

The login page of the DCPS Aspen grades portal / Credits: Sara Weinrod

“Hugely Inflated”: Are Pandemic-Era Grading Policies Doing More Harm Than Good?

By Sara Weinrod ('24)
News Editor

Mask mandates are long gone. International trips have resumed. Virtual learning is a distant memory. Yet one apparently temporary COVID-19 measure conspicuously remains in effect: revised grading policy.

The junior class at Walls has an average GPA of 3.93, a number school counselor Kath-

ryn Moore called “very high.” She also noted that the median GPA was over a 4.0. That means that well over half the class had a GPA above 4.0 at the start of the 2022-23 school year. This number will likely only increase, as juniors take on more AP classes, which are graded on a 5.0 scale.

“Anyone would objectively say that a 4.0 is

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New Menstrual-Product Dispensers Require Tokens From the Front Office — or Quarters

By Ava Barcelona ('25)
Staff Writer

In an effort to address problems of menstrual equity, DCPS high schools installed menstrual-product dispensers in student restrooms over February break. The dispensers are located within the basement-, first-, and second-floor girls’ restrooms, as well as the first floor’s gender-neutral restroom. Labels on the dispensers indicate they accept “quarters or tokens.”

The District of Columbia has recently begun to address barriers of access to menstrual products through statutes like the Expanding Student Access to Period Products Act of 2022. This act requires D.C. schools to install and maintain dispensers of free-for-use period products in women’s and gender-neutral restrooms.

“They’re not supposed to charge,” said Ms. Pace, class of 2025 counselor. And technically, they don’t.

Unbeknown to most students, the front office holds “tokens” available to use at the menstrual product dispensers. Administration is also considering providing class counselors with tokens, but has not instituted this change.

Because the existence of tokens has not been publicized, many students were disappointed by what they viewed as a paywall



Signs on the dispensers read “25¢, quarters or tokens” / Credits: Tess Buckley

blocking access to necessary sanitary products. “I first saw [the dispensers] at Jackson-Reed, then at Walls,” said Sonali Cohen ('25). “I was extremely disappointed in DCPS’s decision to have them cost money. The fact that we have to pay is tired and old-fashioned, especially with-

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Walls Avoids Major Budget Cuts

Reductions Smaller Than Expected Despite End of Pandemic Aid

By David Sipos ('24)
Senior Editor

Walls administrators expect that the new school budget for next year will not result in a problematic funding crunch, despite a small loss of money.

The initial funding allotment from DCPS for SY 2023-24 is \$6,536,431, down approximately \$12,800 from last year. While this budget may seem staggeringly large to students, this is what it takes to keep Walls running. In past years, even these sums haven’t been enough to avoid cuts to school staff and services. However, this year’s budget is sufficient to avoid any cuts to teachers and other staff.

Much of the funding decline is due to the end of Recovery Funding, a one-time D.C. policy that distributed extra money to schools during the pandemic to ensure budget stability. This cancels out a minor citywide increase in the per-student funding model.

Walls has often experienced budgeting challenges. “Usually, there’s too little money... you can move it here, move it there, but there’s not enough to go around,” said Carlton Ackerman, the teacher co-chair of the Walls Local School Advisory Team (LSAT), which makes budget recommendations alongside Principal Sylvia Isaac.

This has posed problems, putting Walls “in a position where we had to cut a staff position because we didn’t have enough funding,” Ms. Isaac said. In some cases, the administration has been able to make petitions to DCPS to adjust parts of the budget and move funds designated for areas, but this doesn’t always save all staff positions. In 2020, for example, a budget crunch led to the loss of a librarian and a mental health specialist, according to Mr. Ackerman.

Additionally, Walls has a more limited budget compared to many other schools because of the DCPS funding formula. According to Ms. Isaac, Walls doesn’t have a large number of low-income students eligible for free or reduced lunch to qualify for certain Title I federal education funds. Schools with more at-risk students get more money from DCPS under Title I. Though Walls has relatively less funding, it also can get by with less.

Despite the regular funding challenges, this year “it all worked out. “[This is] the first year in years and years and years that it all worked out,” Mr. Ackerman said. With this budget “we were able to maintain all of our positions” and avoid cuts, Ms. Isaac said.

Ms. Isaac, who makes many final budget allocation decisions, chose to prioritize holding onto staff next year, which she views as essential to the culture of the school. “That’s important because it directly speaks to why we’re here. That is to ensure we’re meeting the needs of all of the students,” she said.

Mr. Ackerman and the LSAT agreed. “Number one, number two, number three, staff,

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Choir and Orchestra Perform at Orlando Music Festival

By Maia Riggs ('25)
Staff Writer

The School Without Walls music department headed down to Orlando, Fla., March 15-19 to compete in the OrlandoFest music festival.

The choir and band came home with first and third in the “superior” bracket of competition, and the orchestra received second place in the “excellent” bracket.

The event was the music department’s first trip to Florida since 2020, just before the pandemic.

Music teacher Christopher Alberts, the orchestra and band leader, said the trip went according to plan. “I think that the students did a great job, [and] the trip overall was really well organized,” he said.

The 64 students who went on the trip flew down to Orlando on Wednesday morning and spent the next few days exploring the amusement parks at Universal Studios.

“The competition itself is a three-day competition, but we don’t have any control over the performance schedule,” Mr. Alberts said. “This year was actually the first year that it ever occurred that we were the last groups performing in the competition, so we didn’t go until Saturday evening.”

Though the amusement parks were fun, many students said the experience tested their patience. “There was a lot of waiting,” Lucy Byron ('25) said. “Even at this time of year, it was really packed, and some of the waits could take two or more hours.”

Xavier Miller ('25) and Lily Turcotte-Keen ('24) agreed. “The parks were super fun, but the lines were so long. But it was fine because you



Orchestra and choir students at Universal Studios last month / Credits: Christopher Alberts

could talk to each other in the lines, and make friends with the other people around you,” Turcotte-Keen said.

The trip had a per-student cost of around \$1,200, though some students received financial aid. The music department had two fundraisers beforehand, a popcorn sale and a pizza-making class.

Outside of fundraising, the preparation leading up to the trip was also difficult musically. Most of the band and orchestra were just recovering from playing in the drama department’s “Cinderella.” Participating in the musical was a multi-week venture that resulted in many orchestra members missing school for rehearsal.

“We were coming off of the musical, so it was a very busy winter for us,” Mr. Alberts said.

“In hindsight it would have been planned differently, but the kids rose to the occasion and did a great job.”

Though the weeks before the trip may have been chaotic, most students thought that it was a great experience overall. “My favorite part overall was making new friends, and the time that was spent chatting and laughing in hotel rooms,” Turcotte-Keen said.

The competition aspect of the trip went very well, with the choir receiving an incredible first place win. Orchestra and stage band also did well, coming home with second and third respectively.

“Although I didn’t think we were going to get first place, we showed up and we did really well,” Annika Smith ('25) said. “Just go look at the trophy downstairs.” ●

How Does the Walls Admissions Process Work?

By Zoe Becker ('26)
Staff Writer

Hundreds of eighth-grade students came to Walls for admissions interviews earlier this month, hoping to be offered a slot in next year’s freshman class. But what exactly determines whether a student gets into Walls or not?

In recent years, the process for measuring the merit of Walls applicants has changed considerably. The current admissions process, unlike former ones, does not involve a standardized test for applicants.

In December 2020, DCPS Chancellor Lewis D. Ferebee suspended the Walls admissions test over concerns that it could not be administered safely in person or fairly at home during the pandemic given the possibility of cheating.

Officials for DCPS have not publicly communicated why the test was not reinstated following the pandemic.

The former admissions test consisted of an English and Math section, similar to other standardized tests like the SAT but at an eighth grade level.

With the suspension of the test necessitated by the pandemic, DCPS began to explore whether permanent removal of the test would increase racial and socioeconomic diversity. High family income is often correlated with higher performance on tests because it allows students to access more extensive educational



Outside the Walls building March 27 / Credits: Meerabela Kempf

resources. “Despite the [suspension of the admissions test], we have not yet seen an increase in diverse representation across all wards,” Ferebee said in a statement to the Washington Post in 2021.

Given the lack of progress in advancing diversity, Ferebee said that DCPS is “in the process of evaluating additional changes to the admissions approach to recruitment, access, and student preparation to further build a process.” Thus far, the chancellor has not outlined plans to reinstate an admissions test.

Under the new admissions system, after

all applicants have submitted their transcripts from seventh grade and the first term of eighth grade, those with the top 500 GPAs are offered a 20 minute interview. Interviews consist of multiple questions with students and a brief question for parents.

Ishan Hsu ('24), who volunteered the past two years to conduct prospective student interviews, said, “Most of the questions [they] ask come from a pre-prepared list in order to maintain consistency.”

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DCPS Eliminates 501(c)(3) Requirement For Service Hours

By Gabriella Goldberg ('25)
Staff Writer

D.C.'s dramatic reduction of its 30-year-old community service requirement for the classes of 2023, 2024 and 2025 earlier this year — city officials said the COVID-19 pandemic limited opportunities for students to earn hours — had immediate ramifications for many current high school students.

But alongside that move came another, permanent change: eliminating the requirement that students earn their hours with a 501(c)(3) organization.

501(c)(3) status — many nonprofits fall under the designation — is restricted to organizations with a mission of promoting a social cause or offering a public benefit. However, under DCPS's new changes, students can complete hours at for-profit businesses, such as Costco or Safeway.

Officials have said the new policy offers more flexibility in completing hours; however, there is some controversy, with many students questioning whether working for a company is actually community service. A DCPS spokesperson declined to comment.

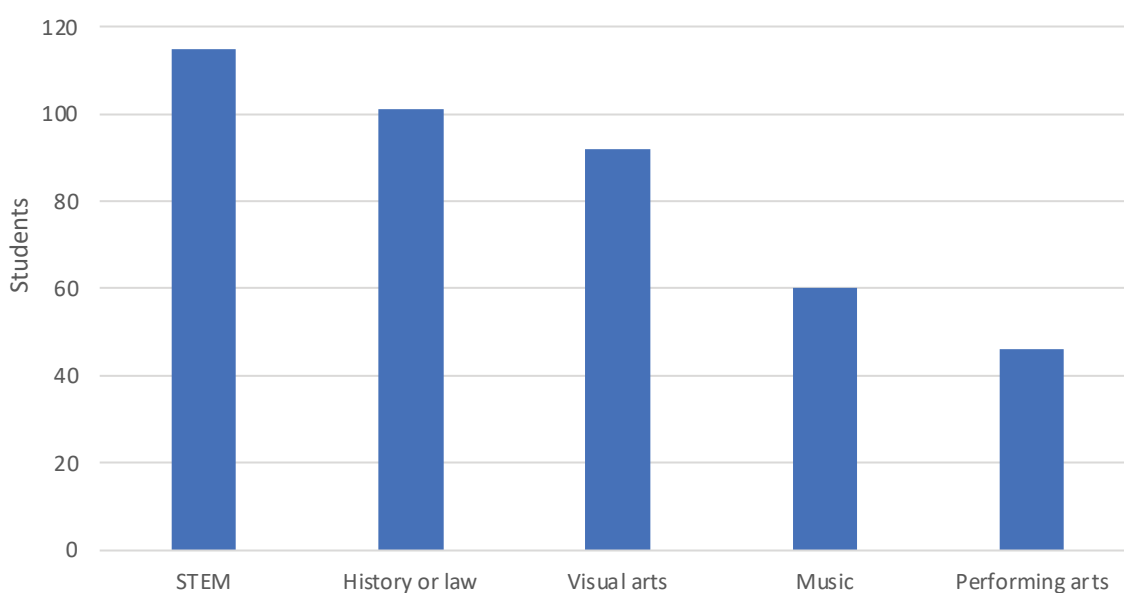
Some students who have already completed their required hours at nonprofits are unhappy with this decision. "Community service is our civic duty as citizens on this earth and members of the D.C. community," said Sophie Schell ('25), who has already completed over 400 service hours. "The community service required should be required to be performed in conjunction with a nonprofit because working at a grocery store isn't community service, it is a job. The purpose of community service is to give back to your community, not just to get a certain amount of hours."

On the other hand, Augusta Kankel ('25) said, "You should get your hours for [for-profits]...You are doing a service to the community, and someone has to do the work." She said she thought working for a business is worth the hours because doing any necessary work is good for the community.

Moreover, Wongel Lemien ('24) said that as a freshman just starting to earn community service hours, the wide array of new options is "helpful" and makes the requirement seem less daunting — especially at Walls, which already has extra requirements necessary to complete in order to graduate, like senior project and internships.

Eleanor Brosowsky ('26) said that because the move doesn't take away any student's options, it "doesn't really mean much" for most people. "This change really depends on your preferences and the opportunities you have," she said. ●

What electives are you most interested in? / Source: Rookery survey



Survey: Overwhelming Majority of Students Dissatisfied With Walls Elective Options

By Rachel Kolko ('24)
Senior Writer

About 26 years ago, School Without Walls offered a French culinary class to students as an elective credit.

Believe it or not, there used to be a small stove and sink in room 226 where students would whip up French dishes, according to the longest-serving faculty member at Walls, Jenine Pokorak.

Although French cooking might not be the first thing that comes to mind, nowadays, many Walls students — especially upperclassmen — find themselves looking for more unique elective options.

A majority of respondents to an anonymous Rookery survey of 207 Walls students across all grades said the school does not offer enough elective options.

Out of the grade levels, the freshman class had the highest number of students who feel the electives don't need to be improved. As the classes progressed in seniority, the positive reviews were fewer in number, with seniors expressing the least satisfaction with the status quo.

Overall, around 70 percent of students feel changes need to be made to the electives at Walls in some way.

The biggest criticism from these students was that Walls does not have enough variety in their offerings. Many note that most of the electives are general novice courses, which leaves little room for more advanced or niche study.

Petra Debelack ('24), who is interested in art, explained that in the first semester of this year, they took Art A, an introductory level class, because it was the only elective of some interest to them that would satisfy their schedule. "I like Art A a lot, but it is not teaching me anything that I don't know," they said, adding that the class felt like a repeat of their fresh-

man-year Drawing and Painting course.

Debelack explained this problem does not apply only to art electives. "Our science department is just generally really limited," they said. "We just have the basic sciences and that's pretty much it."

Others agree. When students were asked which electives they had more interest in taking, 54.6 percent said STEM-related electives, higher than any other type of elective listed.

"Walls could have more science related electives such as anatomy or zoology. Trying to find a class that involves science other than the classes that I have been mandated to take is really hard and usually unsuccessful," one senior respondent suggested.

The challenge with these types of STEM electives is that they usually require expensive resources if they are to be taught in an interactive way.

Simon Kirschenbaum ('23), who is a co-captain of the Walls robotics team, explains that he almost decided to go to Jackson-Reed for high school since it had more robust engineering classes. "[Jackson-Reed] has a lot of very fancy tools that cost a lot of money," he said. Walls, a smaller humanities-focused school with a smaller budget, doesn't always have the means for resources for these higher-tech STEM classes like engineering.

Still, students pushed for more STEM options. "I would totally take a forensics class," Debelack said. Other survey respondents were enthusiastic about forensics as well.

If these students had attended Walls some years back, they might have gotten their wish: Not only did Walls offer a forensics class, it also had classes like anatomy and physiology, documentary filmmaking, peace studies (taught by the renowned peace lecturer Colman McCarthy) and more, according to various teachers.

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New School Budget Sufficient to Prevent Staff Cuts

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staff, staff," Mr. Ackerman said.

Ms. Isaac cited Walls's only having one counselor per grade, compared to the typical three counselors suggested by the DCPS funding model, as an example of why prioritizing staff was important. Additionally, maintaining staff is critical "so that class sizes aren't large and students are getting more hands-on support from a teacher," Ms. Isaac said.

While all staff positions will be main-

tained next year, that may create a separate budget crunch for non-personnel spending. This category includes custodial supplies, office supplies, and student travel, among other essentials. Ms. Isaac said, "If it was possible to get additional funding for non-personnel...that would have been a change I would have made."

"Depending on...if the school system recognizes that it is responsible for certain things," non-personnel spending shouldn't be a problem, Mr. Ackerman said, "but if the school system says 'we're not going to pay for that, that

should come out of the school budget'... then that becomes a problem." For example, there is a question of whether DCPS will cover the cost of textbooks as a citywide expense, or if those have to come out of the Walls budget. If non-personnel funds don't go far enough, the school will likely ask the community and the Home and School Association to step in.

The administration hopes to stretch funding far enough so that everything runs smoothly. "It is really a balancing act," Ms. Isaac said. ●

Walls Needs More Elective Options, Students Say

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A central reason explaining why these electives have not made a comeback is that teachers who would be qualified to teach these types of classes do not have time in their schedule to teach them.

Kathryn Moore, the junior-class counselor, explained that Walls teachers are only able to teach a maximum of five classes each semester. This makes it hard to add new electives, since teachers' schedules are already filled with classes students must take to graduate.

"If we had extra money in the budget for an extra teacher, we could bring on a teacher in any subject that could teach electives," Ms. Moore said. "Unfortunately, DCPS never tends to give us extra money." With the release of the budget for the 2023-24 school year, a new hire appears doubtful.

However, even if an entirely new position is not realistic at the moment, Walls still has the ability to hire adjunct teachers — most of whom are graduate students from nearby universities — to teach specialized electives, like the current street law and constitutional law courses.

In fact, according to Ms. Moore, the school is currently in the process of finding an adjunct teacher to teach a subject desired by many students: economics.

Economics or financial literacy was the

number one requested class, making up about 16 percent of the responses.

"It is a potential elective for next year — not definite, but it is one that we put on the course offerings list to get an idea of student interest, and I know the administration is working on trying to get an adjunct teacher to support that type of class," she said.

Although students mostly expressed discontent with the lack of electives, many also raised concerns about access to the few options that do exist, since upper grades get priority on course selection. "There are lots of classes that only seniors get into... like AP Psych and AP [Human Geography], which means that by senior year many are forced to try to cram in a bunch of classes," one junior survey respondent noted.

Debelack, who wants to take many of the classes typically reserved for seniors next year, faces the same problem. To try and work around it, they requested taking D.C. History this year, earlier than most Walls students do. "I wanted to make it so that I would have extra space in my classes next year," they said. "I have so many classes that I want to take." However, since it is a graduation requirement, seniors have first priority to get into this class, and Debelack's request was denied.

With all of the criticism, students gave suggestions on what could be done about electives. "Instead of having to take electives people

aren't interested in, there should be study hall periods at least for upperclassmen who have already completed their required electives," a sophomore suggested. Several other upperclassmen agreed.

Unfortunately for them, Ms. Moore explained that there is a DCPS-wide policy against study halls. "District-wide, it's probably to make sure that students are scheduled to remain on track for graduation," she said. Ms. Moore noted that a study hall period might not be something of interest to many students anyway. "People tend to take full schedules because it looks better for college," she said.

Another notion students across grade levels advocated for when responding to the survey was more student input with elective choices. "Walls should do surveys about student interests," a respondent suggested. "Then, electives can be created based on the majority's interest."

A desire for more AP classes outside of core AP classes, such as AP Computer Science, AP Art history, AP Micro- and Macroeconomics and AP European History, appeared in a number of respondents' answers.

Other electives students expressed interest in included botany, ceramics and pottery, cooking and home economics, creative writing, criminology, sign language, sports and sports medicine, women and gender studies and zoology. ●

Robotics Team Wins Local Championship

By Jessie Moss ('26)
Staff Writer

A season of hard work culminated in a regional win for the Walls robotics team March 11-12. Competing against 36 other teams in the DMV, Walls students were able to best build a robot that best completed three tasks: taking a small traffic cone and putting it on one of three levels, placing an inflatable cube on one of two platforms, and, without human input, driving onto and balancing on a small platform.

According to team co-captain Bianca Popa ('23), what ultimately set the Walls robotics team ahead was their robot's "very low center of mass" which helped the robot to balance, while "a lot of the other teams weren't able to do that because they had a lot built up on the robot vertically."

Robotics teams from across the DMV built one robot each that could successfully complete these tasks. At the competition, each team was given a small work area and made final touches to their robots before finally executing the tasks to the best of their ability.

Teams competed in 12 qualifying matches before joining forces with two other schools for playoffs. Walls's victory came alongside teams from Fresta Valley Christian School and Poolsville High School.

This was far from easy, and for Walls students, necessary preparation required long daily practices led by team co-captains Popa and Simon Kirschenbaum ('23) with coaches and science teachers Adam Vrooman and Dr. Thomas Bright. In the fall, practice consisted largely of workshops focusing on the basics of robotics, but as the competition season began, the focus shifted to the strenuous process of building the robot.

Despite this extensive preparation, the competition itself was far from smooth sailing for Walls. "We actually weren't able to execute the design we had in mind," Popa said. "Everyone was really stressed out because last-minute everything was beginning to go wrong and we



The Walls robotics team, center, after winning the FIRST Chesapeake District Championship March 12
Credits: Simon Kirschenbaum

initially planned to build something that we had to scrap altogether."

Even with these struggles, the Walls team was able to improvise with the robot's design and ultimately win the competition. This win was monumental for the team, which has attended a total of twenty-three competitions since its founding in 2009. "We've definitely placed at other competitions like this in the past, but never... this high, in terms of winning a tournament," Mr. Vrooman said.

According to Mr. Vrooman, preparation begins at the beginning of the year when fall recruitment begins and the team does "workshops on some mechanical, electrical programming to get some familiarity" for new members. In early January, when objectives of the competition were revealed, students received a kit of parts and had six weeks to construct it, a period referred to as "build season."

Build season is a strenuous process: "We meet every day of the week...in room 30 until 5:30 or later," Kirschenbaum said.

Success in robotics requires funding in addition to this dedication. "Traditionally, the cost of robotics is \$6,000 for rights to attend the competition and for the kit of parts," Mr.

Vrooman said. "Anything that you need to purchase outside of that — for example, this year students had to purchase a gyroscope — has to be purchased using team funds, so student meals, transportation, things of that nature are not covered."

While funding has not been a problem in the past, the limits of Home and School Association funding and the end of a grant from Google has meant that "this year is our last year of having enough money," according to Kirschenbaum. "I think our pool has basically run out."

This lack of money for the program already has implications for the students. "We technically have a chance to qualify for the next round, for the district championships, but we aren't planning on going because we don't want to travel and I don't know that we have the money to," Kirschenbaum explained.

"When students advance to the next level, they generally have to pay another \$4,000-6,000 to compete," Mr. Vrooman added. The aspiration is to get to the regional tournaments and "for students to be able to show their capacity for robotics, but beyond that, it's practical skills that really make this STEM program so important." ●

Students Participate in Youth and Government Legislative Weekend

By David Sipos ('24)
Senior Editor

Fourteen Walls students attended the D.C. Youth and Government (YAG) Legislative Weekend conference, a simulation of the D.C. lawmaking process on March 17 and 18. Students have spent the past six months researching, drafting, and deliberating bills to improve D.C. law. In person for the first time since 2019, students met to debate and pass their legislation through committees and the Council, and see them signed by the youth mayor.

Though the Walls delegation fell short of the Outstanding Delegation distinction, students passed several bills, held leadership positions, and were named to D.C.'s delegation for the national YAG conference.

Delegates wrote bills to affect D.C. policy, and many of these bills were signed into law. These included Dima Chiavello's ('23) bill to eliminate dress codes in DCPS, Sebastian Reese ('23) and Bennet Elmendorf's ('23) bill to give students a designated time to eat breakfast at school, Matthias Dominguez's ('23) bill to invest in rainwater drainage, and Amay Arora's ('24) bill to limit gentrification and increase affordable housing.

The Walls delegation might have been more successful, with a shot at Outstanding Delegation, but several delegates left mid-conference after tournament policy violations.

Chauncey Henry ('23) worked hard to pass his bill, which would make Wednesdays half-days for DCPS students. He explained that he wrote the bill "so that people could have a little break after school and have time to get their community service hours."

Like many YAG delegates, Henry's bill arose from personal experience. He had Wednesdays off during his sophomore year. "I was always very engaged in the second half of the week because we had a break on Wednesday. I was able to get a lot of community service hours as well," Henry said. "If I was able to have



Amina Ford ('23), center, gives a speech to open the conference / Credits: Wyndham Mills

that chance, everyone else should be able to have that chance as well."

He also was appointed to the YAG Board of Education, and regularly voiced his opinion on legislation. "Whenever they needed someone to say something... I always tried volunteering," Henry said. For his work, Henry earned the Outstanding Statesman award at the end of the conference and was named as an alternate to the national conference, alongside Chiavello.

Though he is graduating this year, Henry hopes that the Walls YAG delegation will grow next year, partly to compete with the far larger BASIS DC delegation and partly to gain influence on committees and leadership positions.

With the exception of youth mayor, Walls students actually held all major leadership positions at Legislative Weekend: Amina Ford ('23) chaired the City Council, James Setty ('23) chaired the Board of Education, and Wyndham Mills ('24) ran the Press Corps.

Setty has co-lead the Walls YAG with Ford for two years, capping off four years in the program by serving as youth superintendent. "I logistically planned all the happenings... mainly I oversaw education legislation that came in, I gave my opinion on those," Setty said of his role.

He spoke positively of Walls' performance at legislative weekend, saying "I feel satisfied, a lot of our bills passed, we got some awards." But Setty is graduating this year, and hopes Walls will continue its streak of success next year. "I hope they keep doing well... growing [the Walls program] would be nice," he added.

This was also Setty's first in-person conference as the pandemic canceled his first during his freshman year and made two others virtual. "Debating in person was a much better experience; everything ran smoother," Setty said. "It was more rewarding." ●

Seniors Victorious in School-Wide Quiz Bowl Tournament



The cheer team performs before the final Quiz Bowl tournament round March 8 / Credits: Adah Svetlik

By Rachel Kolko ('24)
Senior Writer

On March 8 during advisory, all of Walls tuned in from their classrooms to watch a cheer team performance followed by the singing of the national anthem. This elaborate ceremony was, of course, a prelude to none other than the championship round of the Walls Quiz Bowl tournament.

Organized by humanities teacher Jeffrey Jordan, the Quiz Bowl tournament featured student teams from each grade who competed against each other to answer a variety of trivia questions.

Jeffrey Jordan already sponsors the Quiz Bowl club at Walls, where students meet twice a week to play the trivia game, but he wanted to give the whole school a chance to experience it.

Competing in the first round of the tournament were the freshmen against the sophomores, with the sophomores coming out on top.

The questions the freshmen and sophomores were asked were created by Mr. Jordan and a few other teachers instead of official questions made by Quiz Bowl that some of the contestants were used to. Eleanor Brosowsky ('26), a regular of the Quiz Bowl club, was surprised by the kind of questions asked. "For that

first round, the questions asked were not Quiz Bowl questions," she said. "There's a very specific format for Quiz Bowl, and that was not it."

According to Mr. Jordan, the questions were created to incorporate content the students had learned about in their classes into the trivia questions.

Brosowsky said that this made it much harder to prepare for, especially after attending Quiz Bowl club and getting used to the types of questions. "Our strategy shifted. But afterwards, it was basically just buzz as soon as you have any idea," she said.

The next round of the tournament, where juniors faced off against seniors, featured official Quiz Bowl questions instead. Seniors would emerge victorious from this round.

Moments before it started, Devan Tatlow ('24) was sitting in his advisory when he got a phone call from a fellow classmate. "He was like, 'Devan, come to [music teacher Christopher] Alberts's room now,'" Tatlow said. "And I was like 'Okay?' and showed up at Mr. Alberts's room, and it turned out to be Quiz Bowl."

For Sydney Horge ('23), the round against the juniors was more of an introduction to the trivia game. "I was really moral support that round," she said. "I was not helpful at all. And even the ones I did know, the juniors got before I could even say anything, or it was something everyone knew."

Since the seniors won the round, Horge had another shot at getting to answer trivia

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Walls Rome Trip, First Outside U.S. Since Pandemic, a “Resounding Success”

By Jessie Moss ('26)
Staff Writer

Last month, 16 Walls seniors accompanied teachers Carlton Ackerman, Jane Brinley and Jan McGlennon on their annual trip to the magical city, and from visiting the Colosseum to enjoying the exquisite Italian cuisine, the trip was nothing short of spectacular.

While in Rome, students visited countless notable locations, including the Borghese Gallery, the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, the Vatican Museums, the Capitoline Museums, the National Museum, and the Stadium of Domitian. Other excursions included biking along the Appian Way, olive picking in the countryside, and a day trip to Pompeii.

The trip, which took place Feb. 14-24, was the sixth Walls trip to Rome. But it came after a break from the biannual schedule of previous trips to Rome due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created numerous barriers to the trip. In fact, the 2023 excursion was the first Walls-led international trip since 2019.

Even coming out of the pandemic, restrictions prevented the trip from going as planned. “DCPS had a ban on international travel which wasn’t lifted until last November, [when] we had hoped to do this trip,” Ms. McGlennon said. “We didn’t get the final approval until less than a month before when we were going.”

The pandemic impacted the trip in other ways, too. “This year, we limited [the students going on the trip] to seniors just because they hadn’t had a chance to travel previously because of COVID. Usually, it’s first come, first served, and the people who are able to pay their deposit and are organized are the ones who get to go,” Ms. McGlennon explained.



Seniors on the Rome trip visiting Pompeii Feb. 22 / Credits: Jan McGlennon

For the teachers involved, meticulous planning was integral to the trip’s success. “We had to plan out what we were going to do every single day, from morning to night; we planned out which days we were going to the museums — nothing was left to chance,” Ms. McGlennon said.

Unfortunately, a minor hurdle early on did arise early on. “Our luggage got delayed and we had flight cancellation delays, so we weren’t able to see the Pantheon the day we originally planned to,” trip attendee Savannah Alexander ('23) said. “But after that, everything was smooth sailing.”

Still, for Ms. McGlennon, the educational payoff of the trip made it very much worth

the struggles. “I think all travel can enrich people,” she said. “Rome, especially, has so much to offer that I think kids with all kinds of interests can find something they’re intrigued by or things that appeal to them.”

Many of the students on the trip take or formerly took Latin, including Meerabela Kempf ('23), who said connections to classical history were at the forefront of the experience. “After years of learning about ancient Rome, finally seeing the structures and places I learned so much about was incredible,” she said.

Even in terms of the weather, the trip struck unusual luck. “It was sunny every single

Rome continued on page 15

Juniors Discuss Preparing for the SAT

By Riley Gayle ('25)
Staff Writer

On March 1, along with thousands of high school students across the country, juniors at School Without Walls took the SAT. The SAT is often considered one of the most important tests in high school, though many colleges now don’t require SAT scores for the application process.

For many juniors this was their first time taking the SAT, which led to nervousness. Lily Turcotte-Keen ('24) said, “It was pretty nerve-racking — it’s a lot of pressure knowing how the SAT affects college admissions, and impacts your application in test-required schools. But once it was over, it was a relief.” She added that “it’s also nice to know that you can take it again if you’re unhappy with your score.”

At School Without Walls, students are given the chance to take SAT Prep as an elective with math teacher John Mungai. This class helps students prepare for the exam with practice tests and lessons. Lilly Menuiti ('24) said the class “was helpful and a good elective.”

There are other resources that can help students prepare for the SAT such as Khan Academy. Students are able to sync their previ-

ous test scores with Khan Academy, where the program will then provide them with practice problems that are specific to what they need to work on based on past SAT performance.

Turcotte-Keen used Khan Academy and found it effective. She said, “Practice tests were the most important and helpful study tool...I studied every day for half an hour in the months prior [to the test].”

Still, some students did not feel prepared for the SAT. Bryna Ha ('24) said, “I didn’t get to finish a lot of questions because I was very unprepared for the timing of things.”

Chamiya Carnathan ('24) had a similar experience. “I did not feel prepared because I did not study at all,” she said. “I guessed for like half the questions.”

Many juniors said they were going to study more for a future test. In addition to the March test, DCPS provides a test in October of senior year. Students can also pay the College Board to take the SAT on select Saturdays throughout the year.

Carnathan said she hoped to take advantage of these opportunities. “I want to take it again in June, so I’m going to study now to pre-

SAT continued on page 15

Quiz Bowl Looks to Future Tournaments

Quiz Bowl continued from page 5

questions in the subsequent, final contest. “The second round was definitely redemption,” she said.

The seniors developed a strategy for the finals where each member of the team would specialize in particular types of questions. She was assigned to the science questions right before the final round started. “Suddenly all of the science facts were coming into my mind,” she said.

Ian Springer ('25) was up against Horge in the tight finals match, where the seniors were declared the Quiz Bowl champions. The sophomores have two more years to win over the title of Quiz Bowl championship. “I think we got a good shot at winning,” he said. “Hopefully we get as many people from all the different grades so that we can have the best tournament we can next year.”

Mr. Jordan has more things in store for the future of Quiz Bowl. “Something’s coming up real soon that you guys will see,” he said. “Students should look forward to it, absolutely.” ●

How Walls Chooses Its New Students

Admissions continued from page 2

According to Noretia Hardge, the Walls admissions director, interview questions are about academic curiosity, resiliency, community, and diversity and inclusion. Parents are also asked one general question about their child.

“After the interview, [interviewers] are supposed to rate [candidates] on different categories,” Hsu said.

According to a public DCPS document from 2021, the interview score — calculated based on the interviewers’ rubrics — is weighted as 86 percent of an applicant’s score, while

GPA is the other 14 percent.

Ms. Hardge said the process after the interview is straightforward. “Based on the scores submitted from the interview [and previously received grades], we rank students 1-500,” she said. The top-ranked students are offered spots. ●

Students Question Token/Quarter Setup of Menstrual-Product Dispensers

Dispensers continued from page 1

in an environment that teaches us to fight against injustices.”

A person’s menstrual cycle is not something they have control over. Because of this, many argue that it is unethical to charge for menstrual products. Students at Walls have worked to broaden access to these products through organizations like the Monthly Club,

who partnered with the D.C. Diaper Bank to supply people in the district with pads and tampons. Last year, they also placed free products in the restrooms.

Compared to these student-led measures, many members of the Walls community feel that the new dispensers are a step backwards for Walls. “[The dispensers] just replace one barrier of access with another,” said Eleanor Brosowsky (‘26).

The inaccessibility of the tokens poses new questions: should it be necessary for students to speak to another person before gaining free access to dispensed menstrual products? How might they access dispensed menstrual products without paying?

Ms. Pace recognized these issues. “We just have to figure out how to put the tokens in restrooms so students can just take a token without having to see a person first.” ●

Lenient Grading Policies Remain as Walls Moves On From Pandemic

Grade Inflation continued from page 1

an excellent GPA, right? That’s an A,” Ms. Moore said. “GPAs are hugely inflated.”

Though grade inflation is by no means new, it has become particularly prevalent in recent years, with many more lenient DCPS grading policies remaining in place as vestiges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the most notable pandemic changes was a raise in the minimum score a student could receive for submitting an assignment from zero to 63 percent. The DCPS grading policy states that students must receive no less than a 63 percent on any submitted assignment that shows “student input, response, effort, or attempt at the task, however minimal it may be.”

Another major revision to the policy was the introduction of the “waiting for submission,” or WS, label for unsubmitted work. Assignments marked with a WS are scored as a 50 percent at the end of the advisory, as opposed to a zero.

“To some extent, [getting an] A is the bare minimum.”

Grade inflation makes it difficult to stand out, especially at a school like Walls where many students are already inclined toward high academic achievement. Ms. Moore cited the honors distinctions that appear on Walls transcripts in place of rankings as an example: Anyone with above a 3.8 GPA — below the junior-class average — graduates summa cum laude, the highest distinction.

In a similar vein, the National Honor Society’s minimum GPA for eligibility is 3.5, a standard the vast majority of Walls students meet. “How much of an honor is it then?” Ms. Moore asked. She clarified that the criteria for honors distinctions and the National Honor Society “were set with a different grading process” before the pandemic.

DCPS said in a statement at the beginning of the pandemic that they had “prioritized equity and rigor in [their] grading policies to ensure all students are supported academically as they navigate the challenges of the pandemic.”

Ms. Moore called the policy changes necessary to address unprecedented circumstances. “I think initially the goal was to provide flexibility, understanding of different situations around the pandemic. I think that was achieved,” she said.

But she questioned the applicability of those policies “now that things are a little bit more back to normal.”

“Sometimes, you’ve got to let students see the bad.”

In order for the grades to carry much meaning, they must reflect different levels of student understanding, physics teacher Dr. Thomas Bright said. “To most people, I would

imagine A means mastery, B means mostly mastery, and C is an average student,” he said. Recently, however, it’s become harder for students to determine what the baseline should be for different levels of content mastery. If a C is no longer the grade of an “average student,” it can be difficult for students to consistently determine what each grade represents.

“To some extent, A is like the bare minimum,” Madeline Eibner-Gebhardt (‘24) said. “It’s almost as if A is like, you put in the effort, and B is like, you just did the work.”

Max Goldberg (‘24) said DCPS policies make it “difficult to get below an 88 if you’re on top of everything.”

A DCPS spokesperson said in a statement to The Rookery that its policies ensure that “grades are not a mechanism used to sort students and perpetuate opportunity gaps” or a “tool for teaching accountability of consequential lessons.” Instead, they “are a measure of a skill or knowledge of content taught” as well as “a tool to grow intrinsic motivation.”

But Jeffrey Jordan, who teaches Humanities I and IV, said students can lose motivation when they are not prepared to fail. “Sometimes, you’ve got to let students see the bad,” he said. “Hopefully, it will propel them to work even harder.”

“A lot of 63s have really saved my grade. That’s a good thing.”

The upside to the more permissive grading policy is that it can help students present an impeccable — or close to impeccable — transcript to college admissions offices, even if they feel more pressure to maintain that record. Not all students see an issue with that.

“Personally, the 63 is better than a zero,” Michael McCleod (‘24) said, “and I’ve got a lot of 63s that have really saved my grade. That’s a good thing.”

“It’s definitely helped my grades so much so that I don’t have to really worry about them as much,” Malcolm Douglas (‘23) said. “I know that there’s going to be a 63 percent if I turn in the assignment, at the lowest, and then if I don’t do the work, it’ll be a WS, which is a 50 percent. So knowing [that], I’ve kind of worked the system a bit and can get by.”

Douglas also clarified that it wasn’t just “senioritis” impacting his attitude toward grades. “Once we came back from COVID after they put in those policies, I became — I wouldn’t say dependent, but I took advantage of those policies,” he said.

Another policy that students take advantage of is the ability to submit work late without harsh penalties. Students can submit work months after the due date and still receive credit. And though official DCPS policy mandates that they may not receive higher than an 86 percent for late work, students find that penalties are at the discretion of individual teachers.

“We learned pretty quickly which ones did and did not hold that policy,” said Douglas, “But still, 86, for turning it in literally months later, is not bad.”

Ironically, though, a lenient grading policy makes school more stressful for some students when getting the highest grades becomes an expectation, especially when colleges are aware of the school context that each student is coming from.

Eibner-Gebhardt said she “would worry what colleges would think,” because “if they know about grade inflation, a B might look bad to them.”

“A [single] bad grade can really mess up your entire future,” Matthew Weitzner (‘25) said.

“I’m not putting in as much effort as I should or could because of those policies.”

Even if it might make school easier, there remain significant consequences that students may or may not be aware of. “I think some of the downsides to [grade inflation] are that sometimes they can give students an inaccurate picture of where they really are in the class or in terms of mastering the material,” Ms. Moore said, adding that this was especially concerning in AP classes, where students face an outside test of their progress that may or may not align with DCPS grades.

Ms. Moore also said the policies “disadvantage students who would be straight A, top students, regardless,” because they don’t stand out as much.

Dr. Bright agreed that artificially enhancing students’ grades is not necessarily in their best interests. “There are a lot of people that used to get B’s that are now getting A’s that we can’t distinguish,” he said, “and unfortunately, teachers recognize this. Colleges recognize this. I don’t think that most students recognize this. And unfortunately [students] may have put themselves in a bad situation, thinking that everything is okay, but everybody that’s going to be looking at their B’s is going to know that that’s the old C, and they’re putting themselves in jeopardy.”

Mr. Jordan said that the pandemic-era grading policy “does not push students to excel,” and that students will face a “rude awakening” when they get to college. “It gives them a cushion and a false sense of their performance,” he said. “Colleges do not have a WS or [a] 63 percent [minimum].”

Some students do understand this. “It’s definitely hurt my work ethic,” Douglas said. “When I go to college, it’s going to hurt me because I’m not actively putting in as much effort as I should or as I could because of those policies. So when I go to college, I won’t be as prepared. I won’t have the strong work ethic that I probably could have [had] if those policies weren’t in place.”

Times have changed since March 2020, and the DCPS grading policy has “run its course,” Dr. Bright said.

Ms. Moore took a more nuanced position. “I think we have to move away from a pure pandemic mindset,” she said. ●

What's in a Letter of Recommendation?

By Georgia Murphy ('26)
Staff Writer

Many high school students find the challenge of receiving a good recommendation letter daunting. Whether you're a stressed-out junior or a paranoid freshman, receiving a good recommendation letter is often an important step in reaching collegiate goals, but the process to obtain one can be opaque. Let's try and demystify it.

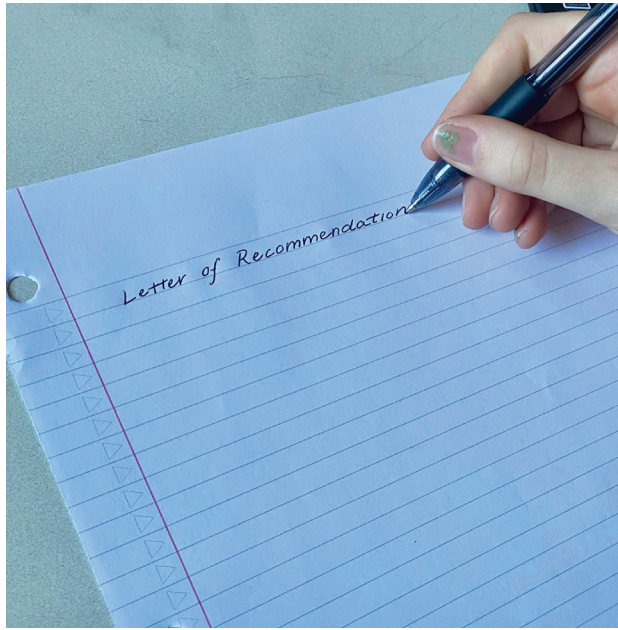
Most teachers and counselors request their students to fill out a brag sheet — a résumé of a student's achievements and activities. The brag sheet helps teachers get a sense of the student beyond their grades and behavior in the classroom. Spanish teacher Maribel Jimeno said, "I don't only talk about what he did in my class, but what kind of student he or she is as a whole. I can only get a sense of that through the brag sheet."

Some teachers don't use brag sheets, taking a different approach. AP Lang teacher Jan McGlennon sees brag sheets as "pointless," believing that "what the college wants to know from teachers is how the student performed... in class." Instead, Ms. McGlennon asks students to "[reflect] on the work that they've done in my class and what they've gained from it."

Once the teacher has the information they need, they begin in the time-consuming process of actually writing the letters. Kathryn Moore, the counselor for the class of 2024 said, "Writing a thorough, quality letter takes time. Usually at least 30 minutes per letter."

Ms. Jimeno said that the time it takes her varies but usually around "three, four hours." Teachers want to show colleges the best version of their students. Writing a high-quality, descriptive letter can be difficult, and the number of letters teachers have to write only adds to the difficulty.

A teacher's recommendation-letter work-



Credits: Georgia Murphy

load depends on a myriad of factors, including whether they are a teacher or counselor and what subject they teach. Counselors must write letters for all 150 students in a grade.

Ms. McGlennon said, "Over the last three years I've written probably an average of 50 students each year. That's sort of normal because I teach junior English, and a lot of colleges want an English teacher."

Many teachers find that their familiarity with the student has a big effect on the time and effort it takes to write a letter. Ms. McGlennon said, "Some of them are really easy, when a student is very active in class and does a good job and makes themselves known to me. It's harder to write [if] I don't really have a good sense of who they are."

Students also notice how beneficial it is to build positive connections with adults in the SWW building. Katrina Tracy ('23) said, "I was nervous, but I got positive responses" to asking

for recommendations due to "good relationships with my teachers."

Despite the systems in place to ensure students receive quality letters, some juniors have worries. "Asking is the part I am most stressed about," Lily Turcotte-Keen ('24) said. "First, I have no clue who would be a good person to ask. And then there's the fact that they could just flat-out reject you to your face."

For the most part, teachers and counselors enjoy writing letters for students they've known for a long time. Ms. Jimeno said, "I have students this year who I've had for four years in a row. I know them by heart. I know what they do. I know everything because they are like part of my family." Ms. Jimeno noted that she doesn't even need a brag sheet from these students.

On the other hand, having a minimal or adverse relationship with a teacher can have the opposite effect. Ms. McGlennon said, "I outright refused [to write a recommendation] once. This was a student I'd had for two years for Latin, and every single time he came into the classroom he borrowed a pencil and by the end of class every single day it was broken." She explained that honesty and respect are incredibly important to her. "You don't have to be a genius but you need to try."

Counselors cannot refuse to write recommendations, but Ms. Moore said that "the quality and depth of a letter can vary based on what qualities the student has demonstrated and how much effort they put into providing information for the letter."

Overall, adults at Walls seem to appreciate the effort a student gives above all else. "I have written letters for students who were not the top of my class but they were the ones who made the most effort," Ms. Jimeno said. "I always write the best letters for them because I can see that there is an effort, there is a willingness to improve and to do well, and that's the important thing." ●

SCHOLARSHIP SPOTLIGHT

Fabiha Hatem Earns GW SJT Scholarship

By Zoe Becker ('26)
Staff Writer

For many Walls seniors, college remains full of unknowns; numerous students don't know yet where they'll be in school next year, and most of those who do are braving new environments and people.

However, Fabiha Hatem ('23) already has many major questions about next year answered because she knows she'll be staying here in D.C.

Hatem was a 2023 recipient of the GW Stephen Joel Trachtenberg (SJT) Scholarship. The scholarship program was launched by former GW president Stephen Joel Trachtenberg in 1989 and to serve D.C. students. The scholarship serves D.C. residents who attend public, private, and charter schools within D.C.

According to the GW website, every year since it has "provid[ed] academically talented D.C. high school seniors with a full, four-year scholarship covering tuition, room and board, books and fees at the university."

Hatem is interested in business and "applied because [she] knows that their business school is good," she said.

Ten students in D.C. are chosen for the scholarship each year. This year, selected students hailed from Mckinley Technology High School, Georgetown Visitation High School, Paul International High School, Coolidge High School, Columbia Heights Educational Cam-



Fabiha Hatem ('23), second from right, with Ms. Tully, Ms. Isaac, Ms. Sinprasith and family
Credits: Sylvia Isaac

pus, Dunbar High School, Benjamin Banneker High School, and Gonzaga High School in addition to Walls.

Seven of the 10 selected students were from DCPS.

All of the selected SJT scholars participate in a weekly seminar once at GW. The goal of the seminar is not formalized instruction or education, but rather, cultivating relationships among SJT scholars. The prospect of this tight-knit group appealed to Fabiha. "I like the SJT program because of how the community seems," she said.

To receive the scholarship, students like

Hatem had to submit an application to GW by the regular decision deadline of Jan. 5 and subsequently be nominated by their school counselor for the scholarship by Jan. 11.

Hatem, along with other finalists for the scholarship, completed a brief interview with a GW Admissions Committee member.

"It wasn't long at all. They asked about why I wanted to stay in D.C.," Hatem said. "I have a big family, so staying in D.C. and staying with them was important."

Congratulations Fabiha! ●

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Ms. X Will Always Be There to Help

By Penelope Morris ('24)
Staff Writer

As Walls' sports teams grow, one of the most important people in supporting the school's athletes has continually been Ms. X.

Xavion Santiago — better known to the Walls community as Ms. X — is the school's athletic trainer, or AT. You've probably seen a crowd of students outside her office during lunch time, looking to receive help with an injury, get advice on sports, or even just to chat. Maybe you're a routine visitor, getting physical therapy on a weekly basis.

Ms. X decided that she wanted to be an athletic trainer early in life, after being in a car accident in high school. At the time, she played several sports, including soccer, volleyball, and basketball. During her recovery from the accident, she developed an interest in athletic train-

ing and decided that she would pursue it as a career, studying kinesiology and exercise science at Temple University and then High Point University.

She began at Walls in December 2017, and it is just one of many posts: she also works at Duke Ellington High School, Hardy Middle School, School Without Walls at Francis Stevens, Hyde-Addison Elementary School, and Stoddert Elementary School. Because DCPS only employs fourteen full-time ATs, each trainer has to cover multiple schools.

Ms. X also wears many hats as an AT. "Athletic trainers are responsible for both paperwork and game coverage," she explained.

She added that she is on duty for "home games for high schools but only playoffs and championships for elementary schools." Outside of covering games, she also works with teams and individual athletes on injury preven-

tion and to assist in recovery.

Ms. X explained that athletic trainers work in many other sectors, such as the military, professional sports, performing arts and even at companies like Amazon to ensure employees are carrying heavy loads safely.

For students interested in pursuing a career in athletic training, she recommends getting started early in order to determine if it is the right path — the majority of athletic trainers have at least a master's degree, and the Board of Certification (BOC) exam is long and complex.

Reflecting on her experience as an AT, Ms. X said the most important part of helping an athlete recover after an injury is getting to know their personality. "Knowing which days are good days and which days are bad days — and knowing when I can use sarcasm — is important. When someone is having an off day I can recognize that," she says.

On the athlete's side, though, she says that self-advocacy goes a long way: "Advocating for your own education, advocating for yourself," is hugely important, she said. ●

GWECF and Beyond: Exploring Dual-Enrollment Opportunities

By Darya Filippova ('24)
Staff Writer

Walls's partnership with George Washington University (GWU) and other universities is a major draw for many potential students. Dual enrollment opportunities engage students in college level work and the college environment before graduating high school.

In the GW Early College Program (GWECF), students take all of their junior and senior-year courses at GW, allowing them to graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Students apply to GWECF in their sophomore year. Typically, the application process starts in late February and concludes in the spring. Students hear back on their decision in April, and after a round of interviews, students are admitted around May.

Other dual enrollment programs include the GW Exposure program, which allows students to take one college class per semester. Courses don't appear on DCPS transcripts and have no effect on GPA. In some cases, GW course credits will transfer to students' four-year colleges. Students still get access to GW's facilities and resources. Applications for the summer semester will open in March and be sent out to incoming juniors and seniors.

Similarly, programs with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) offer dual enrollment opportunities for sophomore, juniors, and seniors at colleges like UDC, Bay Atlantic University, Marymount University, and Montgomery College.

OSSE allows high school students to take up to two courses per semester. Applications open around the end of a semester so students have time to apply for the upcoming one. OSSE matches students with a select college from a ranked list so students are given a variety of schools they can attend.

UDC-Care offers high school students the option to take one course at the community college's campus after being admitted through an application with a timeline similar to OSSE. Students meet with a college advisor that helps them navigate their course offerings. Applications can be accessible through school counselors or the OSSE and UDC websites.

Unlike GW programs that are open to only Walls juniors and seniors and follow a different application timeline, OSSE and UDC-Care are open to all high schoolers who are interested in being exposed to rigorous college work early. In fact, junior counselor Kathryn Moore en-



Class of 2024 students in the GW Early College Program / Credits: Avajane Lei

courages students to utilize Walls's connections with GW but suggests that underclassmen take classes at OSSE or UDC before applying to a more prestigious program.

Exposure students celebrated their successes while admitting the challenges they faced with an additional class. Michael McLeod ('24) enjoyed "getting a 90 on my midterm," but did not enjoy "writing five papers in a matter of two weeks." Alex Lamb ('24) expressed excitement about "learning so many cool things and different formulas," while Adelaide Van Wye ('24) said that "balancing GW work and Walls work" was a challenge.

Applying to GWECF has its advantages alongside getting an associate's degree. GWECF junior Jackson Guo enjoys "being able to create my own schedule." GWECF students are allowed to pick the time of their classes, opening up more room for other activities throughout the day.

Ishan Pabla ('24) said, "Meeting undergrads and professors, taking exciting classes, and having a sense of freedom" were the advantages of participating in GWECF.

GWECF has its challenges too. Not only is the workload an increase from high school, but students expressed difficulty in trying to maintain a solid relationship with friends from Walls while at the same time trying to connect with GW students. One student described it

as "a challenge in interacting with college students and being involved when you don't live on campus or have the full college experience."

Students of both programs said adapting to a college structure was a challenge. Bereket Hailu ('24), who is enrolled at Bay Atlantic University through OSSE, said that "adapting to the structure of a purely lecture based class was a bit strange, and, if I'm being honest, boring."

Avajane Lei ('24), who did UDC-Care as a sophomore and is now in GWECF, remembers being "slammed in the face with intense readings and even the way we were taught how to do citations wasn't exactly sufficient for college professor standards."

Though students experienced obstacles adapting to a college environment, their motivation to do well led them to apply. Some liked the idea of graduating college two years early, while others wanted to gain some experience prior to entering college in a few years. "I applied to prepare myself for college and to get at least some college out of the way, in terms of credit," said Exposure participant Derek Emons ('24).

Pabla had a different approach: He applied for GWECF because he felt like he would be working "the same amount at Walls, but with more reward."

Applications to the summer 2023 GW Exposure program are due April 3. ●

STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS • BY MILES FELIX ('24)

Students Making Their Own Music

Sean Green Raps as Young Jeroh

In eighth grade, Sean Green ('23) was producing rap beats in his room for fun. Four years later, Green is rapping under the name Young Jeroh, and he's planning to attend New York University next year to study at the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music. But how did he accomplish this and get into one of the best music schools in the country?

Like most of us, Green found himself with more free time during the pandemic. His freshman year was cut short due to COVID-19, and all of his sophomore year was virtual. Despite the challenges of life during online school, Green was able to use the new free time to lean more into his interest in music. "In quarantine, I started waking up every day and making a new song, dedicating a lot of time to it, and I got much better quickly," Green said.

One day, as Green worked, he thought,



Sean Green ('23), a.k.a. Young Jeroh, sits on the National Mall to record a music video for his song "Phases" / Credits: Sean Green

"What if I started singing or rapping on these beats?" He challenged himself to develop his skills as a rapper, while still producing beats. Over time, Green has become a talented rapper and producer known as Young Jeroh. Green said that his music "is very hip-hop-based, but takes a lot of elements from R&B and pop music as well."

Green's latest song, "Phases," is very different from his other works — it blends a catchy guitar strum over slower melodic vocals from Green to create a perfect example of his beat-making and rapping strengths. "Phases" dissects Green's ambition to continue pursuing success in spite of the factors against him.

"It was a big step out from the more fast-paced hip-hop I normally make, so I found it hard to come up with lyrics," he said. "Eventually, though, I was able to find a groove and record it and also film a great music video."

Although Green is a talented lyricist and rapper, he emphasized the importance of his beat-making background. "One of the most underrated values of learning how to produce music is that it gives you a great ear for rhythm and melodic structure that would otherwise take years of musical theory structure," he said. This unique perspective on music and Green's drive to improve make it clear why he's headed to one of the best music schools in the country this fall. ●

Isaac Viorst and the Radio Relics

Isaac Viorst ('23) had been playing guitar most of his life, but in eighth grade, his passion for music grew when he leaned into his songwriting. Viorst said, "I found that when I started writing my own songs, music was much more interesting."

Following this, Viorst and his friend Matthew Ashman decided to start their own band, the Radio Relics. Unlike most traditional bands, the Radio Relics is only comprised of two members. Viorst plays the guitar and sings while Ashman plays the drums.

The pair created the band in ninth grade and it has changed a lot since then. Viorst recalls the band was "first called Steal Teel, which is a terrible name, and we changed it to Radio Relics in the 11th grade." He added that "Radio Relics is a beautiful name cause we like to write old music like 70s rock-funk music — that's our style."

Viorst views the band's smaller size as a strength. "What makes our sound interesting is just the chemistry between Matthew and me.



Matthew Ashman, left, on drums and Isaac Viorst ('23) on electric guitar / Credits: Isaac Viorst

"We've literally been playing with one another for seven years," he said. "Because it's just me and Matthew, we're able to jam with no limits." The Radio Relics currently have one song out on streaming platforms, titled "Recognition." The original song has a slow instrumental build-up into smooth electric guitar from Viorst with a blend of modern alternative rock and indie sounds. The graceful delivery of lyrics in the song displays Viorst's talent as a songwriter and a vocalist.

Despite its smooth and catchy sound,

Viorst calls it "our worst song." He explained, "The song we have out right now on Spotify is the most boring one. It's a very classic rock kinda sound, but I would say that could be from any other band — any band can steal that style."

Although "Recognition" is the only song the band has released, Viorst says that the pair has "been sitting on an album for over a year now." The album consists of 12 songs and would include the already-released "Recognition."

In addition to that, Viorst says that "Matthew and I have our own style and I think that comes through on a lot of the songs on the album." Viorst hopes to show everyone that unique style when the album is released next month.

Despite his talent and passion for music, Viorst hasn't put a definite answer on his future with music in college. His bandmate Ashman is headed to New York University to study at the Clive Institute of Music. "I got into the University of Miami and it has a similar program to the one at NYU," Viorst said. "If I do end up going to Miami, I think music will still be a major part of me, so it's really just a question of where I go to college that will put me on track for where my music goes." ●

The Sauna Studios Sensation

Sauna Studios started as a place for musicians to record and collaborate with one another. It was established by John Wood ('24), who houses the recording studio in his basement.

The first two Walls musicians to record at the studio were Naima Akers ('24) and Ishan Hsu ('24). Akers had posed the question "what if we do a cover album?" to Hsu for weeks, and Sauna Studios was the perfect place to perform their covers at.

That question ultimately led to the pair, along with Wood, to record various songs together at Wood's house that weekend. In one of their first takes, the group performed an acoustic cover of Norah Jones's "Don't Know Why."

The trio added a soothing quality to the 2002 pop hit with Akers on vocals, Hsu on electric guitar, and Wood on bass. The trio's music seamlessly flowed with one another, making for an easy take. Hsu said, "It was a very spontaneous process and honestly pretty casual."

The group said that they didn't view



From left: juniors Lily Turcotte-Keen, Tillie Freed, Ishan Hsu, John Wood and Naima Akers, covering Mazzy Star's "Fade Into You" / Credits: Rami Noursi

themselves as a band, but rather as just friends hanging out and playing music.

After the group recorded in Wood's basement, Wood uploaded the recording on Instagram under the username @sauna_studios_. Since then the page has amassed over 5,000 views with nearly 2,000 views on the "Don't Know Why" cover alone.

As of late, more Walls musicians have been playing at Sauna Studios, including ju-

niors Lily Turcotte-Keen and Tillie Freed. The newest upload is a cover of the 1993 song "Fade Into You" by Mazzy Star, with Turcotte-Keen and Akers on vocals, Hsu on guitar, Wood on bass, and Freed on the egg shaker.

In addition, other musicians from Walls have used the studio to record their own projects. Seniors Oliver Anderson and Malcolm Douglas performed a jazz cover of the classic song "In a Sentimental Mood" by Duke Ellington.

Following the success of the page, Wood believes there's more to come for Sauna Studios. "I'm assuming we'll keep on doing covers, but writing songs should be the next step," he said.

The group also explained their ambition to play for a live crowd and insisted that it would work well for the type of music they make. Hsu said "so far we've played a lot of jazz," and Wood adds "it's very calm and smooth, it's very easy to listen to." The three of them all agreed that this smooth and calm jazz sound would be perfect for an intimate crowd to connect to.

"Springtime is perfect for live shows," Akers added. ●

Walls Places Second at DCIAA Cheer Tournament

By Brady Woodhouse ('25)
Staff Writer

The Walls cheer team has only competed in the DCIAA Cheer Championship for three years, but already has two first-place rankings under its belt. This year its winning legacy continues, with the team earning second place.

The DCIAA Cheer Championship was hosted at Calvin Coolidge Senior High School on March 11. The gym was filled with supporters of schools from all across D.C.

In preparation for the competition, the team amped up their practices. Co-captain Aliyah Blake ('23) explained, "In practice, we did lots of full outs to help with endurance and the week before the competition we started to really drill technique and small details." A full out is to practice the routine as the team would on the day of the competition without marking flips and stunts as they might have earlier in the practicing process.

"The night before the competition we even went to a gym so we could practice on a real mat and understand spacing/positioning for the competition," co-captain Lucca Domenici-Mills ('23) said.

The team was aiming to perform their routine without a single mistake. "As we got closer to the competition we would run through the routine and restart if a mistake was made so that we were able to get the routine as close to perfection as possible," Domenici-Mills said.

"Cheerleading is one of those sports where whoever makes the least mistakes wins... the difference between first and second place can be less than a point," Blake said. In fact, the Walls cheer team had a higher raw score than first-place winner Theodore Roosevelt High School, but got a deduction because of a mistake.

All of that work culminated at the DCIAA Cheer Championships in front of a huge audi-



Members of the Walls cheer team compete in the DCIAA championship March 11
Credits: D.C. State Athletic Association

ence. "It was scary at first and I think it's safe to say that we were all nervous walking onto the mat," Sadie Feldman ('26) said. "But personally, seeing our coaches Asia and Mike and our teammate Stephanie gave me confidence."

Walls's performance had the highest raw score — the routine was beautiful and impressive. The unity with which every cheerleader performed was reflective of the cohesion that the team has focused on since the beginning. Cheerleader Sofia Culbertson ('26) said, "we focus on our technique and joining and working on each other as a team."

Many people may only know the cheer team from the sidelines of basketball games, but they are a formidable opponent in their

own right. And the Walls cheer team has only gotten stronger, with the number of cheerleaders doubling since last year.

Blake and Domenici-Mills enjoyed having so many more people. "Everyone came with different levels of experience and it was fun to see everyone and everything come together," Blake said. Domenici-Mills said it "helped me grow and learn in terms of being a leader."

Blake and Domenici-Mills met on the cheer team in their freshman year and became best friends. "I met my best friend freshman year through cheer, so getting to be a captain with her for my last year was great," Domenici-Mills said. ●

ANALYSIS

The Algorithm That Stole SWW's Chance at a Championship

By Julius Cohen ('23)
Sports Editor

The School Without Walls boys' basketball team entered Benjamin Banneker High School on Feb. 4 with one thing on their minds: a win. The Penguins and the Bulldogs both found themselves on the cusp of a D.C. State Athletic Association (DCSAA) Class A bid, entering with near-identical records and battling for the eighth seed in the tournament. The Penguins escaped with a 60-54 win and, they believed, a first-ever trip to States. But the DCSAA seeding committee had other plans. Walls finished, inexplicably, ninth in Class A standings: one spot short of a much-anticipated postseason berth.

The boys spent their February practicing every weekday in preparation for the state tournament. They had every reason to believe the last spot belonged to them. The yet-to-happen DCIAA postseason, which the squad had narrowly missed, held no bearing on the States field. Further, the Penguins held better records, as well as presumably tie-breaking victories, over closely standing teams like Ballou, E.L. Haynes, and Banneker.

The bad news broke in the second half of February when the bracket was finalized. Benjamin Banneker secured the seventh seed



Members of the Walls basketball team on Feb. 4 / Credits: Nadia Lytle

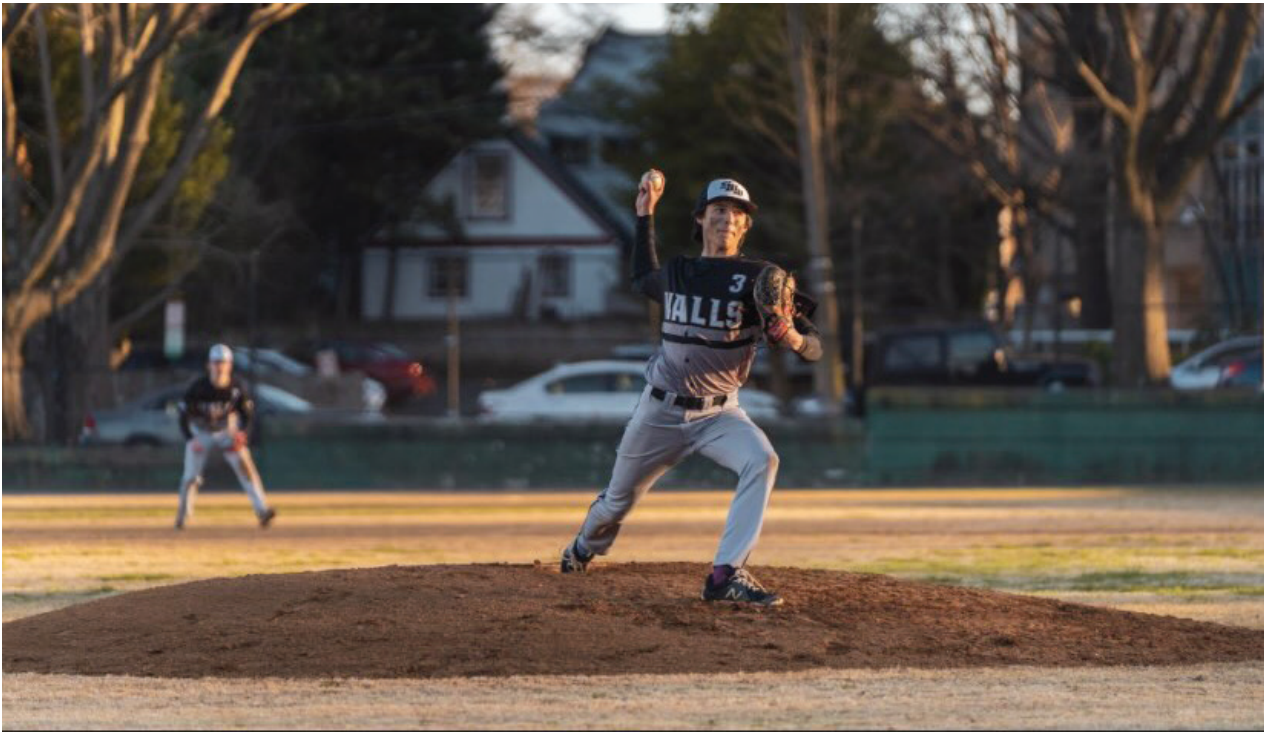
while E.L. Haynes, holding a weaker record (10-14 to Walls' 10-9), weaker competition (charter schools compared to the typically stronger D.C. Public Schools), and a 56-64 loss to the penguins, held the eighth spot; the Penguins were on the outside looking in.

So how did E.L. Haynes, a team with a weaker record, weaker set of opponents, and a loss to School Without Walls finish above Walls in the standings? The DCSAA seeding committee uses a numerical algorithm to calculate an overall "rating" (a.k.a. "Point Index") for each team, found by dividing a team's total "points"

by their number of games played. For Walls, an algorithm technicality prevented a trip to States.

The algorithm takes into account a variety of metrics in order to calculate the total number of points for each team. These points are broken into regular "points" and additional "bonus points." A team earns two points for every victory and one additional bonus point for every opponent with a winning percentage of .501 (a team winning over half of their games)

DCSAA continued on page 13



Pitcher Stephen Showalter ('24) / Credits: Rafi Fox

TEAM SPOTLIGHT

The Baseball Team Has Something to Prove

By Charlotte Tama ('24)
Sports Writer

It's that time of year again — the crack of the bat, the smell of freshly cut grass, and the excitement of a new baseball season. This year, the SWW baseball team is ready to hit it out of the park, with strong opening games and a hunger for victory.

After scrimmages with Landon and DCI, the team faced Archbishop Carroll in their first official game of the season. Though down early, the team rallied back, and with a three-run triple from Sean Aldridge ('25), the boys took the game 4-3.

Next, the team faced Sidwell Friends, looking to seal the deal on last season's 3-0 triumph. Player Stephen Showalter ('24) said Sidwell was "definitely the game we wanted most, everyone [got] really amped up for that." The team dominated their way to a 6-2 win, defeating Sidwell for the second year in a row.

"The [Sidwell game] showed that we are able to play against good competition," said

head coach Kip Smith. Similar to many SWW sports, the baseball team finds little competition in DCIAA teams, and often looks to non-league play for challenging opposition. "We definitely have a chance against most private school teams, and it's kinda where we're able to make it known," Showalter said.

The team is set to face private school foes Riverdale Baptist and Maret in non-league play later this season, and they look towards those games with confidence. "We can definitely win every game on our schedule from here on out," said player Eliav Brooks-Rubin ('23).

As for league play, the team eyes one match with particular hunger: Jackson-Reed. "Jackson-Reed has a longstanding history of winning the DCIAA championship; we have a longstanding history of being second," Mr. Smith said. In fact, Jackson-Reed has clinched the DCIAA title for 29 years running. Last season, our team's championship run was concluded with a tough 11-1 loss to Jackson-Reed.

This year, the team is ready to break

this pattern. "The only goal we need to set every year is to beat Jackson-Reed and win the DCIAA championship," Brooks-Rubin said.

First, however, the team is tasked with patching the holes left by last year's senior class — notably, pitcher John Kammerer and shortstop Peter Herrick. "John was our ace pitcher, and Peter was probably one of the better pitchers that we had, so [we're] just trying to fill those voids," Mr. Smith said.

Though making up for these voids will be an ongoing process, the team is confident that some of their older players — Noah Pershing ('23) and Stephen Showalter ('24) — are up for the task. "[Pershing] has really done a good job at being that ace, kinda like John last year...and Stephen is coming in at that shortstop role," player Sean Aldridge ('25) said.

With this solid foundation, the team feels optimistic about their Jackson-Reed matchups. "We can definitely hang with them — their best pitchers probably throw harder than [Pershing]...but their hitters aren't that much better than ours," Brooks-Rubin said.

The teams will meet in league play on April 26, and likely again in the DCIAA championship on May 11.

In the meantime, the team plans to work hard on fundraising. A major team tradition is their cookie fundraiser, in which they spend a weekend baking and packaging cookies, which they then sell. Have you ever noticed the assorted hats and sweatshirts our baseball players sport? Showalter explained that their excellent gear is credited to this fundraising push — not any sort of favoritism. "Everyone thinks Kip favors us, but we earn around \$10,000 off of [fundraising] every year."

This year, their fundraising will support one additional cause. Reviving a pre-pandemic tradition, the team will be traveling to South Carolina for a tournament, where they'll face teams from across the East Coast. "[We're] just gonna stay there throughout the spring break weekend, have fun, and play baseball," Aldridge said.

With a strong start to the season and big ambitions, the team is lined up for a great season. As Aldridge said, "We have a good group of guys, all hungry, all motivated...to not be looked at as the second-best public school in D.C., and really prove ourselves as a top dog." ●

Lack of Facilities Tightens Sports Teams' Budgets

By Carys Shepard ('23)
Senior Writer

For a small school like Walls without any athletics facilities, it is particularly difficult to support multiple sports and provide each team with the funding they need. In order to raise more money, Walls athletic director Kip Smith said that "we are moving into a mandatory payment of \$150 for our student-athletes." These team dues will likely be implemented gradually over the course of the next year, with several teams beginning to require payments this spring season. The extra money will help teams obtain equipment, access transportation, and pay for coaches that are not covered by the DCIAA, including the soccer, lacrosse, ultimate frisbee, and conditioning coaches.

Even though athletics is the largest expense for the Home and School Association (HSA), at 24.8 percent of its total spending, many sports teams still do not have enough money. Walls faces a unique issue because, as Smith said, "We spend upward of 12-20k in the use of facilities. All of the funding is either obtained through fundraising and/or assistance by our HSA/Boosters."

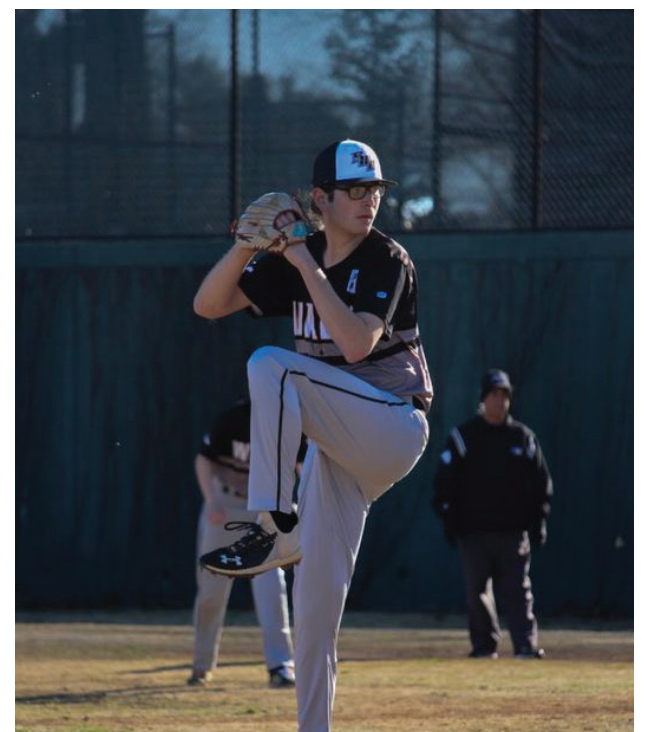
With so much money just going towards facilities, Smith said, "our teams have to do a

better job of at least meeting [the HSA] halfway." He went on to say that "teams (in general) have provided little to no effort in raising funds." Although some teams have held bake sales and requested donations, these efforts have not been strong enough and can only go so far.

The School Without Walls baseball team, coached by Smith himself, is the perfect example of a well-funded team. Although the spring season only officially started this month, the team has already raised \$13,800. On top of that, each member is required to pay team dues of \$650. This money goes towards funding a lot of baseball gear (hoodies, shirts, and hats), a fall travel season of baseball, and a trip to Myrtle Beach over spring break.

Additionally, ultimate frisbee recently also implemented team dues at \$125 per player. Similar to baseball, they are hoping this money will help them buy gear for players, such as jerseys, sweatpants, and discs, and participate in a New Jersey travel tournament later this spring.

"Our HSA has been working on a surplus since COVID, but we must be able to continue to provide financial supports that will better our programs with the disparities that we have in comparison to other schools," Smith said. Hopefully the implementation of team dues in



Noah Pershing ('23) in a baseball game. The baseball team is unusually well funded.
Credits: Lucy Upton

the future will encourage further fundraising and provide teams with the flexibility to access more resources and activities. ●

Lacrosse Team, Anchored by New Players, Re-Formed After Six Years

By Carlotta Rother ('25)
Staff Writer

The School Without Walls lacrosse team is back for the first time since 2017. The team practices for an hour and a half almost every day after school at the new MacArthur High School field. Athletic Director Kip Smith said, “a group largely consisting of sophomore girls pushed for the sport to be reintroduced.”

Mark Engman, the team’s new coach, is putting in extra effort to support the inexperienced players. The team welcomes new players, like Campbell Tiller ('26), who said “before this season started, I hadn’t even touched a lacrosse stick.”

Mr. Engman said, “We have a group of enthusiastic, positive players who are willing to learn new skills and challenge themselves, and who work hard during practices and games.”

Mr. Engman first got involved with the Walls lacrosse team back in 2017. “At SWWHS, my daughter Liza Engman played lacrosse,” he said. “I really liked that SWWHS had a women’s lacrosse team and I’m excited to be coaching the team this year.”

While lacrosse is standard at many DMV private schools, DCIAA does not sponsor the sport. “It isn’t a DCIAA sport because not enough elementary and middle schools have student interest,” said Walls athletic trainer Xavion Santiago. “It’s not normal to start a completely new sport in high school, so DCIAA doesn’t acknowledge it for high school students.”

However, the team still needs funding. Ms. Santiago explained that the Walls lacrosse team “gets funding through the School Without Walls HSA — it’s considered as a club.”

The lacrosse season started during the end of February. The team had their first game on March 13 against the Field School and lost 11-4. Despite the loss, Mr. Engman was pleased nonetheless: “It will take some time to develop as individual players and as a team, and that is fine, we will keep getting better and more competitive,” he said.

Alternate captain Naya Noel-Jeune ('25) said that “no matter the outcome of our games,



The newly resurrected Walls lacrosse team at the Field School field / Credits: Rami Noursi

I am excited to have a fun season and have the team do their best.”

In mid-March, the team has eight games scheduled, with the last one taking place on May 9. The team will play mostly private schools; the only DCPS high school with a lacrosse team is Jackson-Reed, which they will be playing on April 13.

Having to play against mostly private schools can be intimidating, but Sasha Bryer-Gottesman ('25) said, “I wanted to challenge myself and go outside my comfort zone, since sports aren’t really my thing.” Walls lacrosse gives students a chance to experience high school sports without having the pressure of winning.

The team has two main captains and two alternate captains. The main captains are Virginia Burke ('24) and Katrina Tracy ('23). Tracy said, “As captain, I want to build routines and camaraderie between players and help everyone have a good season.” ●

Why Couldn’t Walls Basketball Compete in DCSAA States?

DCSAA continued from page 11

or higher. A team earns another bonus point for each team with a .701 winning percentage (a team winning over 70 percent of their games) or higher. These bonus points, intentionally or not, give charter schools a marginal advantage because the caliber of competition in the charter school league tends to be relatively weaker than the public DCIAA field.

Over the course of the season, School Without Walls tallied 32 points across 19 games: 20 from their 10 victories, and another 12 from playing opponents with strong records. E.L. Haynes earned 39 points for 11 wins and their opponents’ records across 25 games. Simple division gives Walls the edge at 1.68 compared to Haynes’s 1.56. Unfortunately for Walls, an unfortunate set of circumstances aligned to alter these ratings.

First, DCSAA deemed one of Haynes’s losses inapplicable. Thus, Haynes rating was calculated based on 24 games instead of 25. Second, according to DCSAA rules, point indexes for teams that play fewer than 20 games “will be

calculated based on dividing total points by 20.” Walls’s 19-game season was treated by DCSAA as a 20 game season, pushing their rating, or “point index,” to 1.6 — just short of Haynes’s 1.625.

With Haynes edging out Walls, there was one last glimmer of hope for the Penguins: DCSAA tournament rules include that the DCIAA winner “receives an automatic bid” to the Class AA tournament, so when Bard (A) won the DCIAA finals, some speculated that they could be elevated to the Class AA bracket. Unfortunately for Walls, this rule applies only to the following year. Bard would retain their second seed in the Class A division and go on to win the championship.

At the end of the day, there was nothing Walls could do to alter their fate. By DCSAA’s book — despite head-to-head wins over the seventh and eighth seeds in the tournament, better records than both of those teams, and considerable improvement throughout the season — E.L. Haynes *did* earn the last spot. Post-season basketball was simply not in the cards for this year’s Penguins. Walls will have to settle for building on their strong season next year. ●

TEAM SPOTLIGHT

How the Flightless Bird Squad Came to Be

By Georgia Murphy ('26)
Staff Writer

“Floors, ceilings, windows, WALLS!” The Flightless Bird Squad chanted their signature cheer before playing the long-anticipated YULA Invite Tournament in Arlington this past weekend. They began strong, winning 11-6 against Montgomery Blair, before placing 13th in the overall tournament.

The current ultimate frisbee team has over 50 dedicated players that represent a variety of grade and skill levels. 20 of the players are girl-matching, making them one of the many emerging D.C. teams that have the ability to play all-girl games. While the team is incredibly diverse, they share a common goal to contribute to the team’s success. Jillian Sanders ('26) said “I personally am very excited for the new spring season. I’m looking forward to all the tournaments and games that we’ll be able to play.”

The Walls ultimate team got its start in 2011. According to a student newspaper profile of the fledgling team, most of its initial players had little experience. Charlotte Purcell, one of the team’s first coaches, said, “While we practiced, things looked quite sporadic at first. ... We muddled through it (as a team always has to in the first few weeks and months), and we started to look cohesive by some of our first in-season games.”

The coach said she was still connected with the squad over 10 years later. “I have been so happy to see the School Without Walls team thrive throughout the years,” she said.

The team has come a long way since 2011, winning the Virginia Mixed States tournament last November. The victory sparked excitement and anticipation within the team. “This season we can keep going with that energy,” Travis Tiller ('24) said.

The team has both full-time and guest coaches. Many Penguins may be familiar with math teacher Gabriel Webster, the primary coach and organizer, but the team has plenty of other coaches as well, including David Shields, Dylan Deshler, Becca Arbacher and, most recently, guest coach Lisi Lohre.

Mr. Webster began on the squad in 2018. “I love seeing a different version of my students on the field,” he said. “I feel like I get a clearer picture of high school students when I see them in different contexts, and I learn so much about my students when I teach and coach them.

“It’s related to why I teach: I am in it to help students become their best selves, whether it’s their ability to solve problems in the context of math class or improve as an athlete, leader or teammate.”

Mr. Deshler played on the Flightless Bird Squad as a junior and senior in high school before becoming a coach. He said he saw his current role as “a good opportunity to give back to the team.”

Many of the coaches have a wealth of experience at the highest levels of ultimate in the country, many of them playing for top clubs and professional leagues. Ms. Lohre and Ms. Arbacher play for DC Shadow, the District’s women’s professional team, and Mr. Shields plays for its men’s counterpart, DC Breeze.

The squad’s student leadership has its fair share of expertise as well. Captain Amaia Noursi ('23) said that being a captain “means helping people realize their full frisbee potential. Being able to have fun, being able to learn a lot more, and helping teach.” The current 2023 senior captains include Noursi, Julius Cohen ('23),

Frisbee continued on page 15

OPINION

Current Events Belong in the Social Studies Classroom

By Jessie Moss ('26)
Staff Writer

Throughout the K-9 experience, many students craft timelines of the Civil War or annotate the Gettysburg Address. But there is one thing that many lack in their social studies classes: current events education. By teaching current events, students can gain a greater understanding of the life-changing events taking place around them.

Walls's rigorous academic environment would not only allow students to learn about what is happening across the globe but would also help students analyze and apply these events to context outside of school. Especially in such a turbulent period for our world, the ability to contribute to important discussions and form individual opinions on today's pressing issues is an invaluable skill.

Despite the abundant benefits of current events education, it is still often excluded from curricula, much to the detriment of Walls students. Without any current events education, many Walls students lack knowledge on today's important events. Aden Goldberg ('26) noted that the extent to which the news had been incorporated into their educational experience was lacking. "I think there was something like



Credits: Jessie Moss

'check this article out if you have time' a few years ago," they said. "That was about it."

Other students share this sentiment. Mary Louisa Leopold ('23) agreed that her understanding of current events was "almost entirely my own learning about it." Leopold believes that "teaching about current events would definitely boost that understanding for [herself] and a lot of students."

AP World History and AP Human Geography teacher Carlton Ackerman emphasized the importance of current events education, saying that spending time on current events can inform students and also "help them find something they're interested in in the news."

When considering the benefits of current

events education, it is important to understand why social studies classes are best suited to include this education in the curriculum. According to Mr. Ackerman, to fully understand everything that is happening today, it is crucial for us to understand why it is happening or what has influenced it, and that requires taking into account history. "We need to understand how the issues we face today are similar to the issues we've faced before," he said, "and we can do that by looking at them through the lens of history."

A prime example of this phenomenon can be found when looking at the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which brought the Soviet Union and the U.S. to the brink of nuclear war. Understanding the red lines the nations came so close to crossing sixty years ago provides key lessons for students to understand today's conflict between Russia and Ukraine, where red lines are also dangerously close to being crossed with global repercussions. The connection between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war is just one example of historical events impacting countless events today.

Dedicating even five minutes at the beginning of every social studies class to discuss current events could boost an awareness of the watershed years we're living through without detracting from the social studies class we've all grown accustomed to.

After putting this Rookery issue down, consider making a habit of reading the news outside Walls's walls. As Mr. Ackerman says, "I don't care if it's the sports page or the econ page, but be reading some part of the newspaper and finding some topic to follow every day. And before you know it, you're kind of hooked on it." ●

Using the City as a Classroom Is "School Without Walls" Still True to Its Name?

By Tillie Freed ('24)
Staff Writer

"Does your school really not have walls?" It's a question every Walls student has faced, whether posed by an opposing sports team, family member or friend. However, the origins of the school's name has more to do with the structure of the curriculum than the structure of the building.

SWW's primary mission when it was founded in 1971 was to offer an unconventional education oriented around "using the city as a classroom." The school sought to take advantage of its D.C. location, which provided students with unique opportunities and learning experiences. Does the school still live up to this ideology? Did it ever?

Walls was originally modeled after the Parkway Program, used in some Philadelphia schools in 1965. Parkway was a group of nontraditional schools where most of the learning was done in locations relevant to what they were discussing. The program took an even more ambitious approach to the city-as-a-classroom philosophy than SWW by letting students direct their own course of study and fostering more equal teacher-student relationships.

In 1996, the New York Times described the philosophy behind the program as "people learn only what they want to learn, not what someone else imposes on them, and...they learn best by grappling directly with the rich material in the world around them." By 2000, however, the Parkway Program had been abandoned by most Philadelphia schools in favor of more traditional methods.

Though it has since been lost, Walls too was founded on Parkway's philosophy. It was still around by 1986, when now-Principal Sylvia Isaac joined the school and discovered her love for "using the city as a classroom." As a D.C. History teacher, Ms. Isaac incorporated many

outside experiences into her class, including visiting D.C. Council hearings and completing White House tours. She also assigned projects that got students out in local neighborhoods — still an element of D.C. History classes today.

"That's what this school is about," Ms. Isaac said. "Learning is not just opening up a book. ... [It's] how is what you learned in your classroom relevant to what really happens in the world."

But in Walls's 52nd year, this philosophy no longer seems to be at the forefront of teachers' and administrators' priorities. Currently, SWW lacks the emphasis on real-world learning and field-trip-based classes that was a cornerstone of the school's founding philosophy.

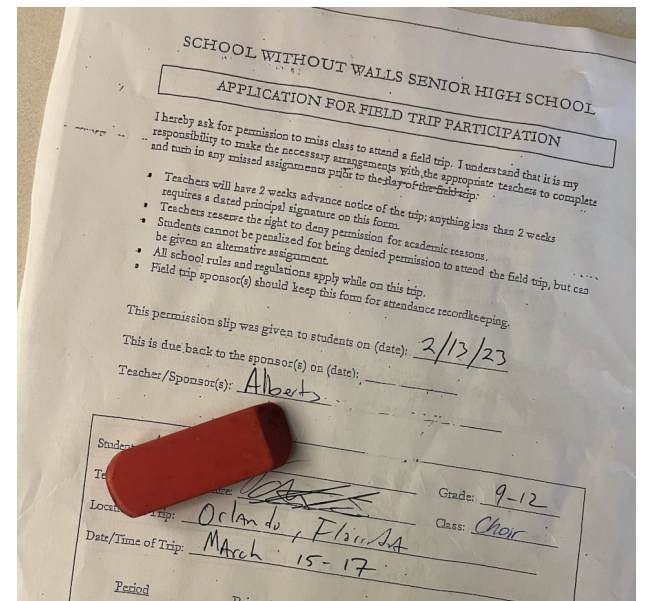
"I think we've certainly moved away from that idea, in part because the world has changed significantly," offered Jenine Pokorak, who has taught at the school since 1997.

Ms. Pokorak cited the changing global climate, saying, "You cannot get in and out of places post-9/11 the way you could prior. ... You weren't going through metal detectors and there weren't barriers you had to get by."

Ms. Pokorak added that the pandemic has only further taken away from the city-as-a-classroom focus. She said as the school has grown to become more academically focused, with increased numbers of AP classes with stricter curricula, it has been harder to extensively incorporate field trips into class time.

Despite her enthusiasm for exploring the city, Ms. Isaac recognized that the school is not what it was 30 years ago. She referenced DCPS's increased involvement with field trips, requiring teachers to fill out extra paperwork to leave the classroom. "Now [field trips require] more advanced planning; we didn't have to do that before," she said.

In spite of these challenges, Ms. Isaac is confident the school has and will continue to adjust to these changes. "It is really important



Field trips didn't always require paperwork.
Credits: Jessie Moss

to me that we continue to use the rich resources" exclusive to Walls, Ms. Isaac said. "I think our teachers work hard to implement that."

Harrison Davis, a Walls physics teacher who attended the school as a student, was skeptical. "There have definitely been instances of the administration being like, 'you can go do these things,' but it's more like you have the option to, not 'this is our culture, we should be planning how to do this,'" he said.

Although the idea of the city as a classroom has had some setbacks, its impact is still noticeable. In some cases teachers have adapted by bringing speakers into the classroom to bypass the difficulties of leaving the building.

The philosophy also lives on in that Walls is a humanities-based school, which prioritizes critical analysis and human values.

Most of the teaching and administrative staff remain steadfast in their belief in the value of using the city as a classroom, despite the challenges. Mr. Davis highlighted the benefit that going beyond the four walls of the classroom can bring to students: "It's important that as a student you understand how the stuff you are learning about is relevant to you and the world you live in." ●



Room 201 (ranked #1)

Despite its name, students at School Without Walls are fortunate enough to have real walls that enclose their learning spaces. The rooms range in temperature, decoration, size, ambience and much more that make them all distinct. So, how do these classrooms rank? Below is a ranked list of 10 classrooms at Walls (1 is the best, 10 is the worst).

#1: Room 201 (Mr. Mungai and Mr. Koplowitz)

This math classroom has large windows that let in a lot of light, offering great views of the bustling GW campus and long deli lines. The spacious room is furnished with comfortable chairs and sturdy desks. It is conveniently located near a restroom and can be reached by climbing a single flight of stairs, pushing Room 201 to the number one spot.

#2: Room 124 (Mr. Webster and Ms. Philip)

The high ceilings and many windows make this math classroom feel open and create a productive learning environment. Room 124 is very close to both school entrances, which makes it convenient if you're running late to school. Behind the large and heavy door, 124 is a bright and spacious classroom, perfect for mathematicians to learn!

#3: Room 27 (Mr. Bulluck)

The cozy couches and unique table configuration in this room create a very relaxed environment. Room 27 is well-suited for chilling out, taking pictures with your friends, and hanging with Mr. Bulluck.

The Best and Worst Walls Classrooms

By Leah Levy ('25)
Staff Writer

#4: Room 322 (Ms. Blessing)

There isn't anything too special about this room. It's not too big or small nor too hot or cold. Aside from the great view of the terrace, Room 322 is a regular classroom that definitely deserves to be right above the middle of this ranking.

#5: Room 327 (Ms. Jimeno and Mr. Mifdal)

Although the classroom itself is quite nice, there is one issue with this language room: the mystery odor. It is unclear if this stench comes from the air vents or the hallway, but if Ms. Jimeno didn't spray air freshener throughout the day, the smell would be unbearable.

#6: Room 14 (Ms. Piper and Mr. Klawender)

Despite the mysterious gas leak, the lack of windows and the lack of natural light, this science classroom has high lab tables and chairs, which are always fun. The smartboard is not entirely reliable, but it's easy for students to turn to the back of the class and use the whiteboard when necessary. The new chairs were a shock to many and are very uncomfortable, especially for taller people. However, even when the rest of the school feels too hot or too cold, this classroom is at the perfect temperature to listen to lectures and conduct labs.

#7: Room 324 (Mr. Ackerman and Ms. Brinley)

Make sure to bundle up for a history or Latin class, because room 324 is absolutely freezing. It is a very personalized room with maps and posters relating to European and Roman history, and lush plants line the window sills, but it's hard to learn in room 324 when your fingers are starting to go numb.



Room 404 (ranked #10) / Credits: Tess Buckley

#8: Commons A, B and C

Everyone has spent a little bit too much time in the infamous Commons, the home of gym class, theater, internship and anything else that has been sent sub-less and adrift when a teacher is out sick. You're lucky if you have a class there during periods 1 or 2, because after lunch, there's food and trash everywhere. Also, the wind in Commons B is extremely strong, so hold on to all loose papers. Although the Commons can be a convenient spot to hang out, it's nearly always too loud and chaotic to get any real work or studying done.

#9: Room III (Mr. Willoughby)

Room III has no windows or outside light. It feels like you're learning in a large box. Also, it's very isolated from the rest of the school. Even when the fire alarm rings, you can't really hear it. On top of that, Room III has the middle school chairs that are connected to small, flimsy, and unstable desks. So, if you like learning in rooms that are quite similar to large stuffy boxes, maybe you should take Bach to Rap.

#10: Room 404

This "classroom" is the least favorite of many Walls students. It is on the fourth floor, right next to the library, and does not belong to a designated teacher or subject. Its unfinished, multicolored walls and crowded floorspace have led many to wonder if it was really meant to be a classroom. Room 404 is hot, stuffy and cramped, and it takes way too much effort to get to. ●

Seniors Explore Rome

Rome continued from page 6

day. As soon as we left it started raining and it's been raining every day since then," Ms. McGlennon added.

According to Alexander, some days were busier than others, but each day was filled with a comfortable balance of scheduling, improvisation, and relaxation. Ms. McGlennon noted that "they had time every day where they could, for example, go to lunch on their own." On their last day in Rome, students were even afforded an afternoon to explore the city independently.

The planned aspects of the trip left little else for spontaneity, though. Students were busy "from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m." daily, according to Ms. McGlennon.

While Ms. McGlennon remained unsure as to whether there will be a Rome trip next year, there was no doubt about the success of the 2023 trip.

"Absolutely, it was a success," Alexander said. "We saw everything we wanted to see, we made some great memories, ate some great food, had great gelato. I learned a lot more about my classmates who maybe I didn't talk to before the trip, and had a lot of fun."

"Despite the hurdles, parents, teachers and school administration worked hard to make the trip happen," said Mitali Mirchandani ('23), another student on the trip. "We were able to make the most of every minute there." ●

Frisbee: From Afterthought to Institution

Frisbee continued from page 13

Emmett Brosowsky ('23) and Malachi Merriam ('24).

Noursi said, "I'm the only female-matching captain of the frisbee team at Walls, I've thought to myself that I have the responsibility to be the voice of all the female matching players in our team and I hope I have been able to do that."

Female-matching players "can play in a mixed sport and...can [still] excel as an individual," she added.

Upperclassmen on the team have high hopes for future years. "I think that next year it's going to be a lot different because all the seniors right now are kind of running the team," Chris Seyfried ('24) said. "But I think next year it'll be fun to have a bigger part."

Since its origin at Walls in 2011, DCIAA has never recognized ultimate frisbee as a sport. This means that no ultimate frisbee teams that play for D.C. Public Schools receive team fund-

ing and instead must find adequate funding themselves.

The team has taken a big shift to focus on fundraising this season. This is particularly important because they hope to participate in their first-ever away tournament in SWW history, in New Jersey over spring break. The whole team has been putting in work to organize bake sales, assemble meal boxes, and make plans to achieve this goal.

Mr. Webster said, "This is our first time ever traveling out of the DMV to play ultimate. This is also the first time we are entering our girls' team into a tournament. ... It's going to be an exhausting and fun time."

The squad hopes to encourage Penguins to support them as much as possible. "Come out to our games!" Mr. Webster said, "Our sport has a reputation for being more of a game than a sport, and I challenge anyone to come out and make that argument after seeing our players run around on the field." ●

pare for it," she said.

Turcotte-Keen agreed. "This was my first time taking the SAT," she said. "But it won't be my last. I wasn't completely confident in my performance, but I won't really know until I get my score back. Regardless, I will be retaking it before my senior year starts." ●

Juniors Take SAT

SAT continued from page 6

Crossword-Solving Tips From the Expert

By Emmett Brosowsky ('23)
Puzzle Creator

Crosswords can be daunting. Scary grids, too-long words, too many open squares — unlike related puzzles like Sudoku or KenKen where a few numbers are already filled in, crossword puzzles give you nothing; just getting started can be the hardest part of a solve. But don't worry! Here, I've got some tips that'll help you not just with our Rookery puzzles, but with any crossword you may come across.

Tip 1: Start with the easy clues — every crossword has them! Scan through the puzzle until you find a clue you're sure about (generally a short one) and fill it in. That's your foothold: once you've got letters in the grid, the harder clues start to fall into place.

Tip 2: Think about clue patterns. See a plural clue? Most likely, the corresponding entry is going to end with an -S. Past tense? Get your -ED ready! Think about common prefixes and suffixes — RE- and -ING show up a ton.

Tip 3: Work in sections. Focus on one area of the puzzle at a time, using solved clues to help with adjacent ones, rather than jumping around from clue to clue. And if you get stuck on a section, just switch to a different one.

Tip 4: Take breaks. Stepping away from the puzzle for a short time can help you approach it with a fresh perspective.

Tip 5: Don't be afraid to erase. If you're unsure about an answer, pencil it in lightly and be prepared to erase and revise if needed. Getting letters on paper can help you visualize the crossing answers, even if you end up being incorrect.

Tip 6: Practice! There are a number of common clue styles that you'll get better at recognizing if you solve crosswords more regularly, like the following:

- Quotes signal that you're looking for a synonym ("Count me in!" = IMDOWN)
- Parentheticals mean that the answer and phrase in parentheses combine to form a synonym of the clue (Search blindly (for) = GROPE)
- Question marks signal some type of wordplay — usually groan-inducing (Final four? = WXYZ)
- Foreign-language words in the clue tell you that the answer will be in that language (Color of el cielo = AZUL)

I hope that these tricks can help make crosswords more fun and fulfilling for those of you who choose to use them. Happy solving! ●

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CROSSWORD Menagerie Madness

By Emmett Brosowsky ('23)
Puzzle Creator

ACROSS

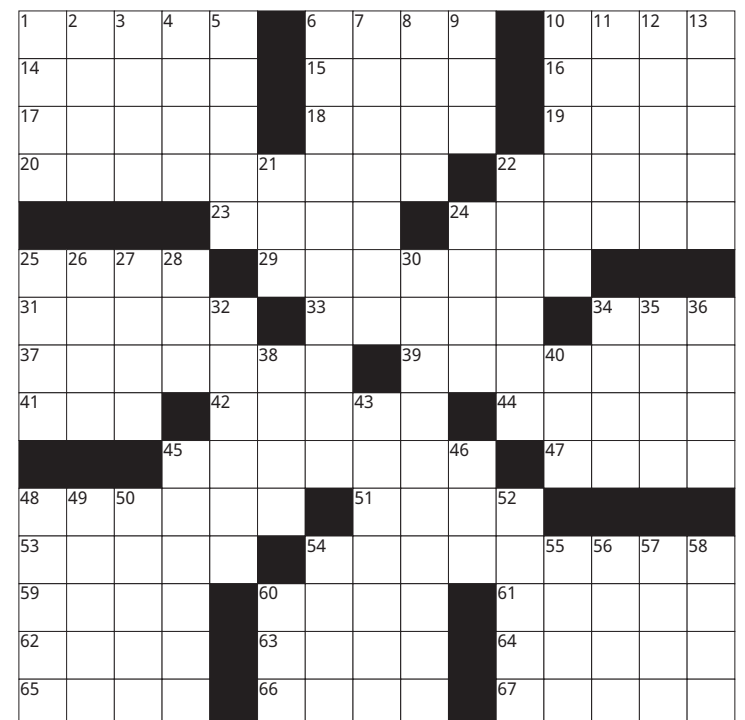
- 1 *Tangle
6 *Interjection of admiration
10 Rowing tools
14 Blow-off class
15 Each
16 Get ready, slangily
17 Take over
18 Old Italian money
19 Food often advertised as "dolphin-free"
20 Famous proponent of Big Stick diplomacy
22 Plastic party cups, probably
23 Tennis' Nadal, familiarly
24 *Loudly protest
25 *Laugh raucously
29 Weather
31 ___ Sports Bureau
33 Singer Lauper
34 Run evasively
37 Trojan, for example
39 Fruity portmanteau
41 Symbol of Sauron
42 Birthplace of a certain Renaissance polymath
44 Midsection
45 Freshen, as art
47 *Interjection of exasperation

- 48 *Target of WD-40
51 Pungent plant
53 Workers on deck
54 1966 Beach Boys album... or a hint to the starred clues

- 59 JFK postings
60 Ryan of "Star Trek"
61 Shaquille also known as "DJ Diesel"
62 *Tree skin
63 "Zip-___-Doo-DAH"
64 Pageant crown
65 BTS fans, colloquially
66 *Pre-explosion noise
67 Throat ailment

DOWN

- 1 Char
2 Billionth: prefix
3 ___ other (without match)
4 Certain whiskeys
5 Less rigid
6 Supernaturally destructive
7 Hair removal device brand
8 Cloud that produces comets
9 New Deal org.
10 Decline to participate
11 Caribbean resort
12 Extend, as a Netflix subscription



- 13 Fire starter

- 21 Alternate spelling: abbr.

- 22 React to something bright

- 24 Fizzy drink

- 25 Blood pigment

- 26 Skincare brand with the tagline "Ageless"

- 27 Trick

- 28 Word after

- street or constitutional

- 30 Sum totals

- 32 Option in a file menu

- 34 Love

- 35 Moreover

- 36 Err

- 38 Something taken by teenagers

- 40 Pai ___ poker

- 43 Forms a whole

- 45 Good omen for

- sailors... but

- only at night

- 46 Spots for RNs

- 48 Biblical

- queendom

- 49 Modern emirate

- 50 Deprive of

- weapons

- 52 Spring noise

- 54 Mani's

- counterpart

- 55 Part of a class

- 56 Close

- 57 Have the nerve

- 58 What Will Smith

- did to Chris

- Rock

- 60 God, to Rastas

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