staff Writer

California Assembly Bill 461, which decriminalizes parents' responsibility regarding chronically truant students, officially took effect at the beginning of the year.

Defined by the California Department of Education, a student is considered chronically truant if they have unexcused absences for 10% or more of school days during the year. All school districts, including Campbell Union High School District (CUHSD), have systems in place to prevent chronic truancy.

In CUHSD, students receive a letter of truancy inquiring why they are truant from their school office clerk during the first stage. If their behavior isn't fixed, the scenario can escalate to the second stage, where the student's parents are invited to a School Attendance Review Team (SART) meeting with an assistant principal to discuss ways to improve the student's attendance. If the students still don't correct their attendance, they are invited to CUHSD's school review board meeting, and a meeting with and possible charges by the Santa Clara District Attorney's Office are considered.

According to Assistant Principal **David Levy**, most students struggle with truancy for similar reasons.

"It's students having a hard time getting up and going to school," Levy said. "Their sleep cycles are different, or they have anxiety. There are a lot of reasons. It could just be school avoidance as well."

An **anonymous student** who received a truancy letter four months ago said that there was more to their lack of attendance than a lack of motivation or sleep.

"I was sick, and my parents only go to the doctor when it's serious, so I didn't really have a note to clear up any of the truantries," they said.

Most students don't make it past the first and second stage of truancy to the point where prosecution occurs, according to Levy.

"In my experience, parents are usually very supportive of trying to help get their kids to school," Levy said.

Courtney Schembri, the Director of Student Services and Chair of the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB), shared a similar experience.

"I have never seen [a truancy case given to the

attorney general], and it's very rare anyway before this bill passed to my knowledge," Schembri said. "I don't know if parents were charged, but in high school specifically, we see much less involvement with that system because our students are older."

With the new bill, Schembri hopes that students and parents receive more support regarding truancy.

"It may actually bring families in more and want to work with us because it's more restorative," Schembri said. "I don't know if it will change student behavior, but hopefully it will call folks into not just our district, but the school system in general. I hope that it will allow families to feel that we're more in a partnership, and we want to bring students to school."

Levy believes that the bill can help truant students.

"We're much better served virtually all the time by trying to work collaboratively with parents. In my experience, virtually all parents want their students in school," Levy said. "It's really trying to work collaboratively with them rather than

holding something over parents' heads."

Although Schembri and Levy both agreed on the effects of the Bill, the anonymous student shared a different perspective, believing that parents hold a certain level of responsibility for their child.

"The bill definitely has its constraints, and it's helpful to an extent," the student said. "It's okay to question parents a bit as to why their child is truant because oftentimes it leads to neglect, and it's important to recognize those signs before further consequences happen."

Rather than the new bill, the anonymous student questioned the CUHSD's system of truancy, mentioning that they wish there was more information about truancy and how to manage a truant status.

"I would say that the system right now is a bit flawed because they send you letters, but there's never any actual follow-up," they said. "So it's confusing and a bit misleading as to what steps you should take thereafter."



Enoch Shin/Bear Witness

Junior Abhinav Ramanath sits across from an empty desk during class.



Editor-in-Chief | Yujin Cho

Editors

Managing Editor: Elliott Yau

News Editor: Emmett Spear

Opinion Editor: Abigail Medeiros

Arts and Culture Editor: Dylan Collisson

Science and Health Editor: Elliott Yau

Student Life Editor: Noa Muyal

Sports Editor: Aryella Finkel-Hozer

Staff Writers

Catherine Carter, Cain Cheng, Kailey Fu, Brayden Gassmann, Brianna Gassmann, Emiliano Gonzalez, Amy Gunaseelan, Anya Gupta, Andrew Ho, Colin Kalanges, Kendall Ladd, Amelia Martorano, Emi Mohanrao, Sienna Moss, Yeonwoo Oh, Vanessa Perez, Reese Richard, Enoch Shin, Hailey Steed, Rebecca Tochilnikov, Danna Triana, Taylor Urquhart

Adviser: Yale Wyatt

Mission Statement:

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.

Website: bhsbearwitness.org

Phone: (408) 626-3407

Email: bhsbearwitness@gmail.com

Address: 1570 Branham Lane, San Jose, CA 95118

SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

TAKING A SHOT

Student photographers take photos on sidelines of Branham sports games

CAIN CHENG
Staff Writer

Over the past semester, student photographers have become ever more present on Bruin sidelines.

One of those photographers, freshman **Anthony Orzalli**, has already found a place on the photography scene after starting out less than two years ago.

"When I came to Branham, I didn't know anybody," Orzalli said. "When I started doing photography here, I met a lot of people and new photographers that I've now become friends with."

It's not only taking pictures that makes him feel at home — it's the reactions from athletes after seeing the photos that gives him pride.

"The players always enjoy it very much. They always thank me and say my photos are really good," Orzalli said. "They love my work overall and want me to be at every game."

Athletic Director **Kaleb Lane**, who is in charge of distributing field passes to aspiring student photographers, has seen an increase in demand for these passes.

"Something we championed this year was trying to get kids involved in athletics that don't necessarily play those sports, or don't play sports at all," Lane said.

The rise in student photographers aligns with CCS commissioner David Grissom's vision statement for helping students feel involved with their school sports.

Lane hopes that allowing students to expand their hobby will create opportunities to develop a career, fund their college tuition and beyond.

"We have some kids that are getting so into photography now that they're thinking [about] making a career out of it," Lane said. "[I want] them to have the opportunity to take those action shots and get that practice in."

Sports photography can also benefit students on the other side of the camera as well.

"It also is a great way for our student athletes to get a little bit of recognition out on social media," Lane said. "Especially for those that are looking to play at the next level, this gives them some



Cain Cheng/Bear Witness

Anthony Orzalli (9) takes photos in the gym.

really cool action shots of themselves and a self-esteem booster at the same time."

Orzalli wants to eventually pursue a full-time career in photography. Although he currently does some free and paid shoots, he's still working on perfecting his craft.

"People who say doing things for free won't get you anywhere don't know what they're saying," Orzalli said. "I've done most of

my work for free, and now I'm starting to get paid for it."

Lane treats the opportunity to photograph Branham sports games as a preview for potential professional work, which is one reason he requires student photographers to dress appropriately in Branham gear to look good in front of an audience.

"When you step out on that field as a photographer, even though you're not playing in that game, you are still representing us as a sport," Lane said. "It shows all the different things we're offering to people to come to Branham."

Orzalli's passion for both photography and football have unlocked opportunities for him to take pictures for games that he thought he would not have the chance to photograph.

"Playing for the JV team allowed me to be on the sidelines for varsity games, which helped me improve a lot," Orzalli said. "I never really thought I would be going to the CCS championship football game to take pictures."

Although senior **Ethan Tran** doesn't intend to pursue photography full time, it's a hobby that he still enjoys.

"I don't think I have the certain amount of passion that it'll take me super far or where I want to go," Tran said. "I really do appreciate people who make it a career because those are the people that have the craziest amount of talent."

Tran mentions that his enthusiasm for taking photos revitalized after taking pictures for football, exotic cars and nature for the past two years.

"My dad, my uncle and my grandpa — all three of them took photos. That was my intro to [photography]," Tran said.

Tran also said that it's a challenging but rewarding practice that takes time and money to invest in.

"The one thing you can't buy is liking the process [of] actually being in the moment to take photos. Photography is not something that you can do remotely," Tran said. "You gotta travel, move and be willing to go places."

Orzalli advises beginners to take advantage of opportunities and practice.

"Don't worry about what other people say about your work. Photography definitely takes time," Orzalli said. "I've been doing it over for over a year now, and it's definitely I still have lots of things I can improve on."

SPORTS TRAINING PROGRAM

Trainers in training

Athletic training program opens opportunities for students interested in the medical field

DANNA TRIANA
Staff Writer

Athletic Trainer **Brady Och** started the Student Athletic Training Aid Program for students who are interested in sports medicine. Students help out in the athletic training room and on the sidelines during games, gaining hands-on experience in the medical field.

Och created the program after working alongside senior **Kira Phan**, who helped previous trainers during her freshman year and continued working with Och. Inspired by collaborating with Phan, Och reached out to Principal Beth Silbergeld to start the program, which was first advertised in an email encouraging students to join on May 30, 2024.

Phan shares her thoughts on how the program changed her approach to injured athletes.

"Before, I didn't really focus on teaching other people, and it was just me and the athletic trainer helping other students. Now, I have the opportunity to advance my skills and teach other students about it," Phan said.

The program builds understanding of anatomy along with various technical skills.

"You get to learn about how the body works, how injuries happen and how to prevent them, as well as hands-on things like different types of



Taylor Urquhart/Bear Witness

Athletic trainer Brady Och helps a soccer player.

tests to figure out what type of injury they have or taping," Phan said.

In addition to the benefits of learning sports medicine, Och also teaches his students about critical thinking and pushes their reasoning.

"I like to make people think for themselves and use their brains and try to do some critical thinking," Och said. "I'll ask people questions about things that we may or may not have talked about and see how they can work through

it. Then, I tell them my thought process on the question."

Och explains that one of the unique perks of being a student of his athletic training program is the hands-on experience.

"It's a really good chance for students to get acquainted with evaluating injuries, treating things and doing things in a much more advanced fashion than anywhere else," Och said. "If you were to shadow a doctor's office or a medical office, that's [a] great experience, but you're probably not actually ever gonna get to touch a patient."

Junior **Jacob Lindt** agrees, adding that learning through hands-on experience has benefits that online courses can't offer.

"Especially with medical terms, it's definitely helpful to learn from somebody and memorize it rather than learn it from a video and be confused about it," Lindt said.

Lindt hopes to use this experience for his future career.

"I'm probably going to get into some type of kinesiology or sports medicine," Lindt said.

The program has also allowed Phan to see a different side of athletes.

"[As] an athletic trainer, you see a different side of athletes other than just them playing

the game. They're also vulnerable when they get hurt," Phan said.

As Och has become more involved with teaching students at Branham, he may expand the program in the future.

"I could see myself eventually trying to start a sports medicine class," Och said. "I feel like that's something that a lot of students would be interested in."

Sophomore **Valentina Hernandez**, who also works with Och, loved the idea of a sports medicine class.

"I would love to learn as much as I can because, after practice, he's very busy with people who come to him with injuries," Hernandez said. "If we had a class, it'd be way easier to learn information and be more focused. This could help other students learn more things and get volunteer hours, and [it's] another way to interact with the school."

Phan says that she will apply her experience in the Student Athletic Training Aid Program toward her future career and encourages others to apply.

"If you're interested in kinesiology, you should just go for it," Phan said. "I didn't really know I would be interested in this until I walked into that room and fell in love with that."

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Rain on my play

Rainy weather affects winter and spring sports

AMY GUNASEELAN
Staff Writer

Branham athletic sports — such as soccer, softball and track and field — are often affected by rainy weather conditions, changing athletes' performance and posing challenges during practices and games.

Each sport has a different protocol when it comes to dealing with bad weather conditions. Girls junior varsity soccer coach **Anthony Mata** emphasizes the importance of being aware of the weather when planning practices.

"Here in the Bay Area, [the weather] fluctuates so much, so we're definitely paying attention to that," Mata said. "That goes all into our planning of what it is that we're going to be bringing out to the field."

No matter how much planning goes into a practice, coaches and players still have to work around the weather's lasting effects on equipment.

"Sometimes you play in weather where the conditions aren't as great, and it does affect [the] performance of the ball," Mata said. "If the ball's saturated and soaked, it makes it heavy, so your

cleats, your equipment, everything becomes heavy."

Junior **Kasey Fagin**, who plays soccer, slipped and sprained her ankle during a rainy practice. Fagin has noticed similar occurrences with her teammates and prefers for practices to be canceled during bad weather to prevent injuries and illnesses from the cold.

"We've had so many injuries," Fagin said. "Now a lot of the team is injured, and I feel like doing simple things to prevent it is kind of easy."

Mata tries to curb injuries from the rain by ensuring the athletes properly warm up. However, athletes may also suffer psychologically from rainy conditions, resulting in their performance taking a toll as a result. Mata attempts to help players as much as possible when their performance begins to degrade during a game.

"Sometimes that's a sub, and other times it's just trying to get them to mentally focus on what they're doing rather than things that are out of their control, like the weather and the conditions that they're playing in," Mata said.

For Mata, hosting practices in the rain can also train his players to persevere through weather

challenges.

"[It] could help the players build resilience playing in cold and wet weather, so even when it rains, we don't necessarily take a day off," Mata said. "It's that learning opportunity for them to learn how to perform at high intensity."

Junior **Sydney Short** practices on a dirt field with her softball team, which can become difficult in the presence of rain.

"We hit in the cage instead because it's a little more covered with the net," Short said. "We can't really play on the field because of all the puddles."

Short believes that playing on a turf field would help counteract rain's effects and suggests other solutions for rainy games.

"Pregame, we should have tarps on the field," Short said. "That's so we can prevent as much [rain] as possible, but what's happening during the game you can't really control as much."

While rain itself isn't enough to cancel softball games, lightning poses a more serious threat across all sports. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) states that when lightning is prevalent during a game,

players are required to wait thirty minutes between flashes before determining whether or not to cancel.

When it comes to cross country, thunder and lightning are typically the most dangerous threats that pose concerns for track and field and cross country coach **Craig Lee**.

"As soon as we hear the thunder or we see the lightning, we are calling everybody in to go inside and make sure we're safe," Lee said.

Although the all-weather track helps lessen the effects of rain for track and field, the cross country off-track routes create challenges for runners due to muddy uphill.

"We typically switch to a more road course, something that they can run, and as long as it's safe, we will send them out," Lee said.

No matter the sport's protocol when it comes to rainy weather conditions, athlete safety always remains a top priority.

"The toughest things that we've seen is really heavy, intense rain or almost hail at certain times," Lee said. "When it gets to that [point], it's just not safe for some of them to be out there."

STUDENT LIFE

VOLUNTEERING

VOLUNTEERING | Helping hands

Branham students and staff give back to their community

REESE RICHARD
Staff Writer

Whether it's through community service, conservation action or international opportunities, volunteering is a way for community members to dedicate time to causes they care about and gain insight and experience.

Science teacher **Rachel Basore** says volunteering has always been in her life since childhood. Her early exposure to community service has shaped her community efforts later on.

"From the time I was at elementary school, middle school and high school, I was in an environment where community service was so important," Basore said.

Basore has volunteered in nursing homes, canned food drives and took part in many clean-up events at Spring View middle school. While attending Rocklin High School, she was required to complete 100 hours of community service. By the end of high school, Basore had completed close to 400 volunteer hours.

After college, Basore volunteered as a zookeeper assistant at the Sacramento Zoo from 2007 to 2008, achieving approximately 180 hours. Basore later volunteered internationally, traveling to Kenya in 2019 to work with OI Pejeta Conservancy and to Costa Rica in 2023 to volunteer with Sea Turtle Conservancy.

"I was searching for volunteer opportunities for science research, and I stumbled across them," Basore said. "In some ways, it's luck, but it's also about knowing those positions exist. There's a lot out there and you just have to go search, and then you have to take that leap."

In Kenya, Basore worked with wildlife conservation teams, helped with a canine unit and participated in various community projects like building clay stoves to reduce indoor air pollution. In Costa Rica, she aided with sea turtle research and data collection.

"The experience has been amazing, and then I get to bring that research experience back to the classroom," Basore said.

Volunteering has helped Basore understand what working in other fields looks like outside of a classroom setting.

Sophomore **Emily Lloyd** volunteers at the Seymour Discovery Center in Santa Cruz. Lloyd works as an exhibit guide, teaching visitors about marine life along the California coast.

"I really want to be a marine biologist, and I talked to my counselor. [They said to] do things that are related to your future job, so I decided to volunteer there," Lloyd said. "I became an exhibit guide, and I was working behind the [display] table. I would also be able to work with the sharks."

Like Basore, sophomore **Dhrithi Ravilochan** volunteers with multiple organizations focused on climate advocacy, environmental cleanup and education. She participates in river cleanups with Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful, volunteers at a library math club for elementary students and works with Silicon Valley Youth Climate Action.

Ravilochan became involved by searching online for volunteer opportunities that matched her interests and attending school and community events. Through Silicon Valley, she has advocated for environmental policies and has communicated with local government officials.

"We talked to the mayor about trying to create this act called 'Make Polluters Pay.' Polluting companies, like gasoline companies, have to pay some amount as a fee for their pollution," Ravilochan said. "Then we take that money to fight the pollution, or that's what the state would have done if the act had passed. We got the mayor's support for that act."



Courtesy of Rachel Basore

Biology teacher Rachel Basore poses for a picture at OI Pejeta in Kenya with a blind black rhino.

Lloyd described how volunteering helped her discover her interests and improve her college applications.

"Definitely starting [volunteering] early would be really good," Lloyd said. "Getting your hours is good because then you can figure out which place you like volunteering [at] the most. It would just help you with colleges so much. Just start emailing the people who manage the volunteer places, and ask them a ton of questions, then try to work your way up there."

One of Ravilochan's most cherished volunteer moments was during a habitat restoration project near a marsh.

"I saw the trees that I planted and [how] they had grown," Ravilochan said. "It was so cool. I made a difference."

Volunteering allowed Ravilochan to see the effects of her work over time, and it encouraged her to continue participating in community

achievements. Ravilochan encouraged students to look for opportunities where volunteers are actively involved.

"I technically volunteer for Red Cross, but I don't really do anything in it," Ravilochan said. "Things like river cleanup make me feel like I'm actually doing something."

Lloyd says she volunteered primarily from summer to mid-October. She completed approximately 56 hours of community service. Volunteering has benefited and introduced her to new people with different backgrounds and interests.

"I met so many nice families. Creating more of a social environment around myself is really cool," Lloyd said. "I think volunteering there, specifically, [and] meeting so many different people with so many different backgrounds, has really opened up my mind about everyone else. It's a really good experience."

COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

Early to the action

Seniors who applied early hear back from schools

ANYA GUPTA
Staff Writer

Many Branham students apply to college through early action due to its many benefits.

Colleges offer a variety of application plans, with the main being regular decision, early action and early decision. Regular decision applications are typically due during the winter while early action applications are due in the fall and allow students to hear back earlier. Early decision applications are also due in the fall, but students who are accepted must enroll.

Senior **Andrew Kim** was accepted into Yale University through single-choice early action. Single choice early action is a nonbinding acceptance but limits students to apply to only one private institution early. Applying early sim-

plified the workload of the application process.

"It cuts your essay workload in half," Kim said. "I know there are a lot of seniors who are balancing academics, school, extracurriculars and [college] essays, so being able to do that early really helps. Once I heard back from Yale, I was really relieved, so I could actually study for my finals."

Senior **Lauren DeWeese** applied early action to 10 universities and applied to 24 overall schools to increase her chances of acceptances.

"My brother applied to 19 [schools], and he only got accepted to four, so I was planning ahead," DeWeese said. "I originally started at around 42 universities, and I narrowed it down from there."

DeWeese chose to apply to several schools through early action to shorten the wait time. Most early action schools notify students of their results between December and February while regular decision results come out between March and April.

"I don't like waiting. It makes me nervous," DeWeese said. "I just want to get it over and done with."

In addition to getting faster results, applying early gives students the opportunity to have their application reviewed multiple times by admissions officers. At most institutions, students can be accepted, denied or deferred, where a deci-

sion is postponed until the application is reviewed again in the regular application pool.

"If you get deferred, like I did for the University of Southern California, you can say that you're still interested," DeWeese said. "They will reconsider you in the general admissions, which is really helpful."

Senior **Hailey Carter** — who applied early action to schools including Pennsylvania State University, Cal State Long Beach, University of Oregon, Oregon State University and University of Colorado, Boulder — said the timing of early action was especially advantageous.

"Getting [college applications] done over summer is a lot easier than doing it during school," Carter said.

DeWeese considered how other students may be dealing with college applications. She highlighted how choosing whether or not to apply early action is typically based on how people manage their time.

"It's a little bit of both [procrastination and being busy]," DeWeese said. "A lot of people don't have the time to do that early on in the year, but it definitely could be procrastination."

Carter agreed, highlighting her personal experiences with procrastination.

"My essays were kind of done by the time school started, but they were still iffy because I procrastinated," Carter said.

Carter thinks that early action is the best choice when applying to colleges because it gives students more time to process their acceptances and rejections and allows them to weigh their options with less stress before committing to a single college.

"The anxiety of not getting accepted went away," Carter said. "In case you didn't get in, you have that time to quickly apply to more schools."

DeWeese believes that early action was not only the most beneficial option for herself, but likely for others as well.

"It's best to apply for early action because not only do you get considered more than once if you get deferred, but it also gives you more time where you're facing a lot of rejections," DeWeese said. "You already know what schools have accepted you, so you can enroll in those."



779

out of 7,140 of Yale University's Class of 2030 Early Action applicants were offered admission.

Source: Yale News

Amelia Martorano/Bear Witness

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

NAILED IT

Senior Aldina Metovic offers custom nail services

BRIANNA GASSMANN
Staff Writer

For senior **Aldina Metovic**, doing nails at home was more than a TikTok trend. What started as a small hobby during her freshman year has grown into a creative outlet that she uses to express herself and connect with her friends outside of school. Metovic began doing her own nails when she discovered on so-



Courtesy of Aldina Metovic

A nail set designed by Aldina Metovic (12).

cial media that it offered an artistic solution to her nail biting. "I always liked painting my nails and getting dressed up," Metovic said. "I have always had a problem [with] biting my nails, so I became super insecure about them."

Metovic began researching nails and creating designs herself. Through TikTok, she discovered a new technique called Gel-X, which involves gluing a nail tip made of solid gel onto the natural nail before painting.

"It was a lot easier than acrylic," Metovic said. "I got really creative with it, and it became an outlet for me."

Eventually, people began to notice the unique designs on Metovic's nails. After explaining that she designed them herself, her friends began to request appointments with her. Through practice, patience and time, she improved her skills and eventually gained enough confidence to start doing her friends' nails for free. Over time, her hobby has grown into a fun social activity rather than a business.

Even though she does nails almost every day after school, she still manages to balance it with school and her job. On average, a set of nails for one person takes around an hour, depending on length, shape and design.

"I always find time," Metovic said. "It's become a daily thing, whether it's looking online for new sets or actually doing someone's nails."

Nail art trends change quickly, and Metovic keeps up by watching short videos on TikTok and searching for inspiration on Pinterest. Instead of copying designs, she prefers experimenting on her own and finding techniques that work best for her.

While Metovic has thought about going into cosmetology to get her nail technician license, she views it more as a lifelong hobby. Currently, she hopes to pursue a career working with children but doesn't plan on completely stopping doing nails. By doing nails at home, Metovic is able to save money and help not only herself, but also her friends, feel more confident.

"I love being able to do nails for my friends," Metovic said. "I don't think it's ever something that I could give up."



Courtesy of Aldina Metovic

A nail set designed by Aldina Metovic (12).

WORKING WITH KIDS

Little kids, little legends

Branham students reflect on their experiences working with kids

SIENNA MOSS
Staff Writer

Working with kids while still technically being a kid is a challenging but educational job that many students at Branham have taken on. Navigating interactions with children, which are so different from peer and adult relationships, can make a lasting impact on students' emotional intelligence and shape their future aspirations.

Jaydin Barlow Levin, a senior at Branham, works at Almaden Valley Athletic Club as a "Ninja Instructor" in their NinjaZone, a program for kids that combines gymnastics, martial arts and agility skills. Barlow works mostly with younger preschool children and sometimes with kids up to second grade.

Barlow admits that adjusting her communication for different age groups, especially the youngest kids, has been a struggle.

"Very little kids don't always understand everything that you're telling them, so it's been honestly really challenging to navigate that because you have to perfect each kid's needs and how they can best understand you," Barlow said.

With certain kids who have a harder time focusing or listening, Barlow has to multitask and find solutions to make her classes run smoothly. Especially when working with kids with learning disabilities like ADHD or in special education, Barlow finds that understanding each kid is very important.

"I've found out that you have to walk them through everything, while simultaneously keeping an eye on other kids," Barlow said. "Some things will work for one kid, and then some things won't work for another. So I've had to really understand every kid in my class."

Senior **Mars Le** currently works as a math tutor at Kumon. They teach all age levels, ranging from elementary school to high school.

Similarly to Barlow, Le finds that one of the most essential skills in working with kids across different ages is knowing their individual needs. Some children require special teaching styles or additional assistance and time in order for them to be successful.

Le used to be a Kumon student themselves, and their personal experience has shaped their current teaching experience.

"[Tutoring at Kumon] has helped me understand kids and when they need help, because a lot of the time they don't ask for help when they obviously do need it," Le said. "When I used to take Kumon, I used to be too scared to ask, and I would always fall behind. But now, because I understand that, and I can visually see it, sometimes I don't even ask, 'Do you need help?' I just go, 'Okay, let's go through this problem together.'"

One of Le's favorite parts of working at Kumon is that they get to personalize their teaching style and make their own unique impact. In their opinion, Kumon is slightly lacking in explaining the "why" or reasoning behind math problems.

"But that's also what I love about Kumon: I get to teach the kids about the 'why?'" Le said. "When I did Kumon, I didn't get that explanation, so I didn't understand what I was doing."

Senior **Mia Olson** has a job as an activity worker at the Farnham Elementary School afterschool program. She is in charge of supervising the kids playing outside and indoor games and assisting them with their homework.

From her time working at an elementary school, Olson has developed her own strategies for settling conflicts.

"I've found that a lot of the time [what works] is when I tell [kids], 'It doesn't just hurt people around you. It hurts my feelings.' And I think having them realize that their actions are hurt-



Grace Ngo/Special to Bear Witness

ing other people makes them automatically change," Olson said.

Olson's combination of lessons from her AP Psychology class and her own personal experience have taught her how to understand children's psychology and how to personalize her communication depending on each situation.

"I've realized that you can't just communicate to kids how you would communicate to [peers or adults]. You really have to understand the emotions they are going through in each situation, instead of just yelling at them because they did something wrong. In most cases, they don't really know what's wrong," Olson said.

Olson is determined to continue her efforts in the classroom by becoming a teacher for elementary or secondary education, and she plans on pursuing an education major in college. This passion has developed in Olson since she was in elementary school.

"My mom and grandma are teachers, so I grew up knowing about their jobs," Olson said. "I'd go into her school and work and she'd have me help with them. So that inspired me, and [made me realize] 'Oh, I actually like doing this.'"

Although Le doesn't want to strictly be a teacher, they plan on becoming a nurse, and working with kids has inspired them to be a pediatric nurse.

So far, Barlow has reflected on her working experience as beneficial and educational, and believes she has grown many important traits as a result of the lessons she has learned.

"I've definitely become more empathetic and more understanding," Barlow said. "It's also made me a more patient person. I think that's something I used to struggle with until I started working with kids."

For Barlow, even though she doesn't have her exact career path

planned out yet, she knows working with kids is always something she can fall back on because she genuinely enjoys it and wants to make a meaningful impact on kids' lives.

"I love the excitement of kids when they learn something new, how proud I feel over my kids that I coach, and then how proud they feel of themselves. I love to see their achievements," Barlow said. "I don't want to be that type of coach or teacher that makes them feel bad for making a mistake. I always try to give positive reinforcement."

"I just love the excitement of kids when they learn something new, and how proud I feel over my kids that I coach, and then how proud they feel of themselves. I love to see their achievements."

Jaydin Barlow Levin (12)

SCIENCE & HEALTH

NUTRITION

FLIPPING FOOD

As the government introduces new dietary guidelines, students and teachers reflect on the changes

ABIGAIL MEDEIROS
Opinion Editor

On Jan. 7, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. released new Dietary Guidelines via the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), replacing the previous MyPlate guidelines. These guidelines were accompanied by an inverted, or upside-down, food pyramid and a focus on increasing the intake of whole foods and decreasing the intake of highly processed foods.

Biology and Anatomy/Physiology teacher **Ryan Matthews** agrees with many of the focuses in the new guidelines, but he also believes that there is room for improvement within the food pyramid.

“What it doesn’t do a great job of [is explaining] how much people should be consuming,” Matthews said. “That’s one area that I definitely think that they can build on. What types of fats? How much fat?”

These new guidelines were met with a mixture of praise and backlash, with supporters stating that the focus on “real food” will be good for overall health.

Critics argue that an emphasis on foods high in saturated fats, like red meats, butter and beef tallow, will be harmful to the health of America, according to “The Nutrition Source” from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

One of the most notable changes from MyPlate to the new inverted food pyramid is the shift from the five food groups displayed in a plate format to specific food recommendations that are roughly grouped into different areas within the pyramid. The new guidelines also specify grains as whole grains and feature the addition of the “healthy fats” to progress the administration’s focus on whole foods.

The USDA has used a variety of food guides in the past, with the earliest one dating back to 1916, according to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Throughout the years, the format — whether pyramid or not — has changed, along with the number of food groups and the style in which the guidelines are presented.

“These Guidelines [in the inverted food pyramid] return us to the basics,” RFK Jr. said in a press release in January. “American households must prioritize whole, nutrient-dense foods...and dramatically reduce highly processed foods. This is how we Make America Healthy Again.”

Food guidelines are updated by the USDA every five years, and RFK Jr.’s Dietary Guidelines will be in place until 2030. The pros and cons of the guidelines maintain a widespread desire for constant improvement when it comes to the health of Americans.

When teaching her classes, Foods teacher **Debbie Gorton** uses the MyPlate food guide as an example for students because it

is simpler and easier to understand than the new inverted pyramid. While the pyramid has various food suggestions, MyPlate maintains a more portion-based plan. Gorton shares a similar opinion to Matthews, noting both the pros and the cons of the updated guidelines.

“I think it starts good conversations, especially about cutting back on processed foods,” Gorton said. “But it oversimplifies nutrition and can be confusing for students.”

Senior **Maximiliano Haman** agreed that the inverted food pyramid can be confusing for students because it’s not as straightforward as MyPlate, which focused on portion and customization. Still, Haman noticed improvements in the food arrangements.

“Bread and butter is mainly in the [lower] tier, which is a good view of it because foods that have a lot of carbs [aren’t] usually something you want to eat a lot of,” Haman said.

Gorton said that teaching students nutrition literacy and how to achieve and maintain a balanced diet is more important than following one specific model or set of guidelines. She explained that the hands-on approach of cooking allows students to learn about nutrition as they go.

“In class, students actually cook and taste the food, so nutrition becomes something they experience, not just something they read about,” Gorton said.

Food guidelines have implications for schools and individuals alike, and teachers and students explain the necessity for these government guidelines to be comprehensive.

“People need to know how to balance their meals because right now we’re relying on them to figure that out,” Matthews said. “I like MyPlate for how it is organized, and I like how this [inverted] pyramid is trying to [help people] understand processed foods and move to a more organic diet.”



A focus on “Real Food”

The official government website realfood.gov advises people to avoid highly processed foods: “For decades we’ve been misled by guidance that prioritized highly processed food, and are now facing rates of unprecedented chronic disease.” This warning is accompanied by an image of the 1992 Food Pyramid — which recommended six to 11 servings of bread, cereal, rice and pasta.

New recommendations call for consuming new amounts of each food group per day:

- 1.2-1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight
- Three servings of vegetables
- Two servings of fruits
- Two to four servings of whole grains

Source: realfood.gov

TESTING

Pressure to perform

Test anxiety is rampant in high schools and can both help and hurt students

NITHYA KARAMBAKKAM
Guest Writer

As academic pressure has increased, test anxiety has become a common issue among students. 30% of American high school students report having high levels of test anxiety, according to a 2025 article in *Psychology International*.

Test anxiety is a situational form of general anxiety that is directly caused by tests and pressure. According to a 2016 article published by the UNC Chapel Hill Learning Center, it can be defined as a combination of physical and emotional reactions that interfere with an individual’s ability to perform well on tests. It has been linked with decreased performance, poor concentration, lower self-confidence and burnout.

The UNC Chapel Hill Learning Center states that possible causes of test anxiety include fear of failure, lack of preparation, poor performance in the past, pressure to perform well and perfectionism. For many students, such as junior **Kate Kim**, these pressures manifest during high-stakes exams.

“Obviously I feel anxious because some of these important tests [such as the SAT and AP exams] determine my future,” Kim said. “Sometimes I get too nervous, and I can’t really think properly. It really affects my testing abilities at some point.”

Senior **Lily Junkar** also frequently takes tests but has a different experience with test anxiety. Junkar said that her anxiety sometimes fades during the process of taking a test.

“I definitely feel anxious before I’m taking the test,” Junkar said. “During the test, as soon as I start, all of my nerves go away. But if I notice that I’m running out of time, that’s when I start to get super nervous.”

In short, test anxiety can be incredibly detrimental to a student’s mental and physical health, yet it is more abundant than ever as students face pressure from AP and honors classes, as well as standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT. Some students believe that test anxiety has intensified compared to the previous generation, as academic expectations and college admission standards have risen.

“Nowadays, students have to perform on a much higher level than students in the past had to,” Junkar said. “Now, straight A’s won’t guarantee you [getting] into a good college, so you have to keep up your grades and do a bunch of extracurriculars at the same time. It makes sense that kids now are more stressed than in the past.”

Sustained test anxiety can have both immediate and long-term negative effects on students’ performance and wellbeing. Branham Wellness Coordinator **Lashonda Eagels** said that prolonged stress can negatively impact multiple aspects of students’ lives.

“Too much test anxiety can reduce performance on exams, hurt students’ confidence and motivation, disrupt sleep and contribute to social or emotional difficulties,” Eagels said. “Over time, chronic academic stress can contribute to burnout and broader

mental health issues if unmanaged.”

For some students, the effects become most apparent during high-stakes standardized testing. Junkar experienced repeated test anxiety while taking the SAT, despite preparing.

“Every time I took the SAT, especially on the reading sections, there were always one or two questions that I did not know how to figure out, and I froze up,” she said. “I think that definitely affected my performance negatively. It was something that I could never overcome. I did a lot of practice, and I was doing well on the practice tests, but when I was actually in the testing room to take the test, my stress made me perform worse on it.”

However, test anxiety doesn’t always negatively affect students. In some cases, moderate stress can enhance focus and motivation. This phenomenon is explained by the Yerkes-Dodson law, a psychological principle stating that performance improves if there is an optimal amount of stress or mental excitement. This relationship is typically represented by an upside-down U-shaped curve: low stress leads to boredom; moderate stress boosts focus and efficiency, and high stress leads to excessive negative emotions and mistakes.

Taking a test can trigger an individual’s fight-or-flight response, which activates the sympathetic nervous system and prepares the body for action. According to a recent article published in *Simply Psychology*, moderate levels of stress — often referred to as eustress — sharpen focus and support performance, while distress — excessive stress — degrades prefrontal functions such as working memory and flexible thinking.

Junkar said that stress helped her succeed by providing motivation. In her sophomore year, she was taking AP Chemistry, and her concerns about succeeding and attaining her desired grade helped to motivate her.

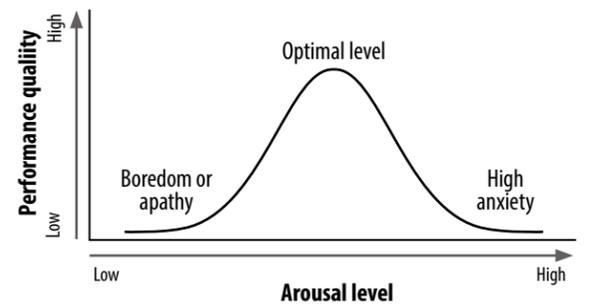
“Stress did motivate me to study a lot,” she said. “I focused on studying for the test and learning the material. That’s how I ended up with an A in the class and a five on the exam. So in that way, stress motivated me to perform better.”

Eustress can have many benefits, such as encouraging students to stop procrastinating. However, it can quickly escalate into distress.

“When worry becomes constant, overthinking takes over, or students struggle with concentration, focus, sleep or confidence, [then] stress stops being productive and starts interfering with learning and performance,” Eagels said. “At that point, additional support and coping strategies are important to help restore balance and wellbeing.”

Students employ different strategies to help alleviate stress and improve performance. Junkar prepares makes sure to prepare thoroughly before tests.

“I always try to set aside some time out of my day to study specifically for the tests I have in the upcoming days,” Junkar said. “I do have to do that at the expense of some [personal] time.”



The Yerkes-Dodson law

This law states that performance improves with mental arousal (such as stress, excitement, alertness, etc.) up to an optimal point. It is a U-shaped curve. Low stress leads to boredom and poor results; moderate stress boosts focus and efficiency, and high stress leads to negative emotions and mistakes.

For example, some pre-exam tension can sharpen focus, but too much anxiety can lead an individual to forget what they know

Source: simplypsychology.org

Kim benefits from appreciates pre-exam rituals, such as her AP World History teacher’s tradition of reciting an inspirational mantra before taking a test.

“I really like Ms. MacInnes’s approach to tests, like saying, ‘I can do this. I’m confident. I’m capable.’ Even if it’s just words, I feel like that it helps to bring confidence back,” Kim said. “And there’s this professor who turns on a little meditation video before big tests. We can just meditate along, and I feel like that helps to decrease heart rate and bring your calmness back.”

Branham also offers support for students struggling with test anxiety. They can visit the Wellness Center for physical and mental health support. They can also access mental health and wellness tools and activities, such as the Soluna app, Mindfulness Mondays, and the Mindfulness Club.

Test anxiety is a real concern that many students suffer from. Some amount of stress can be beneficial to improve academic performance, but an excessive amount can lead to poor performance and even chronic health issues.

“It’s important for the school community to understand that test anxiety isn’t just ‘nerves,’” Eagels said. “It’s a real emotional and physiological response that can significantly affect students’ performance and wellbeing.”

HEALTH APPS

BEYOND THE APP

Health apps and fitness trackers are shaping teen habits — physically

REBECCA TOCHILNIKOV
Staff Writer

Most teenagers have at least one health app on their phone — whether it's Apple Health, a step counter, a calorie tracker or an app that scans food labels to designate products as "good" or "bad."

On the Apple iPhone, people can easily track their physical wellbeing through the Apple Health app, which organizes health data from connected devices and apps and automatically counts steps. It integrates with the Apple Watch to track cardiovascular health, blood pressure, sleep and activity.

Junior **Anna Waller**, who practices gymnastics for about three hours a day and competes on weekends, constantly checks her trends to help maintain her fitness and nutrition level.

"Having all your data laid out in a specific form is at least easier for my brain to wrap around my trends and what I'm eating on one day versus another," Waller said.

Health apps encourage students to move, eat better or sleep more. However, it can also create stress, anxiety or pressure to reach a certain goal. Waller describes how anxiety can get to her sometimes when checking the health app.

"It's also anxiety inducing, seeing what I'm eating and intaking and how that affects me," Waller said.

For Waller, tracking her nutrition is an important part of her daily routine.

"[The app] has definitely given me a different perspective on foods and what they do to your body, especially as an athlete trying to control your protein intake," Waller said.

Foods teacher **Debbie Gorton** explains why balancing eating matters to students.

"A healthy diet includes a variety of foods and limits highly processed or junk food," Gorton said. "It's about balance, not cutting everything out."

Gorton believes that teens are influenced by the health expectations that circulate on social media. Health apps can serve as a helpful guide, providing clear feedback and support for making balanced choices.

"Students hear a lot about food everywhere right now," Gorton said. "Apps and social media definitely influence how they think about eating. Some of that information is helpful, and some of it can be confusing, so learning how to think critically about food really matters."



For junior **Abhi Ramanath**, who uses the app MyFitness Pal, it's a necessity for him to track his nutrition.

"You have to know what you're eating," Ramanath said. "There's no harm in sneaking in a couple unhealthy stuff — that's not gonna kill you but just mainly being accountable and understanding what you eat."

Samsung devices include Samsung Health, an app that tracks sleep, fitness, nutrition, heart rate and medication through phones and compatible wearables like Galaxy watches and rings. Android users can also use Google Fit, which personalizes fitness goals and syncs with wearable health trackers such as the Oura and Galaxy rings.

Weight training teacher **Christopher Jensen** tracks his fitness and nutrition through an Oura ring — a health tracker worn on the finger that connects biometric data such as heart rate, sleep patterns and activity levels. It helps users monitor overall wellness and fitness trends through a connected app, as the Oura ring is compatible with most phones that connect to Bluetooth.

As health apps continue to evolve, many are beginning to use artificial intelligence to tailor personalized feedback and recommendations to each user. AI is able to identify patterns in heart rate, sleep, activity, recovery or nutrition over time by analyzing users' personal habits through a health app. According to a 2025 Harris Poll sponsored by Verily, "three-quarters would prefer more personalized solutions," with 76% saying they want apps



that help them understand their health data over time and 75% seeking individualized recommendations.

Jensen also uses another app not provided by his phone called Hevy, which helps him track food intake and manage his fitness progress and goals. Through the app, he is able to take pictures of his meal and get immediate feedback that aligns with his goals.

Jensen noticed how AI has changed the way health apps personalize fitness tracking.

"Health apps are more personalized for each person because a lot of them, especially with the way AI is, can personalize things pretty good for you," Jensen said.

Many health and fitness apps have started shifting toward AI-driven features, using machine learning to analyze user data over time and offer more personalized insight, goals and feedback tailored to individual habits.

Physical health is important for everyone, and different apps help users understand their bodies in their own way. By tracking daily habits and activity, these tools give personalized insights that help users understand and respond to their individual physical needs. Phone apps organize and analyze daily habits, smartwatches track activity and smart rings monitor subtle body signals like sleep, recovery and nutrition.

Jensen emphasized the individuality of fitness, noting how personal factors shape each student's progress.

"Exercise is really personal to the person, their size, everything about them," Jensen said. "That's what I try to preach in class."



MENTAL HEALTH

Shifting online

Soluna makes mental health resources accessible to students

EMILIANO GONZALEZ
Staff Writer

Students walking around campus might see purple posters scattered throughout the hallways and the Wellness Center advertising Soluna. Accessible through the website and app, Soluna offers free, safe and confidential mental health support for students.

According to Kooth, the company behind Soluna, the app is a part of the California Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), a five year-plan to improve the mental health of young people with a \$4.7 billion investment. According to Soluna, 50% of Soluna users consider it their first source of professional mental health support, and one in three would not have access to mental health help without Soluna.

According to Soluna, 49% of these coaching sessions occur outside traditional school hours. Trained professionals are accessible through text, phone or video call through Soluna's website and app.

Wellness Coordinator **Lashonda Eagels**, who helps facilitate the Wellness Center by connecting school admins to their student population, believes Soluna provides convenience to students.

"If students have an outside therapist, and it's once a month, it helps fill in the gap," Eagels said. "There's another portion of Soluna that allows the student to actually talk to someone, so they can help them set and achieve goals similar to their therapist, but on their own time."

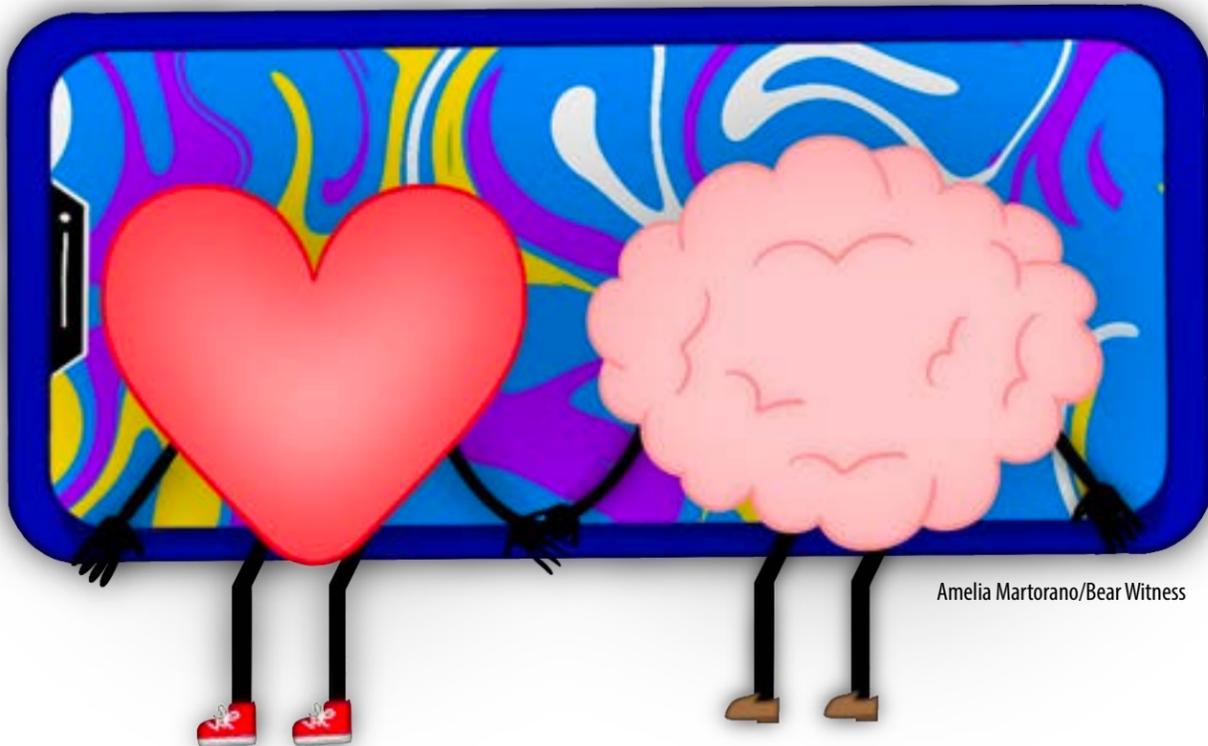
Soluna can also provide therapy to those who don't have access to enough sessions but still need to talk to a professional.

"I have a lot of families who have Kaiser or other health insurance providers, and they just don't get enough time. It's not weekly like they want, or it's not long enough," Eagels said. "This really can help fill in the gap because [Soluna therapists] can chat privately with them for five or 45 minutes, and there's no limit on this."

Eagels emphasizes the customizability that Soluna brings to its users, as it creates age-appropriate menus that gather minimal information from minors utilizing the app. Soluna also offers additional resources in a subpage for housing, food and shelters.

Junior **Hector Montes**, who used the Soluna app for five months, says that the confidentiality of the app creates an atmosphere where users can feel safe expressing their emotions.

"Through this app, it's helpful that you don't have to be ashamed of trying to get help or get your story out there and see if you can



Amelia Martorano/Bear Witness

get professional help from other people," Montes said.

Montes reviews the Soluna app and would recommend it to others for its convenience and private chats.

"If you're going through something, you should always talk to someone, but in general, if you want to get help but have that fear of trying to receive it, this app is very helpful," Montes said. "It's probably one of the best apps you can get for helping you with your mental health."

Soluna can also help households that do not support traditional mental health resources.

"There are some cultures or communities that don't believe in mental health," Eagels said. "[Students] may not feel uncomfortable or not want to go against their family's traditional views of what mental health is and how they access support."

Eagels explains the therapy styles Soluna provides, tailoring them to different learning approaches and users. Soluna offers educational videos and stories tailored to the user's age group, which cover topics like anxiety, peer pressure and loneliness.

"If you're a person who prefers someone giving you a lecture and the audio component, you can do that, or you can watch [a one to five minute video] and look at the story related to anxiety," Eagels said.

Eagels highlights how Soluna's outreach opens up the opportunity to get help without needing to visit the Wellness Center or even be on campus.

"That's the best part because we're not here all day. We're only here until school ends, so [Soluna] helps fill in after hours because a lot of things happen when we leave school," Eagels said. "I just love giving students more resources than just what we have here."

Montes explains that many of Soluna's features helped him through various situations.

"It has a lot of stuff that can help you calm down a bit. If you're having a panic attack or having trouble breathing, it will try to guide you to think about, instead of the problem, other thoughts that are out of your control," Montes said.

Khalil Curry, a school psychologist who supports students through crises and counseling evaluations, notes that in some cases, in-person therapy methods are needed, depending on students' situations.

"Counseling sessions, therapy sessions, check-in sessions will look really different based on what you need," Curry said. "You can have a crisis, and we might have to do a crisis plan. You can have suicide ideation, [and] we have to do a safety plan, or you can be very high in anxiety or very [heightened] emotions, and we might need to do counseling."

Curry highlights the other mental health resources given to students and the variety they provide.

"Each app has its [own] different functions. With Calm, Headspace, Daybreak and Soluna, they all have different functions and support different things," Curry said. "It gives a variety of tools to students who use it for free."

Montes said Soluna has improved his mental health and helped him change his mindset.

"I started looking at things in a more positive light," Montes said. "I stopped seeing the bad in things, or I stopped worrying a bit, overthinking constantly."

Montes believes it is important to make mental health resources more accessible for those who need them.

"One of the biggest priorities for teenagers and young adults should be mental health," Montes said. "It should be a priority to have it be very accessible to everybody."

Kooth

Kooth is a U.K.-based company that provides mental health services online to young people through the Kooth app and to adults through the Qwell app. In 2023, it won a contract from California to build Soluna, which was launched in January 2024 alongside BrightLife Kids, a platform for kids ages 0-12 and their families.

>117,000

young people aged 13-25 have accessed Soluna.

< 5 minute

average wait time for appointments.

34,503

coaching sessions started on Soluna.



Source: California Department of Health Care Services, May 2025.

ARTS & CULTURE

MINI REVIEWS

SONG



I Just Might
Bruno Mars
Atlantic Records

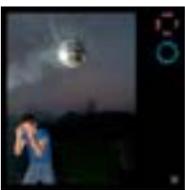
What is it: "I Just Might" is Bruno Mars's new song released as the lead single for his upcoming album, "The Romantic."

Liked: I really like how upbeat the song is! It's super fun to listen to in the car, and the vibes are perfect for the upcoming spring and summer seasons. It makes me enthusiastic to listen to the entire album when it releases!

Disliked: While the song is fun to listen to, there isn't a lot of depth to the lyrics. One of the things I like the most about Bruno Mars is how soulful his songs are, even if they're upbeat. I'm hoping that the rest of his album still has deep lyrics.

—Yujin Cho

SONG



Aperture
Harry Styles

What is it: "Aperture" is the lead single in Harry Styles' studio album: "Kiss All the Time."

Liked: I like how the lyrics fade in and out with the beat of the music.

Disliked: It's pretty repetitive at times and sounds very techno-like.

—Amy Gunaseelan

SHOW EPISODE



The Muppet Show

Sabrina Carpenter and Seth Rogen

What is it: The 32-minute revival episode came out on Feb. 4 with Sabrina Carpenter as a guest star. The show was full of musical acts and comedy, with throwbacks to all the classic Muppet characters.

Liked: I liked that they had all of the most popular Muppets in the episode like Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Rizzo the Rat, etc.

Disliked: Some of the jokes were a little weird.

—Abigail Medeiros

STORE



Square Pie Guys

Marc Schechter and Danny Stoller

What is it: Square Pie Guys is a Detroit-style pizza shop that opened in Campbell last year. They make square-shaped pizzas.

Liked: I liked the simplicity of the pizzas and unique square shape. They also have interesting pizza combinations that distinguish them from other chains.

Disliked: I wish it was less greasy, and it is very expensive for the amount of pizza you get. Other pizza places like Pizza My Heart or Little Caesar's are more affordable.

—Cain Cheng

BOOK ADAPTATIONS

PICTURE THIS

Book-to-film adaptations help original literary works gain attention

VANESSA PEREZ
Staff Writer

From debuting on the bookshelves to appearing on TV screens, book adaptations have become a major trend in the film industry.

Book adaptations are films transformed from a literary source, such as novels or comics, to a new interpretation of the story shown through movies, TV shows or other spin-offs. These adaptations can vary from the dystopian genre, with book-to-film movies like "The Hunger Games" released in 2012, to embracing the romance genre with "People We Meet on Vacation" released in 2025.

With many of these books already having a present fanbase, senior **Tatum Wadholm** has noticed the entertainment industry using this to their advantage to reimagine fan favorites with a new perspective.

"I think that film directors, actors and writers are picking stories that already have a fanbase, making it more successful than a new story," Wadholm said.

Senior **Isla Gordon**, Book of the Month Club secretary, believes the rise in popularity of these films is due to decreased interest in reading among people who favor digital media rather than physical literature.

"When you're reading, some people just read the words and enjoy it that way," Gordon said. "For me, I see it like a movie in my head, so for those who can't imagine the story in their head, I feel like the movie does that and broadens the story."

AP English Language teacher **Heather Amanatullah** believes BookTok, an online community for book lovers who share reviews and opinions about books and literature, contributes to the popularity of book-to-film adaptations. Amanatullah says that this com-

munity brings a larger audience to books and requests for these films.

"Hollywood doesn't want to do the work of developing their own kind of creative writing, so I also think the popularity of BookTok has made it explode when readers are saying to Hollywood, 'We're really enjoying these [books]. Show us what it could look like on film and on TV,'" Amanatullah said.

Recent book adaptations have also sparked interest in new literature within the Branham community. For example, the success of TV show "Heated Rivalry" released in November 2025 has drawn many like Wadholm to read the original book.

"It did a really good job of highlighting different aspects that the book didn't, especially with the characters' sexual identities [and] relationship through different ways," Wadholm said.

Readers are fond of seeing their favorite books being shown on screen, especially when film writers adhere to the original plot and the author's imagination of their work. Wadholm viewed "The Summer I Turned Pretty" series as a successful adaptation since the original novel author Jenny Han had a voice while producing the series.

"When making movies that are adapted for TV, it's really important to have the author of the story have a voice in the retelling of their story," Wadholm said.

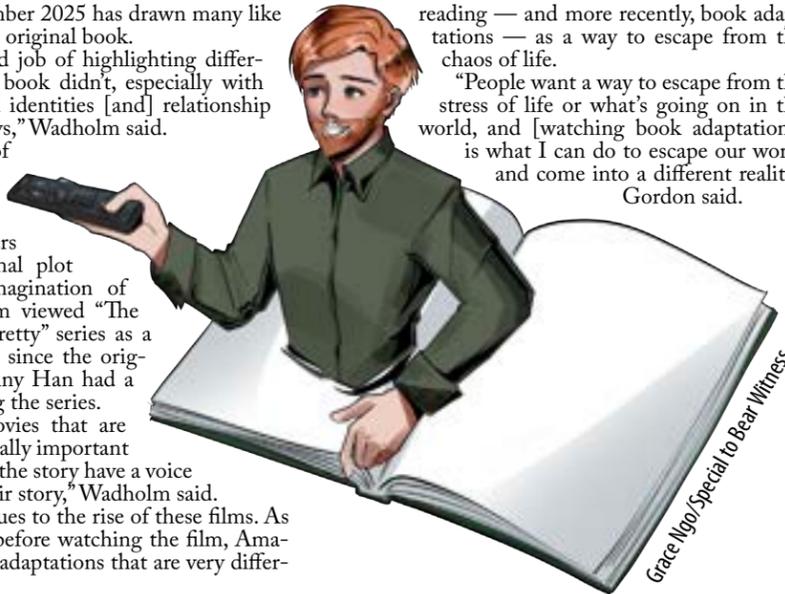
There are also critiques to the rise of these films. As someone who reads before watching the film, Amanatullah avoids book adaptations that are very differ-

ent from the original books. For instance, she did not enjoy the new "Frankenstein" film released in 2025.

"I like the "Frankenstein" novel," Amanatullah said. "It's one of my favorite books to read and teach, so when I watched the first 20 minutes, I had to turn it off because it was so different from the novel that even though it was beautiful and rich in detail, I was raging."

Watching book adaptations is becoming an additional way to enjoy contemporary literature, bringing more fans to the book world. Gordon uses reading — and more recently, book adaptations — as a way to escape from the chaos of life.

"People want a way to escape from the stress of life or what's going on in the world, and [watching book adaptations] is what I can do to escape our world and come into a different reality," Gordon said.



Grace Ngo/Special to Bear Witness

MUSIC

Viral lines

Artists take advantage of "TikTokified" music

"Some of the older songs will get almost co-opted by TikTok," MacInnes said. "It's interesting to see the resurgence of older songs."

Like MacInnes, Liewer says that many older songs have the ability to resurface because of TikTok. For example, the feature of the 1984 song "Purple Rain" by Prince and the Revolution in season five of "Stranger Things" entered the song into the Billboard Top 100. This popularity was attributed to TikTok users who were discussing the show and using the song.

Compared to nostalgic hits resurfacing in the modern world, trending music today has a distinguishably different sound. Liewer believes that songs have less complex lyricism, more profanity and more electronic sounds as seen in TikTok hits like "Manchild" by Sabrina Carpenter.

"Piano Man" by Billy Joel [has] a very different sound from "Taste" by Sabrina Carpenter," Liewer said. "I notice a lot of songs nowadays have dialogue in the middle of them, and they use a lot more electronics as opposed to acoustics."

According to Mystic Keys, an online music education program, advances in technology were key to shifting music into its electronic sounds, popularizing genres like EDM, pop and hip-hop in the digital world. Since everyone gained access to that sound, its use became more popular through music making platforms and the internet.

"TikTok has definitely had an impact on [sound] because we're in a digital age right now, and it's easier to make music with the computer than live instruments," Liewer said.

MacInnes elaborates that newer artists want to appeal to the newer generation to gain profit. To do this, they emulate the modern sounds of TikTok. "[Musicians will] try to have a really catchy part because with short form content, you want those sound bites," MacInnes said.

"There's a lot of pop artists, especially up and coming, that will try and get a sound that will be used as a trend on TikTok or Instagram."

According to a data study conducted by Luminate, a compiler of entertainment data, 84% of songs on the Billboard Top 200 in 2024 were originally viral on TikTok. Freshman Brianna Kearney enjoys the viral hits she hears on TikTok, such as "Golden" from KPop Demon Hunters, noting that the app introduces her to new genres and sounds that are trending.

"I listen to most of the music I see on TikTok. Some of it gets to the point where I listen to it so much," Kearney said. "It's just too catchy."

Similar to Kearney, freshman **Hayley Foss** discovered some of her favorite artists, including Sombr and

Olivia Dean, through TikTok. She enjoys looking into the discography of the artists and learning more about them.

"On social media, I've discovered a lot of artists from just seeing a post or a reel of their song," Foss said. "You can find artists just by them going viral."

Like MacInnes and Liewer, Foss explains that music sounds more similar due to artists' desire to trend on TikTok, lessening the individuality of artists as they prioritize creating short, viral clips.

"Artists gained fame in the past by being a good artist and having their music for themselves," Foss said. "Today, they depend on going viral for them to have their music be found."

Because artists want to make higher profits, they use TikTok and other social media apps like Instagram to promote their music and go viral. This creates an interactive experience as fans can provide their input on new music or promote it by using the sound, benefiting the artist's platform and income.

As a Taylor Swift fan, MacInnes finds that Swift and other artists experience greater input regarding their music through apps like TikTok. People can make quicker judgments on music they haven't listened to themselves and adapt to the views they see online, creating a bandwagon effect.

"There's a lot of opinions that get put out there that can influence people to either really like it or really dislike it without truly sitting with the music for a long time," MacInnes said. "People will make their judgment very quickly nowadays so that they can put out a TikTok or jump on a social media trend about the album."

Kearney believes that TikTok has influenced people to listen to music that interests other people online, decreasing individuality in listeners as well.

"TikTok has a very standardized [sound]," Kearney said. "If you listen to a different type of music, then you're weird or different. I feel like everyone tries to listen to the same stuff."

Foss says that because of TikTok and social media, music in the future may concentrate on the qualities that music has now.

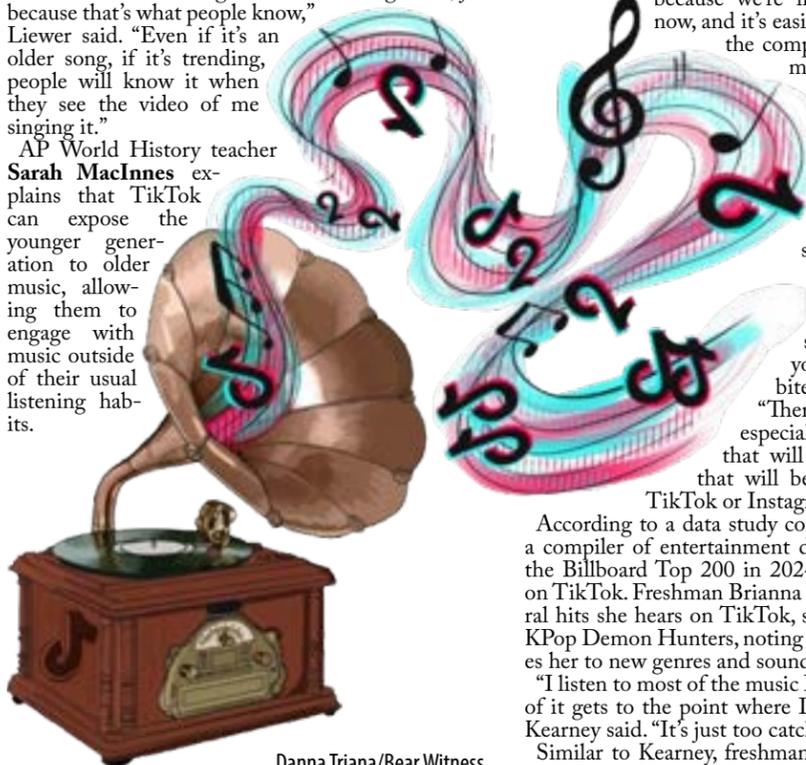
"Artists will eventually recognize what kind of beats people listen to, and in the future, songs are going to sound the exact same," Foss said. "They will sound very upbeat and poppy like Sabrina Carpenter."

MacInnes also fears that TikTok is corroborating what music people enjoy, which could take away from artists' creativity in the future.

"There's always that fear of people bending to the consumers of music and making it more about just trying to get clips," MacInnes said. "Hopefully that doesn't happen, and hopefully artists are still willing to put out their true craft."

MacInnes thinks that TikTokification in the music industry is a way for artists to adapt to new trends in society. The sound of "TikTok" music is constantly changing, but the app's influence on music consumption remains.

"Sometimes people are like, 'Oh, this is a TikTok song,' but I think it's also important to remember that almost any song can become a TikTok song," MacInnes said.



Danna Triana/Bear Witness

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Don't judge a book by its cover

Dear Editor(s),

I have come to find that people are reminiscent of books. In my third year at Branham, whether it be through clubs, athletics, or random hallway encounters, I have grown accustomed to meeting new individuals. Though I encourage others to engage outside of their typical circles, I understand it is human to make discernments — the same face-level opinions we form while skimming through covers at a library or a bookstore. However, the issue occurs when people's preconceived judgments end up becoming the collectively shared "truth" about someone else.

For instance, I have befriended some truly lovely people in recent years whom I was surprised to learn are spoken about by their respective classmates in a way that is remarkably differ-

ent from the actual character I have gotten to know. I see the toll these inaccurate discrepancies have on their confidence and self-esteem, causing them to reconsider the identities they once felt secure in.

When you declare someone's narrative before they can decide it for themselves, you rewrite who they are and that often becomes the version they get stuck with — or worse, the version they start to believe is true.

Compare it to a negative literature review by someone who has not even read the novel; other people are likely to believe these unreliable assertions and consequently avoid picking up the book altogether. And while no one should feel obligated to interact with every person they come across (nor does one have to like them), I think everybody deserves a chance to show who

they are first, before they are treated as such.

The time-honored caution "Don't judge a book by its cover" remains a pertinent takeaway,

but I compose this letter to specifically emphasize the importance of refraining from claiming to know who someone truly is without any corroboration. I wholeheartedly encourage my peers to foremost allow other people to present their authentic nature before it is pronounced for them.

At the very least, we ought to read the back cover for ourselves.

Sincerely,
Charlotte 단비 Homer

VACCINES

NO SHOT

Government removes recommendations for seven vaccines this year, citing deceptive evidence

KENDALL LADD
Staff Writer

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. adopted the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) platform after being appointed in February 2025. Motivated by various studies linking vaccines to autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders, the platform advertised an expeditious removal of six vaccines from the list of nationally recommended immunizations. The studies were later proven baseless, heavily disputed or fraudulent by acclaimed doctors and supposed authors.

RFK Jr. removed the Rotavirus, COVID-19, Influenza, Meningococcal disease, Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccines from the child immunization schedule, which reduced the number of recommended vaccines from 17 to 11. According to the White House, these vaccines were chosen to be removed to "protect women and children" especially.

Although the reduction in vaccines does not explicitly ban Americans from seeking out such vaccines, it makes it significantly more complicated in terms of insurance.

Every vaccine recommended by the government, though not mandated, is obligatorily covered by insurance companies. Naturally, taking recommendations away allows the insurance companies to dictate what they cover. KFF, a health research organization, emphasized the HPV vaccine specifically, which protects people from different types of papillomavirus — a form of cancer.

Before Trump released his memo, three shots of HPV were recommended as per previous research; now, the administration only recommends one. As a result, insurance companies will likely only cover the first shot, forcing Americans who want the vaccine to pay out-of-pocket for the remaining two.

In his presidential memoranda, Trump argued that the United States had been an outlier in comparison to other "peer" countries — most of those countries having 15 or less. Trump included that these changes were based on scientific evidence and studies, adding that if such evidence changed in the future, he would "update the United States childhood vaccine schedule" again.

This evidence that he referred to has been repeatedly denounced by several educated individuals in the field.

In particular, Trump and RFK Jr. pulled back the COVID-19 booster shot, advising pregnant women and children to avoid the vaccine. Pregnant women remain at incredibly high risk for complications as a result of contracting the illness, and "Vaccinating pregnant women also protects newborn babies," according to CDC News. Ph.D. holder Sean O'Leary criticized such ideas, arguing that this move "takes away choice" from parents.

RFK Jr. claims he is not "anti-vax" but wants to prioritize the safety of American children by avoiding diseases that are the result of heavy vaccines, or "overmedication."

According to BBC News, RFK Jr. claimed during a press conference that vaccines cause autism, citing a study published by Andrew Wakefield in *The Lancet* Journal in 1998, which studied under 20 children. In the study, Wakefield claimed to have discovered a clear link between autism and the measles, mumps and rubella vaccines. 12 years after its publication, the paper was retracted due to an investigation that found it to be entirely fraudulent.

However, it's not just unsubstantiated century studies. The White House released a 73-page document called "The MAHA Report," which connected over 500 sources to their overall assertion: excessive vaccines lead to unrelated, detrimental issues. These sources included the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Center For Disease Control And Prevention (CDC) and the National Cancer Institute.

At least seven of these sources were incorrectly cited, misrepresented, misinterpreted or non-existent, according to ABC News.

For a study that highlighted a spike in children's anxiety and depression during the pandemic, the report cited the first

author as Dr. Katherine Keyes. Keyes, who holds a doctorate in disease control, explained to ABC News that she did not write the article — in whole or in part. Moreover, the report also references *The JAMA Pediatric Journal* as the overseer of the report. A representative of the journal explained to ABC News that the study did not exist under their publication. Similarly, two other researchers who were cited in the report, Harold J. Farber and Joanne McKenzie, have confirmed that those studies did not exist in any of their publications either.

Regardless of improper citations, the White House has persistently claimed that its vaccine changes were created in an attempt to align with other reputable countries, such as Denmark, Japan and Germany, and not necessarily to protect from conditions like autism as they have previously claimed.

Overall, the Trump administration did as they promised during the election process in 2024 by repealing vaccines, simultaneously revoking convenience for Americans and denouncing compelling research done in past years.

Eliminating research-backed vaccinations was a reckless move from the nation's administration. In choosing to discard these immunizations in such an uncorroborated manner, RFK Jr. and Trump have sparked government distrust among the nation and placed Americans at risk. As a school, it is important that students are cautious of information they view online concerning this topic. It is clear that the White House will not stray from using fraudulent information to support their claim; as a result, it is crucial that we do not let them.

Danna Triana/Bear Witness

K-POP IDOLS

Pop problems

Should fans still support major management companies that mistreat K-pop idols?



Irene Yoon/Special to Bear Witness

ANDREW HO
Staff Writer

Imagine trying to live out your dream as a K-pop idol and being forced to only eat ice cubes for a week to lose weight. Beneath all the viral hits and stunning choreography from K-pop groups is the hidden reality of how South Korean entertainment companies treat idols.

Rigorous beauty standards, control over idols and long

training hours — these are just a few ways major companies mistreat their idols.

Fans should question whether they should continue supporting these huge companies that inflict so much pain and pressure on young idols.

A substantial part of the idol world is netizens, or online users, who gain influence by funding the groups through their support. They reinforce the extreme Korean beauty standards — which consists of perfect faces and bodies — and play a major role in how groups act and dress, leading the labels to force idols to fit the image they want.

One instance of this is with Twice's Hirai Momo before she debuted back in 2015. Her label, JYP, forced her to lose 15 pounds a week before her debut. During a livestream, Momo revealed that her diet consisted of ice cubes and that she would cry at night due to the fear of not waking up the next day.

While dieting, she also feared the label would remove her from the debut lineup for not meeting netizens' visual expectations.

While idols' conditions can be jeopardized by their labels, it's not only limited to physical health. JYP has also had instances of members going on hiatus due to mental health effects from extremely busy schedules during album promotions.

Choi Jisu (Lia), a member of the girl group Itzy, went on hiatus on Sept. 18, 2023, for mental health reasons.

Lia sent a letter to fans expressing how she was taking a step back from group activities and wanted to focus on recovering her mental health. As a result of her busy schedule from album releases, she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, which ultimately caused her to miss Itzy's second world tour com-

pletely.

Although JYP gave her nearly a year to rest and receive treatment for her disorder, Lia's condition highlights how brutal idols' schedules are. People should not be pushed to their limits to receive good treatment from a company.

These instances highlight physical mistreatment, but that's only one part of the puzzle. Idols are arguably treated worse mentally because of the high standards for idols in Korea.

Worldwide debates about the girl group NewJeans rose when all five members attempted to end their contracts with their label ADOR after they fired CEO Min Hee-Jin.

On Sept. 11, 2024, the group went on an unauthorized live stream on YouTube, where they explained how they had been mistreated by ADOR. The members also expressed how they wished that ADOR would protect them from deliberate mistreatment by their parent company HYBE.

According to *Teen Vogue*, the group stated "ADOR does not have the will or ability to protect NewJeans." On Dec. 29, 2025, ADOR stated that member Danielle Marsh's contract was terminated for breaching the exclusive contract and for participating in independent activities, which they argued hurt the reputation of ADOR and NewJeans. According to *Forbes*, the label is also suing Danielle and Min Hee-Jin for roughly \$30 million.

From Sept. 11, 2024, to Oct. 30, 2025 — the time period that ADOR and NewJeans have been having this dispute — ADOR could have made more money than what they are suing for. According to *Billboard* and *NME*, ADOR sold 4.3 million albums

in Korean alone and generated \$80 million in 2023, which is a 166% increase from the previous year.

As of Jan. 16, all current NewJeans members except for Kim Minji have returned to ADOR.

While members are considered "workers" under the label, they should still have a voice in making decisions that affect their daily lives.

These instances highlight the control that these companies have over the idols. At times, they are seen as pawns in a game to get the most money rather than human beings. Companies like JYP — one of the largest and most influential South Korean entertainment companies — shouldn't normalize unethical practices just because they make a lot of money.

Fans support artists by streaming songs, purchasing albums, attending concerts or buying merch. Idols dedicate their life to creating the best possible product for fans, and demonstrating support for them recognizes their hard work.

However, fans should still try to convince labels to treat the idols better. K-pop relies heavily on listeners' opinions, album and concert ticket sales, as well as the voices of netizens. Companies are sensitive to widespread backlash online, and by being vocal about mental and physical health, humane working conditions and fair working schedules, fans can shift the industry norms of K-pop.

Love for artists shouldn't hinder listeners from speaking out against exploitative management companies. Fans should use their voice to create a system for idols to thrive and create music without sacrificing their well-being.

THE BACKPAGE

Map Labels:

- Top Row: TENNIS COURTS, FIELD, GYM, GATE C, ASB ROOM, BIKE RACK
- Left Column: LOCKER ROOMS, BRUIN BUCKS, POOL, GATE B, COMPUTER ROOM, COLLEGE & CAREER CENTER, BOOK ROOM
- Right Column: OFFICE, CHANCE, STUDENT SERVICES, GATE D, CAFETERIA, BRUIN BUCKS, QUAD
- Bottom Row: JUST VISITING IN DETENTION, THE ROCK, CHANCE, LOTE MURALS, GATE A, CAFETERIA MURAL, LSU MURAL, 2:35

Central Area Content:

- BRUINOPOLY** (Large red banner with a bear character)
- Card 1:** "Advance to the BIKE RACK" (with bicycle image)
- Card 2:** "It is a room full of life. I love seeing that it's a space for all students." -Activities Director Victoria Raineri about the ASB room
- Card 3:** "Designed by Hailey Steed, Compiled by Hailey Steed and Colin Kalanges, Illustrations by Kailey Fu and Emi Mohanrao" (with paw prints)
- Card 4:** "The goal of the [cafeteria] mural is to create a sense of inclusivity, so when students see food from their culture, they feel recognized and welcomed." -Mural Club president Irene Yoon (12)
- Card 5:** "Use your Bruin Bucks to get out of DETENTION for FREE. Keep this card to use when you are in DETENTION"
- Card 6:** "Advance to the LOTE MURALS" (with mural images)
- Card 7:** "Advance to the LSU MURAL" (with mural image)
- Other Elements:** Question mark cards, Bruin Bucks icon, and a clock icon showing 2:35.