



Computer science industry is becoming oversaturated



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Sports legacies: 2 athletes follow the footsteps of family members



# THE saratogafalcon

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## PROM 2024

### Venue to be held on triple decker dinner cruise in San Francisco Bay

BY AnikaKapasi

Juniors and seniors will board the San Francisco Hornblower Cruise ship for their prom on May 18 and see sights such as the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridges during their 4-hour cruise around the bay.

"We were looking at many different venues and [the cruise] just seemed like the most interesting," senior class president Paul Hulme said. "It was the most out-of-the-box idea and all the other ones seemed more basic."

The ship has three decks: the first deck is reserved for dinner and drinks provided by the cruise line company, the second deck will be transformed into a dance floor and photo booth and the third deck is an open outdoor area meant for pictures and sightseeing the San Francisco night skyline.

Inspired by the boat's triple-deck structure, the senior class officers decided to make the prom theme "Princess and the Frog."

While the school

>> PROM on pg. 3



This year's prom venue, held onboard the California Hornblower, can accommodate 488 passengers total.

Courtesy of ISARA CHANKHUNTHOD

## Winter Perc to attend championship in Ohio

BY AnthonyLuo

As a judge signaled them to start, members of the school's winter percussion World ensemble set up their instruments and props in the Titan Gym in Fullerton on March 24. They had performed in the same place the day before and made it to the finals round of the Winter Guard International (WGI) West Power Regional.

This performance, which earned them 7th place out of nine schools, was a precursor for a trip the 37-member group will be taking from April 13-20, where they will fly to Dayton, Ohio, to perform at the WGI World Championships at the University of Dayton Arena.

These showings mark a historic year for the program, as it is the first time in history they are competing in the highest division, Percussion Scholastic World (PSW), and the second time ever that they travel to Dayton for the World Championships. Winter percussion previously attended in 2015 in the

Percussion Scholastic Open (PSO) division.

"Whenever you see videos of drumlines online, they're always performing at Dayton," junior quad drummer Tanuj Siripurapu said. "So it's a cool experience to be able to play and compete alongside them and make a name for ourselves."

**The 37-member group will perform at the WGI World Championships in Dayton, Ohio, from April 13-20.**

Earlier this season, the group, led by directors Sean Clark (who is in charge of the battery percussionists) and Chavadith Tantavirojn (who leads the front ensemble or keyboard percussionists), performed in two local preview shows and three competitions

as a part of their local circuit, the Northern California Percussion Alliance (NCPA).

Clark and Tantavirojn decided to move the ensemble up to the PSW division after they dominated the PSO division last year. They won first place in every single NCPA competition they attended in the PSO division, including the championship, earning historically high scores along the way.

So far this season, despite facing stiffer competition in the PSW division, the ensemble has continued its winning streak with a 1st place win at Fremont High School on Feb. 10 and 2nd place finish at American Canyon High School on March 2. (Due to printing deadlines, the Falcon was unable to cover their third NCPA show, which occurred on March 30 at James Logan High School.)

The show itself tackles themes that the members can relate to as high school students, Clark said. This year's show, "Facade,"

deals with discovering one's identity behind the masks one wears throughout life.

Clark and show designer KK Rasmussen used this theme as inspiration for how to design the other elements of the show, including costumes, props and the floor.

"When you think of a facade, you think of something that is meant to conceal," Clark said. "We took that idea and thought about how it applies to specific shapes, colors or patterns."

The show floor is filled with bright, neon colors meant to appear artificial. Six large props, shaped like triangular prisms, rest on top of the floor and move around on rotatable bases throughout the show.

Each member's costume is also filled with harsh edges and contrasting colors as if concealing something, and the members wear LED masks that switch between different designs. Most of the musical

>> PERCUSSION on pg. 5



Siripurapu

## Davis to retire after 17 years

BY EmmaFung & KathyWang

After 17 years as physics and business teacher, Kirk Davis will retire at the end of the school year.

With Davis's retirement, Intro to Business has been discontinued as a class offering, while Regular Physics will most likely be taught by science teacher Jennifer Lee, Davis said.

Prior to his mid-career switch to teaching, Davis worked in the

healthcare industry and business field for almost 30 years. He recalls that his inspiration to begin teaching was sparked by his children's poor experiences with math and science teachers, who he thought usually explained class content poorly and contributed to a lack of understanding.

In 2007, he stepped away from his career in industry and tried his hand at teaching Physics and Introduction to Business at the school.



Davis

>> RETIREMENT on pg. 4

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 newsbriefs

**Annual Martha's Kitchen competition is live**

The school is again participating in the Martha's Kitchen Food Fight, a friendly competition among six private schools and SHS which aims to raise awareness for and help alleviate food insecurity. The event — run by Martha's Kitchen, a soup kitchen in San Jose that provides almost 250,000 meals a month — is taking place from March 25 to April 30.

This year, the school will be competing against Valley Christian, Notre Dame, Bellarmine, Presentation, Saint Francis and Harker. Participating students can earn points for their respective schools by volunteering with Martha's Kitchen (8 points per hour), donating cans of food (4 points per pound) and creating and donating snack packs (1 point each).

Other ways to earn points include creating social media posts (1 point each) and making financial donations (1 point per dollar). The Prathima and Nagaraj Murthy Family Charitable Trust will match donations up to \$10,000. Assistant principal Kristen Cunningham encourages students to create snack bags, whether it is in clubs or even in friend groups, and drop them off at Martha's Kitchen. In addition, she hopes more students will register for volunteer sessions with Martha's Kitchen.

"This is one of two times our community specifically comes together to give back... it's a great way to be aware of those who are food insecure," Cunningham said. ♦

— Jane Lee

**Engineering lab to receive new computers**

The district board recently approved funding 72 upgraded Lenovo laptops for the school's engineering program.

The new computers — which arrived on March 28 — cost \$165,240 along with a \$360 recycling fee, for a total of \$180,884.

The new Lenovo P1 G6 I7 laptops sport a more powerful GPU and CPU while also hosting a far larger display — with a 16-inch screen and a refresh rate of 165 hertz, compared to the old P51 models' 15.6-inch screen and 60 hertz refresh rate — meaning these new computers can display moving objects on-screen more smoothly.

Engineering teacher Audrey Warmuth expressed her excitement for the equipment upgrade, emphasizing the importance of having a set of more powerful computers than traditional classrooms have.

"We have been very lucky in the engineering lab to always have these nice computers, which are completely different from the sets in other classrooms," Warmuth said. ♦

— William Cao and Eric Shi

**New math books to be implemented next year**

Following California's mandate to reevaluate textbooks every seven years, the school's math department has chosen Big Ideas Math as the textbook provider for the Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II (AGA) courses starting next school year. A major reason for switching to the Big Ideas series is that it offers improved technological compatibility compared to the current textbook company, math department head Kristen Hamilton said. The new Big Ideas textbooks will replace the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) textbooks currently in use.

AGA teachers conducted a "pilot program" during the fall semester to evaluate two possible textbook publishers, Reveal Math and Big Ideas Math.

During this pilot period, AGA teachers incorporated modules from both Reveal Math and Big Ideas textbooks into their existing curriculum.

As a result, Big Ideas Math will be adapted into all AGA classes next fall. According to Hamilton, much remains to be done to smoothly incorporate the new curriculum into current AGA classes and teachers must overcome many challenges to restructure their class lessons. ♦

— Alec Guan

picturethis



Photo by ANGELA TAN

Spring Strings | Junior violist David Kim performs his solo concerto on March 7 in the McAfee Center.

Debate duo advances to nationals

by EmmaFung & AnthonyLuo

As they walked out of Dwinelle Hall and into the sprawling campus of UC Berkeley, public forum partners Ashish Goswami and Leonardo Jia felt confident about their success in their third and final round of the day.

After arguing for and against a ban on all single-use plastics throughout the weekend of Feb. 17-18, they had gone undefeated in the preliminary stage of the annual UC Berkeley Cal Invitational, advancing to the elimination rounds.

The team went undefeated in the preliminary stage of the competition.

The two juniors eventually made it to the semifinals with an impressive streak of 3-0 wins (where all three judges voted for their side) in their double-octafinal, octafinal and quarterfinal rounds. However, they lost their semifinal round on a 0-3 ballot.

"Ultimately, our mistakes came back to bite us in the semifinals, but I'm still very happy with the way we performed, given that the Berkeley tournament brings the best from around the nation," Goswami said.

Goswami and Jia prepared extensively for the Berkeley Invitational. As one of the main qualification tournaments for the Tournament of Champions (TOC), it saw attendance from 235 varsity public forum teams across the nation.

The two debaters will attend the TOC in Lexington, Kentucky, on April 20. Sophomore Anthony Luo and junior Skyler Mao will also be there competing in public forum, and juniors Timothy Leung and Kinera Potluri will compete in the Duo Interpretation category.

Goswami and Jia had only about a month to prepare for the Berkeley invitational topic, which was whether the federal government should ban single-use plastics. To be as prepared as possible, they did extensive research on ar-

guments on the topic and attended other prestigious tournaments.

For instance, they attended the Stanford Invitational on Feb. 10-12 and made it to triple-octafinals. More notably, they were invited to and attended the exclusive California Round Robin on Feb. 15-16, which pitted them against 11 of the best teams in the nation.

Held at a hotel near the College Preparatory School in Oakland, the California Round Robin was hosted in conjunction with the Berkeley Invitational and consisted of 12 teams. They were split into two 6-team pods.

Every team in either pod faced off against the other teams in their pod in rounds with two judges each — the teams with the most ballots made it to the elimination rounds. Although the duo did not see great results, receiving just 2 of 10 possible ballots, they still found the experience to be more than enough to get them ready for the prestigious Berkeley Invitational the following weekend.

"Despite our results, we were able to gain insight into the topic [of banning single-use plastics] and how the Berkeley tournament would go," Jia said. "As a result of that, we were able to prepare our arguments well and have really good preparation going into the weekend."

Those efforts paid off, as the pair was able to win all six of their preliminary matches at Berkeley.

Since those rounds only had one judge, who was often a parent or a more inexperienced judge, the two opted to speak slower in order to focus on their rhetoric and persuasive skills.

The tournament was structured with three preliminary rounds on Saturday, the other three on Sunday and all of the elimination rounds on Monday.

Usually, tournaments will squeeze most preliminary rounds into the first day and run more efficiently as a whole, but the Berkeley Invitational's massive attendance forced organizers to space everything out.

As a result, many teams felt fatigued by the long, drawn-out days — which is when Goswami and Jia's extensive experience as debate veterans took the spotlight.

"Being juniors and having been to so many in-person tournaments gave us an edge because we knew how to conserve our energy compared to some of the younger teams, who maybe haven't debated in person as much," Goswami said.

Moving into the elimination rounds, the two had to shift their debating style to suit more technical judges, many of whom were coaches or former debaters.

As these judges were familiar with the topic and the technicalities of debate overall, the pair transitioned to faster and condensed speaking to overwhelm their opponents with arguments.

"We started to prepare responses to more unique arguments, which might not sound as perceptually convincing, but work on a technical level," Jia said. "Additionally, we prepared various strategies to improve our efficiency, allowing us to [focus] on a larger amount of arguments in our case."

However, as the day went on, the duo started to feel the effects of fatigue catching up to them. By the time the semifinal round arrived at around 5 p.m., they were exhausted and thus prone to making mistakes, some of which ended up knocking them out of the bracket.

"The tiniest things will give you an edge and lead to wins."

JUNIOR Ashish Goswami

"The biggest lesson we learned is that though debate is a mental activity, you have to be there physically as well," Goswami said.

Goswami and Jia said they are excited to compete at the TOC in April, but they also acknowledge how competitive and difficult it will be.

"When you go to these national tournaments, everyone is roughly about the same skill level, so the only thing that affects whether you win or lose is how you perform on one day," Goswami said. "That's when the tiniest things will give you an edge and lead to wins." ♦

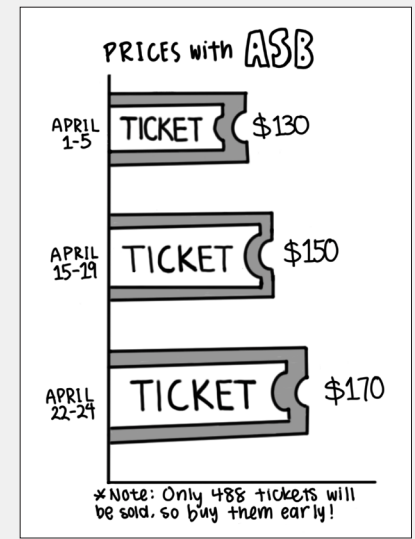
PROM

continued from pg. 1

hosted a prom in 2002 on the Hornblower, the senior class officers ran into a roadblock at the beginning of the planning process: the venue's high price. The officers then sought sponsorships from the community and found two who greatly reduced the cost: the company Humanize Her and local realtor Andy Tse.

"It's rare these days with all the venue and busing costs being less than \$200 a ticket. So the fact that we were able to get it to \$130 is incredible," assistant principal and activities director Kristen Cunningham said.

From the week of April 1-5, tickets were \$130 with ASB and \$150 without ASB. Starting after spring break, prices will increase by \$20 each week, and sales will close on April 24. Due to venue capacity, the number of sales is limited to 488. As a result, Cunningham encourages students to buy tickets early.



Graphic by SHIRINA CAO

Students who have not fulfilled their assigned Saturday School requirements will be placed on a no-go list and cannot purchase a prom ticket unless they attend a make-up Saturday School on April 6.

On the day of prom, students are expected to arrive at 3:45 p.m. at the high school and will be transferred by coach buses to the dock. All students attending must travel with the school-provided buses, except the badminton and boys' tennis teams, as they have a game scheduled. Students in those respective sports teams will need to receive permission for their parents to drive. All students will return to the school around midnight.

The administration advises students prone to motion sickness to take medication before departure, as staff are not permitted to give students medication. There will also be a security check before boarding.

"There is a potential that there could be a little bit of a walk from the buses and the dock," Cunningham said. "We just recommend that students not wear super high heels or anything that will make walking uncomfortable, because once you're on the boat, it will be moving." ♦

>> bigidea

A Peek into Prom

**Where and when?**  
Prom will be held on May 18 on the San Francisco Hornblower Cruise. The cruise will be from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m.

**What is the theme?**  
The prom theme for 2024 will be "Princess and the Frog."

**What are some restrictions?**  
Students who have overdue Saturday School must make it up on April 6. Students are advised not to wear uncomfortable shoes.

VEX Robotics team wins U.S. Open

by WilliamCao & NealMalhotra

The school's VEX robotics team 95071X placed first out of 164 teams from across the world in the U.S. Open Nationals tournament headed in Council Bluffs, Iowa, on March 14-16. The team also won the Excellence Award, the highest judging award attainable.

A week prior, they competed at the Tracy California Regional Championship, losing in the quarterfinals but winning the Excellence Award; this performance qualified them for the World Championship on April 25-27, to be held in Dallas.

Team 95071X consists of sophomores Adit Sharma, Richard Lee and Bryan Zhao, junior Luke Zhang and seniors Kai Otsuka and William Cao. It is one of six VEX teams on campus.

In preparation for Worlds, the team's members are working on updating their Engineering Design Notebook to include tournament analysis from nationals, fine-tuning their driving, programming their autonomous skills routine and testing other prototype robot builds.

"So far, this season has surpassed everyone's expectations," said Lee, the robot's driver. "We have strong momentum after winning the Excellence award states and Tournament Championships at nationals, and we're looking forward to mimicking



Photo by WILLIAM CAO

Senior Kai Otsuka fixes 95071X's robot before the championships.

this performance at worlds."

The 6 members compete in the VEX Robotics Competition (VRC), an organizing league that holds robotics competitions worldwide. VRC releases a brand new game every April, which dictates what challenges teams have to build their robots.

This year's game is "Over Under," in which robots in teams of two are tasked with scoring green, acorn-shaped balls into goals and climbing onto a pole. All teams also have the opportunity to play in the Drivers Skills Challenge, where robots

compete individually to score as many points as possible.

While the team's first build swept the Central Valley Regional tournament held in Ceres, Calif., on Dec. 9 in an alliance with team 77787B — which qualified them for the U.S. Open — members were dissatisfied with their robot's overall heavy weight and speed.

Following the regional, the team redesigned their robot toward a lighter design, creating a more maneuverable robot.

"Our original robot was more for skills," Otsuka said. "We

wanted to be better at match play, so we tried to decrease the weight of the robot and we ended up dropping from 18 pounds to 16.5 pounds."

Quick turnarounds have also been a strength for the team this season. While the team only had three days to prepare for the U.S. Open Nationals, they took full advantage of the little time. The team's ability to adapt their robot to different challenges continued to give them an edge.

On the first day of the U.S. Open, they had the opportunity to attempt the Driver Skills Challenge. The team ended up placing second at the event with an autonomous score of 183 and a driver score of 226 out of a maximum total of 250 points.

The team later went undefeated during their qualification matches. They earned first place in their division after the qualifying rounds.

This year, the 95071X team was made to be the collection of the best members in the club to create a "super" team. Otsuka mentioned that each person brings a specific strength to the team and over time they were able to put everything together.

Otsuka hopes that the team can carry their strong performance to Worlds in April.

"As long as we don't go too ambitious on the robot [remaking big subsystems] and we refine what we have, we will do well at worlds," Otsuka said. ♦

Digital Photography hones lasting skills

by ShirinaCao & EmilyWu

During a recent third-period Digital Photography class, senior Samuel Kau raised his Canon R7 to the tall redwood trees in the quad and positioned it vertically to capture their full height. He carefully snapped a few photos by adjusting the ISO control to match the bright sun. Around him stood several other Digital Photography students, who had also ventured to the back of campus alongside Kau to study the landscape and frame their creative shots.

The freedom to go on outings like this is a typical daily experience for students in Digital Photography — a visual arts elective with one class period taught by first-year media teacher Carla Villela. She teaches students how to effectively use a camera, frame photos and edit them. Each of the 29 students is provided with a Canon T6 with a 15-18mm zoom lens, although bringing personal cameras is also allowed.

Throughout the year, students learn how to use different camera controls like aperture, shutter speed or ISO — the exposure trifecta — to optimize a camera's performance. These controls, among others, help the students control the amount of light, focus and clarity in their photography. In addition, the class covers other fundamental photography skills like personal design, color theory, sequential imaging, photo framing and more to expand students' photographic arsenal of skills.

"I'm always taking photos because there are a lot of different assignments," sophomore Blue Chankhunthod said. "It's really fun because you get to experiment with different lighting and props."

In a typical class period, Villela briefly explains a concept students will be exploring, like the rule of thirds or the effects of using different apertures. After checking everyone's camera is ready to take photos, she assigns them a task to accomplish.

"After we are taught specific skills in class, we go around campus looking for what we just learned and practice taking



Courtesy of CARLA VILLELA

Self-portrait projects (Caleb Yu left, Franky Zheng top right, Vivienne Brooks bottom right)

photos with it," Kau said. "In a way, it makes us more aware of what's around us. It keeps our eyes peeled looking for things."

The next class after the photo-taking assignment, students usually do a "daily" — or a professional critique — where every student will show their work and other students critique it based on their knowledge of the elements of that particular design.

Villela said she deliberately orders the classes in this "cyclical" format, where students learn a new concept, practice applying it and then reflect on what they learned. She finds that this structure helps students learn in a way where they can compare skills to concepts they've learned prior and build upon them.

After students carefully frame and take photos, the last step to complete the photography process is editing. In the class, students learn to use Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop to add highlights, bring out deep, saturated colors and add their style to the photos. Villela also covers techniques like batch editing (editing large numbers of photos at the same time) and compositing (combining photos to make a new image).

"Ms. Villela usually has an example photo, a photo that she took herself, that she shows on the projector," Kau said. "She uses it to show us how different controls affect the image. Editing is sort of like art, and it gives each person's photo their style and shows their artistic take on the picture."

Throughout the year, students also complete various projects like creating artistic self-portraits or taking 1,000 pictures of a real-life event. Through the real-life event assignments, Villela hopes that students will have the opportunity to practice their newfound photography skills during an event that is meaningful to them.

"I love digital photography because it's like a gateway elective for budding artists," Villela said. "Sometimes art classes can feel pretty daunting to students who don't have any art experience. But photography is a great way to still learn about art principles, but be able to make visual masterpieces with a tool." ♦



# Choir goes to National Concerts Festival

By Angela Tan

Unfamiliar, enchanting harmonies of "From Scorched Earth" by Katerina Gimón echoed throughout Benaroya Hall in Seattle, enveloping the audience with a beautiful blend of voices that captivated the meaning of a written poem into a moving musical performance.

On March 25 and 27, SHS choir students performed a seven-piece set as part of the National Concert Chorus (NCC), an approximately 175-person combined choir with four other schools. They were also one of three combined choirs that performed in the National Concerts festival, each performing separate music sets.

The NCC's performance included "From Scorched Earth" by Gimón, a piece specially written for the NCC and based on Vancouver poet Saphren Ma's "Wildfire." The poem and music composition call attention to the catastrophic effects of climate change and the rebirth of hope that arises from both nature and human healing.

The group also performed other works from varying cultures and periods, including Hela Rotan's "Traditional Indonesian Folksong" arranged by Ken Steven, modern pop artist Aurora's "Apple Tree" arranged by Gimón, and "I Love You/What a Wonderful World" by Larry Norman and Randy Stonehill, a work inspired by early contemporary Christian song.

The choir students flew to Seattle on March 22 for the 5-day trip. All SHS choir groups, including the Concert Choir and the Chamber Choir, participated in the festival, and most students who did not have prior conflicts chose to attend.

In the days leading up to the festival, the group rehearsed in 2-4 hour blocks in the hotel ballroom, working intensively with guest conductor Dr. Giselle Wyers from the University of Washington and "From Scorched Earth" composer Gimón.



The National Concert Chorus performs on the stage at Benaroya Hall in Seattle on March 25.

The trip was a partnership with National Concerts, a company that organizes similar-style performances at Carnegie Hall. Nitzan was hesitant to have the choir attend a festival as its own ensemble, as the SHS choir struggles to maintain an adequately sized roster even with all its grade levels.



Nitzan

"We are small, especially compared to band and orchestra. Doing a whole tour on our own was tentative because of the numbers and not being sure how many people were going to sign up. I wanted to make sure we did something that was combined with other people for just a little support," Nitzan said.

Unlike other music-related trips, the process of applying to attend the festival did not require a competitive audition. Instead, Nitzan reached out to National Concerts expressing interest and was asked to send in videos of recent performances and their rehearsal process.

Although she does not consider it a prestigious festival, Nitzan believes that traveling as an ensemble, no matter the prestige of the event, is valuable for music students.

"They can work with a guest conductor over a more extended period than just having somebody come into the classroom for a day or two," Nitzan said. "It can also be a really powerful experience to meet others who you know are doing the same thing as you but have a different background or experiences that they bring to the table."

For senior Hannah Shaw, this trip was an opportunity to form bonds with choir students she previously didn't know as well.

"Normally [in school], students in Concert Choir and Chamber Choir only see each other through passing periods, tutorial rehearsals and concerts," Shaw said. "It's kind of hard to form connections. So this trip really brought a lot of people together, which I really love, especially with people who sing in the same section and who ended up standing next to me." ♦

## RETIREMENT

continued from pg. 1

"I liked it, and then decided I would do it, but I only wanted to continue doing it as long as I was still really enjoying it," Davis said. "I still get a kick out of the kids; it's just that other things in my life have taken priority."

After the recent birth of his first grandchild, Davis has decided to spend more time with his family. Since all his children live relatively far away, Davis said he wants to allocate more time to traveling and visiting them.

Davis also hopes to spend more time pursuing his hobbies.

"I like to bike and golf so I'll be able to do that a little bit more often," Davis said. "I also have taken up woodworking so I've got a little woodworking place in my garage. I'm gonna do a lot more stuff and just have more time to relax."

Davis said he will miss the business projects his students create, including an activity where students create a business proposal for any real-world product. One of the most memorable efforts was a binder made of Kevlar that would be highly durable as a result.

While Davis looks forward to what retirement holds, he hopes his students will continue to grow both academically and socially. Davis mentioned he has tried to be empathetic and reasonable to foster an engaging and inclusive environment where his students can feel comfortable.

Junior Eunice Ching, who takes Physics with Davis, said she greatly appreciates Davis's ability to connect with his students.

Ching, who is on the gold team, recalls that Davis would always put an effort into starting conversations regarding their shared interest in golf.

"In class, he would always bring up golf with me, so I think it's cool that he tries to find similarities between students and talk about them, and he does it with other students as well," Ching said. ♦

# Drama prepares comedy musical 'Something Rotten'

By EmmaFung

During performances that run from April 26 to May 4, a cast of 24 actors will step out onto the McAfee Center stage to perform the well-liked musical "Something Rotten."

The musical, written by John O'Farrell and Karey Kirkpatrick in 2015, tells the comedic tale of two brothers, Nick and Nigel Bottom, both aspiring playwrights in the late 1500s competing with one William Shakespeare.

In order to beat him at something, the brothers go to a fortune teller, who tells them to write a musical, something they had never heard of. They decide to name the musical "Omelet," a parody name for Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

According to drama director Benjamin Brozman, the musical was built on a myth that many of Shakespeare's ideas originated from Greek writings and mythology, which is shown in the musical.

"Because rumors about Shakespeare

copying other works were circulating at the time, the play sort of portrays Shakespeare as a shady character," Brozman said.

**"The whole message of the play is 'to thine own self be true,' and it's honestly such a beautiful message."**

TEACHER Benjamin Brozman

The two main characters, Nick and Nigel, will be played by juniors Apollo Burgess and Maheshwar. Maheshwar said she auditioned for the play as it is one of her all-time favorites — she first fell in love with the play after watching it on Broadway in 7th grade.

"It's such a funny show and there are so many easter eggs for all the theater fans out there," Maheshwar said. "I really wanted

to finish off senior year with a bang, and I knew that this would be a perfect role for me."

Alongside the two main protagonists, the musical will feature a variety of interesting characters, such as Shakespeare, who will be played by junior Ryan Backus, as well as Nigel's wife Portia, who will be played by junior Niraali Garg.

During daily after-school rehearsals in the Thermond Drama Center, Brozman has used a system called "skeleton blocking," in which he plans out the itinerary and goals of the day. The point of this is to keep rehearsals on track, and it is crucial for mastering choreography and singing over the weeks leading up to the play, he said.

"I do this so that the production can move smoothly and according to schedule," Brozman said, "especially because the cast has a lot of choreography and singing to learn over the course of the next couple of months."

For the auditory aspect of the production, choir teacher and music and vocal director Elizabeth Nitzan will organize the musical numbers. Although most of the cast members have extensive experience in drama productions, students with no musical background are always welcome to audition for musicals.

"A lot of us are actually doing a musical for the first time this year," Maheshwar said. "It's perfectly fine if you don't have previous singing experience; the whole thing is just supposed to be for fun, and there's no pressure if you're not a good singer either."

The drama team is excited to perform for their audience and leave an impact on them.

"The whole message of the play is 'to thine own self be true,' and it's honestly such a beautiful message," Brozman said. "I think it also pertains to our whole team, because theater is a place that brings so many different kinds of people together, and it's where we can just be ourselves." ♦



Maheshwar

## PERCUSSION

continued from pg. 1

and visual elements of the show are designed by the staff themselves and are specifically tailored to each member's strengths.

**The show is divided into three parts, with each exploring different stages in the search for identity.**

Musically and visually, the show is divided into three parts, titled "Face/Mask," "Mirror" and "Glitch," with each exploring different stages in the search for identity.

The first movement, "Face/Mask," deals with hiding one's face and introduces the concept of the masks worn throughout one's life. Throughout the movement, each section within the ensemble receives its own small musical features.

"We've seen tons of growth with the students so you'll see a lot of individual sections showcased, more so compared to past years," Clark said. "Different elements weave in and out, and with such a strong group we can bring out unique sounds and perform something more nuanced."

For the second movement, "Mirror," Clark and the rest of the electronics team — including Tantavirojn, Gabriel Boquerin, Sean Chen and AJ Gonzales — collaborat-

ed with artist Skyler Stahlmann to use lyrics from her song "Facade" as background audio throughout the movement.

Visually, props rotate to reveal mirrors, and members of the ensemble are able to "see themselves" for the first time. Through their choreography, they confront their identities and try to discover who they are behind the mask.

The second movement is followed by a drumset solo by sophomore Raymond Zheng, which transitions into the third movement, "Glitch," set to David O'Dowd's song "People We Don't Know."

The show finishes with senior snare drummer Grant Hough performing a solo that concludes with him taking off his mask and staring into a mirror.

According to Clark, the ending is meant to show that masks themselves are the only honest thing we display in our lives, and the only facade is thinking that we know ourselves and those around us.

"As far as winter percussion shows go, a lot of them end up being cheesy or not diving deep into anything," Siripurapu said. "Our theme is a lot more intriguing and leaves you with something to think about after the show is over."

Siripurapu finds that the ensemble's achievements come as a result of hard work put in by both the students and staff, as they usually rehearse for more than 10 hours per week after school.

"Rehearsals are pretty crazy this year — 5:30 to 9 p.m., three days a week, and it's pretty hard balancing my workload with that," Siripurapu said. "But after going to a few competitions and seeing our results, I think they're paying off." ♦



Clark



Winter Percussion practices before WGI West Finals at Whittier High School on March 17.

## Lost and found items now being donated to teen charity

By DivyaVadlakonda

Students walking by the lost and found outside the main office sometimes see an imposing pile of jackets, crumpled novels and assorted water bottles stacked on a table near the entrance doors.

All these items, if unclaimed, are donated to Teen Challenge, a nonprofit that provides recovery programs for teens with destructive, abusive and addictive lifestyles, assistant principal Matt Torrens said.

Previously, the school donated lost and found belongings to the local Goodwill store until administrators discovered SHS students themselves were going there and buying expensive items that they had no genuine need for.

"We wanted to start donating to Teen Challenge because then we knew where it was going and that it was going to a good cause," Torrens said.

Office staff donate the items to Teen Challenge every six weeks. They started announcing the dates of donation for the first time last December to give students a heads-up and avoid potential disasters from donating important belongings.

Torrens recounted an incident where a student's family heirloom was almost donated, but was recovered a day before donation.

"Our mistake was donating the whole pile right away, so what we're doing now is announcing it a week prior," Torrens said.

Though there are many belongings that have accumulated in the school's lost and found bins — one in the MAP building, library, music building and gym — it

is not an abnormal amount compared to previous years, Torrens said.

As for the most commonly lost belongings, Torrens said water bottles — currently two buckets worth — are the most frequently lost and unclaimed items. Jackets and shirts are the next contenders.

Water bottles and Falcon merchandise not picked up by the end of each 6-week period are washed and given to the Green Team to sell and promote their message of sustainability. Highly expensive items, however, such as AirPods, phones and wallets, are kept in the office at the front desk until they are claimed.

If any of these items sound familiar, consider retrieving them from the lost and found. ♦

### THE bigidea

#### Lost and found donations

The following items will be donated if not claimed:

- 1) Backpacks
- 2) Batting Helmets
- 3) Booster Seats
- 4) Jump ropes
- 5) Pencil Sharpeners
- 6) California Drivers-Ed Handbooks
- 7) Leather Jackets
- 8) Nike Shoes
- 9) Badminton rackets
- 10) Berets

They will go to Teen Challenge, which helps teens recover from addiction.

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# The current presidential electoral process threatens democracy, must be overhauled

The 2024 presidential election is approaching, bringing with it a Biden-Trump rematch. This close matchup between the incumbent and previous president is revealing the seismic cracks in America's electoral system.

The one-candidate ballot undermines candidates who would otherwise be a good second or third choice; the Electoral College, which allots a whole state's electors as bloc to the winning candidate, means the presidential race comes down only to six or seven battleground states, utterly ignoring the popular vote; and caucusing — like the Iowa Caucus that kicks off the election year — gives an extreme representation of the rest of the country's demographics and core issues.

It's time for the country as a whole to look toward other voting systems, such as ranked-choice voting, as a replacement for the Electoral College.

The system of allowing voters only one vote to cast puts an additional, irrelevant factor for voters to consider — electability — not the candidate's policies or personality, but their predicted chance of winning against the opposing party's nominee.

This November, one Democratic and one Republican candidate will clash, and voters will have the choice between the two, or may vote for a third-party candidate — someone who, realistically, has no chance of winning. From 1892-2022, the only third-party candidate to gain more than 10% of the electoral votes was former president Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, with 16.57% as part of the Bull Moose Party — nowhere near the number of votes needed to win. In fact, America hasn't elected an independent candidate since George Washington.

Effectively, third-party candidates take away votes that would otherwise have gone to major party candidates. This year, although a record number — 63% of voters — say they would prefer a third-party candidate, only

17% say they would actually vote for one. And those 17% are evenly divided, so as voters face an unpopular rematch between Biden and Trump, third-party voting may factor into the final outcome. Although it is an idealistic demonstration of democratic principles, in America's voting system, casting ballots for third-party candidates is essentially throwing away your vote and possibly helping your lesser-liked candidate win.

Furthermore, the issue of electability has historically undermined female candidates in presidential elections. Although it is not a focus for Republicans in 2024, a poll in 2020 suggests that many voters skew their votes away from female candidates because they believe that they have lower chances of leading the winning party — with 76% of Democratic respondents stating that they believed it would be more difficult for a female candidate to beat Trump.

But perhaps an even more self-evidently flawed institution is America's Electoral College system.

The vote counting system is out-of-date and historically fails to accurately represent the popular vote; five of 46 presidents have been elected with a win in the Electoral College, but a loss in popular vote — since all states also get a minimum three electoral votes, small states like Wyoming are given a disproportionately large weight in elections, in comparison to their population. (Wyoming's population is 600,000 compared to the nearly 40 million Californians.)

In addition, according to Pew Research Center, the Electoral College stimulates an effect called electoral vote inflation — where, on average, the difference in Electoral College votes is 1.36 times greater than the difference in popular votes.

In all but two states, there are winner-takes-all elections: Whichever candidate wins a majority of the popular vote in a state is awarded all the electoral



voting power that state has, essentially discarding every vote for the losing candidate.

The only benefit of the Electoral College is that the winning candidate will always have a simple majority of electoral votes, in comparison to popular voting — but this also means that third-party candidates winning a state's electoral votes is statistically near-impossible, with only three candidates in the past 100 years having ever won even one state.

And if a presidential candidate without the greatest number of popular votes can win through a distorted majority, how can we claim that this is the best voting system?

A possible solution: ranked choice voting and primaries instead of one vote per person and caucuses

Given the Electoral College's problematic one-person one-vote system, ranked choice voting, a system where voters rank all presidential candidates — so that if their candidate is eliminated, their vote is immediately

given to their next choice — is an option worth considering.

It has the potential to decrease polarization and "spoiler votes" by forcing candidates to appeal to a wider audience rather than a singular, strong, like-minded base (think of Trump's MAGA movement). RCV may also encourage turnout for voters who would rather abstain than vote for either major party candidate.

Then, those votes can be used as popular votes, bypassing the Electoral College system. Lastly, caucusing states should switch to conducting primaries rather than caucuses, which are in essence unproductive shouting sessions for already polarized voters, who have the time and job security to dedicate an entire evening to yelling supporting points for their candidate, into the opposing masses of feverishly screaming people.

In order to prevent the nomination of extreme candidates who do not truly have the support of a majority of Americans, America's voting system needs to change. ♦

### Opinion of the Falcon Editorial Board

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Kavya Patel

Reporter  
Beverly Xu

The Saratoga Falcon staff voted 27-2 in favor of this article.

# High school and healthy sleep do not mesh

By Sarah Zhou

24 hours the CDC recommends for teens ages 13-18.

Despite constantly being chided to report to bed earlier for better long-term health, many SHS students still find themselves only getting into bed in the wee hours of dawn. From personal experience, despite certain benefits to sleeping earlier, it's not realistic for students to change this habit.

In elementary and middle school, I was generally fast asleep in bed before 8 or 9 p.m. and getting at least 9 hours of sleep a night.

Sophomore year, however, I consistently tucked into bed at 1 or 2 a.m., while waking up at the absolute last possible moment (8:12 a.m.) to get to school in a sort of on-time-ish way. This was already pushing the limits of the 8-10 hours of sleep per

Junior and senior year only got worse. If you had checked Spotify or Discord activity statuses at 3 or 4 a.m., you would have probably seen me and many of my friends still procrastinating on English readings and Physics homework due in 4 hours. On the weekends, you would not find me up any time before noon.

Whether it's procrastination (senioritis is definitely real) or the genuinely unmanageable workload that came with taking seven classes in junior year, I found myself nodding off in my classes to get myself closer to the daily recommended sleep amount, but the quality of sleep isn't as high when you're constantly trying to dodge your teacher's

watchful eye.

Also, the 3-hour naps I took after school — whether they came at 4 p.m. or 10 p.m. — were never refreshing.

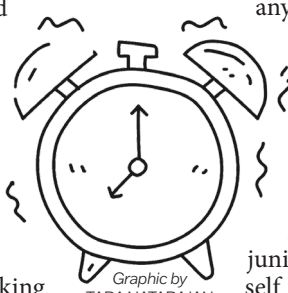
In the past month or so, in an effort to get my life back on track, I have begun reverting to something similar to my elementary school sleep schedule. I go to bed around 10-11 p.m. and wake up at 6 a.m.

Our circadian rhythm (biological clock) dictates the best quality of sleep happens between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. Unfortunately, I have to admit the quality of my sleep when I'm in bed earlier, though sometimes less in hours, is higher quality. The peace and quiet of waking up at 6 a.m. coupled with a comfortable amount of time to get ready for school is also more relaxing and a better way to start my day.

While sleeping earlier and waking up earlier is good for long-term

health and something that people should strive for throughout their entire lives, I don't think it's realistic for high schoolers at academic pressure cooker schools like SHS to achieve. I started this health kick only because I'm focusing on myself and bettering my health as a second-semester senior. If I had done this the past three years, my grades would have suffered.

My friends all know my most productive time period occurs around 2 a.m., and a 6 a.m. cram session simply would not be as effective. Though I'm enjoying this sleep experiment while it lasts, along with most normal students, I consistently save my work for the last minute before tests, and having a 10 p.m. bedtime is not conducive to effective study sessions, and likely isn't something I will be able to consistently hold up in college. For now, though, I'm waking up at dawn and I'm more than OK with it. ♦



# While controversial, college ranking systems are instrumental in constructing college lists

By William Cao  
& Nikhil Mathihalli

With over 5,999 college options in the U.S., seniors face a daunting array of possible directions; merely choosing colleges to apply to can feel like navigating a maze in the cornfields, blindfolded.

From our experience in the past several months, the most critical sifting device in the decision-making process has been well-known college ranking systems, such as U.S. News & World Report and Niche.

Ranking systems — while often condemned for perpetuating a culture that prioritizes prestige — nonetheless remain an essential part of the college application process.

### Even among the most prestigious universities, a notable disparity exists in admission rates.

They provide useful statistics and serve as efficient tools for building college lists.

While researching schools to apply to, we found that college ranking systems are a helpful starting point to gauge the difficulty of admission and filter the schools as safeties, targets and reaches.

After all, regardless of whether you believe in the value of a college's prestige, you still need realistic estimates of your chances of admission, and this information is most easily accessible through ranking sites.

Ranking systems, which provide the breadth that other resources lack, can be a time saving tool for generating a preliminary list.

There's an abundance of online resources readily available to help with college re-

search, making the process more efficient than solely relying on information from a college counselor or admissions officer.

Scrolling through rankings may also be more helpful than browsing individual college sites (which takes too long for initial research) or paging through glossy college brochures.

Colleges do this purposefully, advertising their school to you, and thus seek to persuade the applicant rather than inform them.

College ranking systems offer a standardized and comparative framework, enabling students to assess the academic reputation and resources of institutions and determine which colleges fall into these categories.

This consistency allows for a fair evaluation across a plethora of colleges, aiding in the process of choosing those that align most closely with individual educational goals. When examining college lists, it's also reasonable to infer that higher-ranked institutions have more meaningful resources for their students.

A particularly prominent example of this is using them to find top-quality faculty and greater access to research and internship opportunities, leading to higher graduation rates and post-college job placement due to name recognition from a recruiter standpoint.

Ranking sites provide plentiful statistics about job placement after graduation and major-specific rankings can aid students in determining which colleges offer the best resources and align with their academic pursuits.

Moreover, these college ranking systems are useful for choosing which schools to commit to post-college decisions: In particular, we researched the engineering programs at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Michigan.

At first glance, these programs are simi-



Graphic by AMY MIAO

lar in terms of their academic rigor, faculty expertise and emphasis on hands-on experience like research — it would be a tough decision to choose between the two colleges.

However, ranking systems provide abundant, accessible information about curriculum ranking and costs. This can help inform your decision about where to enroll for undergraduate studies with regard to demographics, class size, athletics and campus life.

When considering top schools for your particular major of interest, it's important to prioritize the quality of education and student life over just the institution's reputation.

While prestigious colleges and universities such as Princeton may often dominate

the overall rankings, the perception can vary significantly depending on the specific field of study.

For instance, if you intend to pursue a nursing-related degree, Emory University might emerge as a top choice despite not being as prominent in overall rankings of schools.

Despite the bad reputation college ranking lists sometimes get, college ranking systems offer enormous benefits for overwhelmed seniors.

It is crucial to delve into the programs offered by different universities and assess their strengths and resources in your desired major, as long as you don't solely rely on the perceived prestige of the institution's rankings. ♦

## togotalks

What do you think about college ranking lists?

"I didn't use any; I mainly went off of prior knowledge from extended family when applying."



senior Emily Ta

"College ranking lists are very useful; through them, I was able to find schools good for my major."



senior Naina Tallak

"I applied to a lot of schools, but I never really looked at any. I don't think you need them."



senior Shrey Jain

# The computer science industry is becoming oversaturated

By Richard Fan  
& Alec Guan

young people all across the world are studying hard to get into prestigious universities with top-tier computer science programs.

However, the computer science job market is shrinking as tech giants reduce costs in two ways: outsourcing work overseas and using AI to do work once done by people.

Let's start by looking at why they're outsourcing their work to small firms overseas in China and India. Simply put, it is because the price of labor is vastly cheaper in those countries than here. Why would a tech company pay workers \$200,000 a year plus benefits to do work someone overseas can do for \$20,000?

As layoffs have occurred, big tech companies have seen positive results in their stock prices. The tech-heavy S&P 500, a compilation of the 500 largest companies, has hit all-time highs multiple times so far in 2024, with the top companies like Alphabet, Microsoft and Meta leading the way. Smaller companies have been jumping on this bandwagon to boost their company's worth as well.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a further 11% decrease in job opportunities for computer programmers, citing "automation" as the reason.

Then there are the disruptions being caused by AI. With AI becoming exponentially more powerful every day, it will be able to take over jobs with higher complexities, further exacerbating the shrinkage of the CS job market. And while it is true that rapid AI development is creating lucrative new job opportunities, these are often limited high-level openings; competition for these tighter positions will be fierce as the vast majority of low-level programming jobs are swallowed by AI.

For prospective CS majors, this gloomy landscape is daunting. Job security should be held in high regard, just as much as salary is for job-seekers. To make matters worse, salaries are decreasing too — computer scientists all across the U.S. saw a decrease in salary of over \$15,000 in 2022. Salaries dropped another 4% in 2023 — and this downward trend is projected to continue in 2024.

Every year, over 200,000 students graduate with an undergraduate degree in computer science. All signs point to the job market becoming oversaturated with graduates looking for jobs that either do not exist or are not needed. Should STEM majors give up all hope and pursue work as Starbucks

baristas? Not so fast. Instead, they should shift from CS and pursue similar majors such as engineering or mathematics. Those fields still support jobs such as aircraft design or electrical engineering — at least within the near future — AI cannot do. ♦

## >> falconfigures

30 percent of US undergraduates major in CS

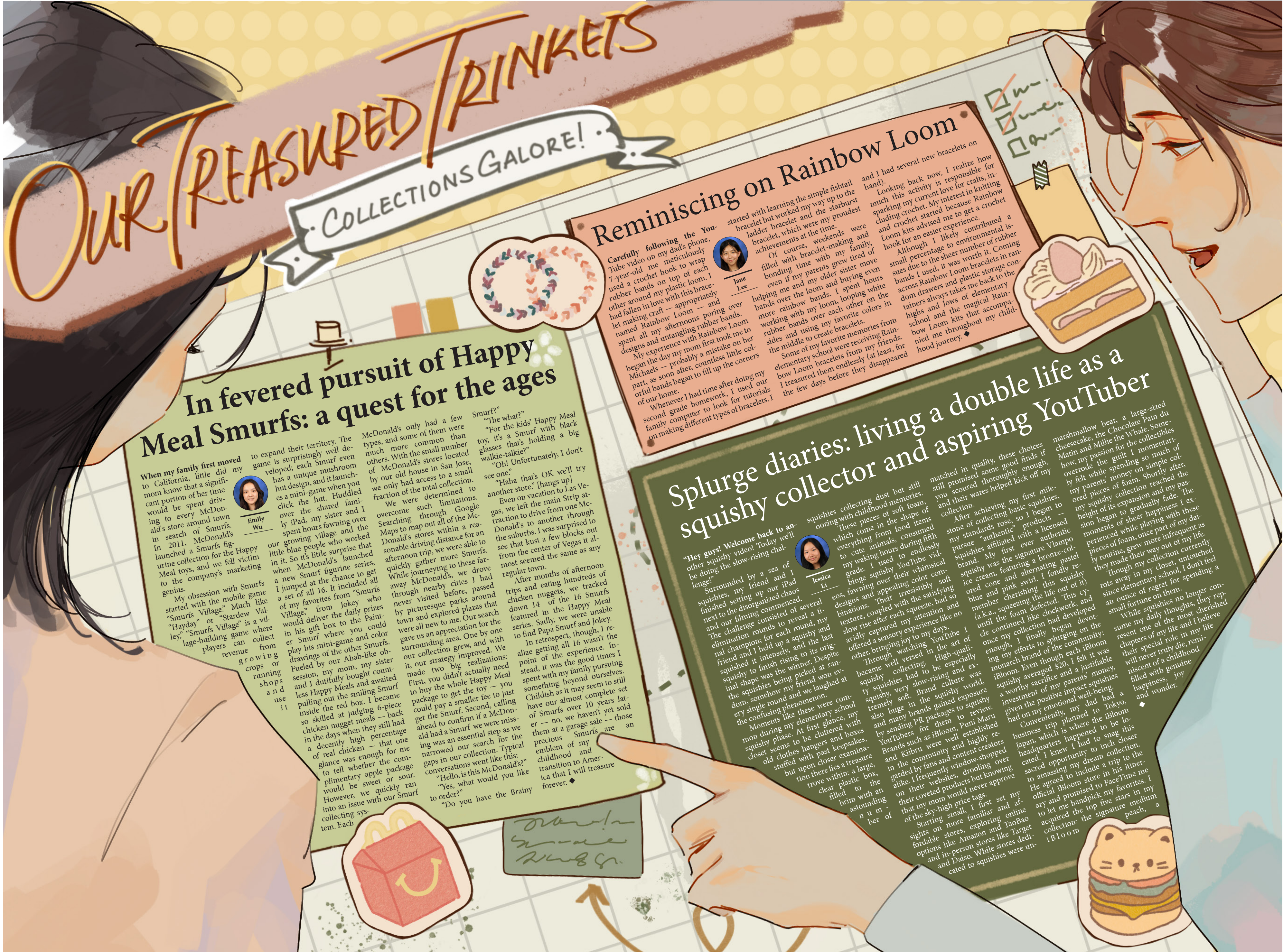
11 percent decrease in job offers for computer programmers

25 percent predicted increase in tech stocks for 2024

4 percent decrease in salaries for computer scientists in 2023







# OUR TREASURED TRINKETS

## COLLECTIONS GALORE!

### In fevered pursuit of Happy Meal Smurfs: a quest for the ages

When my family first moved to California, little did my mom know that a significant portion of her time would be spent driving to every McDonald's store around town in search of Smurfs. In 2011, McDonald's launched a Smurfs figurine collection for the Happy Meal toys, and we fell victim to the company's marketing genius.



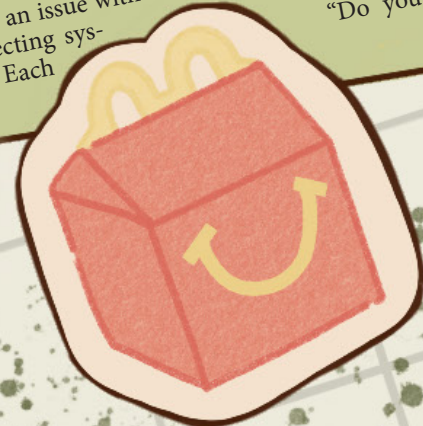
Emily Wu

My obsession with Smurfs started with the mobile game "Smurfs Village." Much like "Hayday" or "Stardew Valley," "Smurfs Village" is a village-building game where players can collect revenue from growing crops or running shops and use it to expand their territory. The game is surprisingly well developed; each Smurf even has a unique mushroom hut design, and it launches a mini-game when you click the hut. Huddled over the shared family iPad, my sister and I spent hours fawning over our growing village and the little blue people who worked in it. So it's little surprise that when McDonald's launched a new Smurf figurine series, I jumped at the chance to get a set of all 16. It included all of my favorites from "Smurfs Village," from Jokey who would deliver the daily prizes in his gift box to the Painter Smurf where you could play his mini-game and color drawings of the other Smurfs.

Fueled by our Ahab-like obsession, my sister and I dutifully bought countless Happy Meals and awaited pulling the red box. I became so skilled at judging 6-piece chicken nugget meals — back in the days when they still had a decently high percentage of real chicken — that one glance was enough for me to tell whether the complimentary apple package would be sweet or sour. However, we quickly ran into an issue with our Smurf collecting system. Each McDonald's only had a few types, and some of them were much more common than others. With the small number of McDonald's stores located by our old house in San Jose, we only had access to a small fraction of the total collection. We were determined to overcome such limitations. Searching through Google Maps to map out all of the McDonald's stores within a reasonable driving distance for an afternoon trip, we were able to quickly gather more Smurfs. While journeying to these far-away McDonald's, we drove through nearby cities I had never visited before, passed by picturesque parks around town and explored plazas that were all new to me. Our search gave us an appreciation for the surrounding area. One by one our collection grew, and with it, our strategy improved. We made two big realizations: First, you didn't actually need to buy the whole Happy Meal package to get the toy — you could pay a smaller fee to just get the Smurf. Second, calling ahead to confirm if a McDonald's had a Smurf was an essential step as we narrowed our search for the gaps in our collection. Typical conversations went like this: "Hello, is this McDonald's?" "Yes, what would you like to order?" "Do you have the Brainy Smurf?" "The what?" "For the kids' Happy Meal toy, it's a Smurf with black glasses that's holding a big walkie-talkie?" "Oh! Unfortunately, I don't see one."

"Haha that's OK we'll try another store." [hangs up] Even on vacation to Las Vegas, we left the main Strip attraction to drive from one McDonald's to another through the suburbs. I was surprised to see that just a few blocks out from the center of Vegas it almost seemed the same as any regular town.

After months of afternoon trips and eating hundreds of chicken nuggets, we tracked down 14 of the 16 Smurfs featured in the Happy Meal series. Sadly, we were unable to find Papa Smurf and Jokey. In retrospect, though, I realize getting all 16 wasn't the point of the experience. Instead, it was the good times I spent with my family pursuing something beyond ourselves. Childhood as it may seem to still have our almost complete set of Smurfs over 10 years later — no, we haven't yet sold them at a garage sale — those precious Smurfs are an emblem of my childhood and transition to America that I will treasure forever. ♦



Brainy Smurf

### Reminiscing on Rainbow Loom

Carefully following the YouTube video on my dad's phone, 7-year-old me meticulously used a crochet hook to wrap rubber bands on top of each other around my plastic loom. I had fallen in love with this bracelet-making craft — appropriately named Rainbow Loom — and spent all my afternoons poring over designs and untangling rubber bands. My experience with Rainbow Loom began the day my mom first took me to Michaels — probably a mistake on her part, as soon after, countless little colorful bands began to fill up the corners of our home.

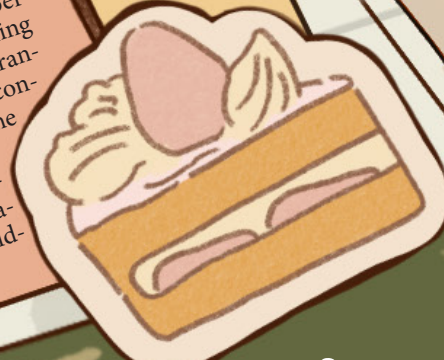


Jane Lee

Whenever I had time after doing my second grade homework, I used our family computer to look for tutorials on making different types of bracelets. I started with learning the simple fishtail bracelet but worked my way up to the ladder bracelet and the starburst bracelet, which were my proudest achievements at the time.

Of course, weekends were filled with bracelet-making and bonding time with my family, even if my parents grew tired of more rainbow bands. I spent hours working with my loom, looping white rubber bands over each other on the sides and using my favorite colors in the middle to create memories from elementary school for my friends. Some of my favorite memories from Rainbow Loom bracelets from my friends, I treasured them endlessly (at least, for the few days before they disappeared and I had several new bracelets on hand).

Looking back now, I realize how much this activity is responsible for sparking my current love for crafts, including crochet. My interest in Rainbow Loom kits started me to get a crochet hook for an easier experience. Although I likely contributed a small percentage to environmental issues due to the sheer number of rubber bands I used, it was worth it. Coming across Rainbow Loom bracelets in random drawers and plastic storage containers always takes me back to the highs and lows of elementary school and the magical Rainbow Loom kits that accompanied me throughout my childhood journey. ♦



### Splurge diaries: living a double life as a squishy collector and aspiring YouTuber

"Hey guys! Welcome back to another squishy video! Today we'll be doing the slow-rising challenge!"



Jessica Li

Surrounded by a sea of squishies, my friend and I finished setting up our iPad and our filming commenced. The challenge consisted of several elimination rounds to reveal a final champion; for each round, my friend and I held up a squishy and squished it intensely, and the last squishy to finish rising to its original shape was the winner. Despite the squishies being picked at random, somehow my friend won every single round and we laughed at the confusing phenomenon. Moments like these were common during my elementary school squishy phase. At first glance, my closet seems to be cluttered with old clothes hangers and boxes stuffed with past keepsakes, but upon closer examination there lies a treasure trove within: a large, clear plastic box filled with an astounding number of squishies collecting dust but still oozing with childhood memories. These pieces of soft foam, which come in the shape of everything from food items to cute animals, consumed my waking hours during fifth grade. I used to endlessly binge squishy YouTube videos, fawning over their whimsical designs and appealing color combinations. Their irresistibly soft texture, coupled with the satisfying slow rise after each squeeze, had so avidly captured my attention and offered a sensory experience like no other, bringing joy to my days.

Through watching YouTube I became well versed in the art of collecting. High-quality squishies had to be especially squishy, very slow-rising and extremely soft. Brand culture was also huge in the squishy world, and many brands gained exposure by sending PR packages to squishy YouTubers for them to review. Brands such as iBloom, Puni Maru and Kiibu were well established in the community and highly regarded by fans and content creators alike. I frequently drooled over their websites, drooling over their coveted products but knowing their mom would never approve of the sky-high price tags. Starting small, I first set my sights on more familiar and affordable stores, exploring online options like Amazon and TaoBao and in-person stores like Target and Daiso. While stores dedicated to squishies were un-

matched in quality, these choices still promised some good finds if you scoured thoroughly enough, and their wares helped kick off my collection.

After achieving my first milestone of collecting basic squishies, my standards rose, so I began to pursue "authentic" products — squishies affiliated with a licensed brand. My first ever authentic squishy was the signature Vlampo ice cream, featuring a bronze-colored cone and alternating pastel blue and pink swirl. I fondly remember cherishing this squishy until the foam detected. This cycle continued like clockwork, and once my collection had developed enough, I finally began devoting my efforts to splurging on the monarch brand of the community: iBloom. Even though each iBloom squishy averaged \$20, I felt it was a worthy sacrifice and a justifiable investment of my parents' money, given the positive impact squishies had on my emotional well-being. Conveniently, my dad had a business trip planned to Tokyo, Japan, which is where the iBloom headquarters happened to be located. I knew I had to snag this sacred opportunity to inch closer to amassing my dream collection. He agreed to include a trip to the official iBloom store in his itinerary and promised to FaceTime me to let me handpick my favorites. I acquired the top five stars in my collection: the signature medium peach, a marshmallow bear, a large-sized cheesecake, the Chocolate Pain du Matin and Millie the Whale. Somehow, my passion for the collectibles overrode the guilt I momentarily felt while spending so much of my parents' money on simple colored pieces of foam. Shortly after, my squishy collection reached the height of its expansion and my passion began to gradually fade. Moments of sheer happiness I experienced while playing with these pieces of foam, once part of my daily routine, grew more infrequent as they made their way out of my life. Though my collection currently sits away in my closet, untouched since elementary school, I don't feel an ounce of regret for spending a small fortune on them.

While squishies no longer consume my daily thoughts, they represent one of the most cherished chapters of my life and I believe will never truly die, reminding me of a childhood filled with genuine happiness, joy and wonder. ♦





# 'Us': A sinister thriller film that leaves you curled up in fear and questioning your mere existence

BY EmmaFung

Editor's note: Spoilers ahead.

During quarantine, I finally mustered up the courage to leave behind my anti-scary movie ideals and watch my first horror movie, Jordan Peele's 2019 thriller "Us."

I was immediately hooked when I first read the plot summary, which revolves around a family facing a sudden attack by masked killers. Sounds like a typical home invasion movie, right? But wait, there's a twist: The killers look the same as each of the family members. So naturally, my curiosity got the best of me as I just had to find out what happened next.

I ended up getting a lot more than I bargained for — after finishing the movie, I was left huddled against my twin sister while the credits rolled, neither of us daring to move.

There are so many aspects of this movie that set it apart from other horror movies, but one main element is how Peele twists a basic horror concept to convey a much deeper message. The ultimate meaning behind "Us" is that we are our own worst enemy. While we live in fear of those around us, we don't take into account how the deepest monsters are created within ourselves. This concept is brilliantly executed in a much more literal way, as the killers that look identical to the family members turn out to be a botched government experiment called "tethers" who live underground mimicking their human counterparts and are unable to speak, re-

sorting to making grunting noises as a form of communication.

Peele does a phenomenal job in revealing the connection between the family and their counterparts, showing how although the tethers experience the same lives as their human counterparts, their lifestyle is much more brutal. For example, while the main character, Adelaide, gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, her underground tether, Red, went through a gruesome labor and gave birth to a "monster."

Additionally, the tethers are forced to copy their counterparts' every move but in a much more violent, inhumane manner. The comparison between the two is shown through vertical pan shots between life above ground versus the tethered life underground. For example, while people above ground are shown eating food and chatting happily, their tethers are then shown eating raw meat ravenously while making animalistic sounds.

## The concept of the "tethered" represents all of humanity's dark characteristics.

This contrast can also be seen as a representation of the upper and lower classes of society, and raises a chilling question: If we also lived under harsh, inhumane conditions, would we also become tether-like?



Courtesy of ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

The tethers finally make their appearance, signature scissors in hand.

The concept of the "tethered" represents all of humanity's dark characteristics, such as violence and ferality. No matter how much we try to conceal them, they will always resurface. The binding between humans and their tethers is symbolized through the tethers' weapon of choice: a pair of scissors, two identical blades permanently bound together.

Another noteworthy element of the movie is its soundtrack. Its most popular song is a remix of Luniz's 90's hit "I Got 5 On It," titled "The Tethered Mix." Luniz's song is first shown in its original form at the beginning of the film when the family is introduced on a road trip to Adelaide's hometown. The catchy melody and memorable lyrics effectively set up the family dynamic and start the movie off on a positive note.

As the movie progresses, however, the musical score shifts toward a darker tone to match the gradual horrors that are revealed. After playing in the beginning, "I Got 5 On It" is eventually remixed with an original score composed by Michael Abels, and it is an eerie piece with various types of sounds that are meant to frighten the viewer and make them feel uneasy. When it is combined with the slowed version of Luniz's song, it manages to turn a popular, upbeat hip-hop classic into a certified horror movie sensation.

While the symbolism and soundtrack all contribute to the brilliance of "Us," the most crucial factor that made the movie beyond terrifying was the actors' performance in their roles. While all the family members do an amazing job of playing dual parts

as their tethers, Lupita Nyong'o, who plays both Adelaide and Red, steals the show as she nails the task of alternating between a paranoid, protective mother and a deranged, inhumane woman. Nyong'o was also nominated as Best Actress for the movie at the Academy Awards.

Additionally, at the end of the movie (MAJOR SPOILER WARNING), it is revealed through a flashback that Adelaide was really Red the whole time, and that she had forcefully switched places with the real Adelaide and left the underground while she comfortably assimilated into Adelaide's real human family. As viewers try to process this sudden discovery, it is also interesting to look back on the movie and watch as "Adelaide" slowly becomes more beastly throughout the movie while protecting her "family" from the tethers. This subtle yet powerful performance by Nyong'o not only enhances the entire movie but also makes the rewatch much more fascinating as viewers try to look for signs of "Adelaide's" true identity.

An example of Peele's masterful foreshadowing of the plot twist is how Adelaide's clothes gradually get soaked in blood — becoming redder and redder, matching her real name.

Although the film is definitely not for the weak-hearted, "Us" is tastefully made and has so many hidden layers that I would highly recommend it for those looking for a horror movie that offers more than cheap jumpscare. But be warned: It will make you scared of your own reflection. ♦

The Saratoga Falcon

April 5, 2024

# Denis Villeneuve's 'Dune: Part Two' blows the sci-fi genre completely out of the sand

By AnthonyLuo

Editor's Note: Minor spoilers for "Dune: Part Two"

When I recently walked into a fully packed IMAX theater to watch "Dune: Part Two," I had high expectations, given it was following up one of the most innovative movies of the past few years. Ten minutes in, I had already been blown away by the first scene alone, leaving me waiting in anticipation for what was to come.

Released on March 1, the second installment of this adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel "Dune" succeeds in spite of its long and densely packed two hours and 46 minutes of run-time, going above and beyond what the sci-fi genre is usually capable of producing. Relying on beautiful cinematography and powerful performances from the cast, it has already set itself apart as one of the best movies of 2024.

The film adapts the second half of Herbert's novel and picks up right where the first movie left off. It follows the story of Paul Atreides, played by Timothée Chalamet, as he rises to power on the desert planet Arrakis among the native Fremen. As someone who read the novel, I believe the movie excels despite — and sometimes because of — the changes director Denis Villeneuve made to the plot.

From the start, Villeneuve faced a momentous task with making this movie. Villeneuve had previously released "Dune: Part One" in 2021, which won six Oscars but was also criticized by casual viewers for being slow and lacking plot direction. Those opinions were understandable, as Herbert's thick 700-page book, as well as Villeneuve's first film, delve into more than just sci-fi action, tackling issues of politics, religion, oppression and environmentalism.

With "Dune: Part Two," Villeneuve had to recapture the best aspects of the first film — its worldbuilding and exploration of each character — while also making it

more engaging throughout in order to capture audiences' attention. And there's no doubt that he succeeded in both.

From the very first shot of the movie, cinematographer Greig Fraser re-establishes his dominance over the medium of film, having previously worked on "Dune: Part One" and 2022's "The Batman." From massive wide-angle shots of the vast sand dunes on Arrakis to disorienting dream sequences, Fraser makes the beautiful fantasy universe look like it could exist on our planet.

What stood out the most to me was the planet of Giedi Prime, home to the main antagonists of the film, the Harkonnens. The grimy and industrial world is captured by some of the most creative uses of black and white

film that I've seen to this day, and fits in perfectly with the rest of the movie.

Complementing the impressive visuals is Hans Zimmer's immersive score, which only builds on his Oscar-winning soundtrack for the first movie. From light, fleeting instruments like the Armenian duduk to guttural throat chants that shake the whole theater, Zimmer is able to seamlessly transport the viewer into an entirely new world.

Although most of "Dune: Part Two" focuses on diving deep into heavy topics like religious fanaticism and the merciless nature of politics, what ultimately sets it apart are the more personal moments between its characters, grounded by amazing performances from its

star-studded cast.

Chalamet delivers a stunning lead performance as Paul, staying reserved in the beginning of the movie only to release all of his emotions in the third act after a turning point in the story and his character. His powerful monologues, especially towards the end of the movie, command entire scenes, but he can just as easily draw back into tender moments of connection with his co-stars.

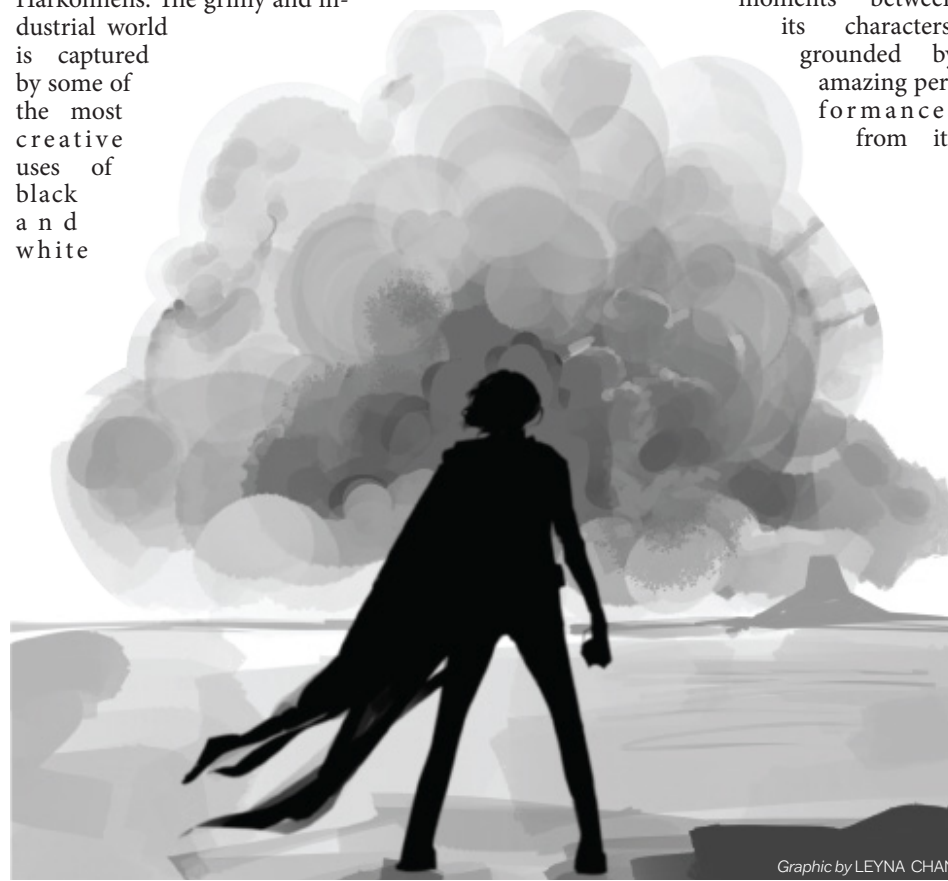
Alongside him are Zendaya and Rebecca Ferguson, who play Paul's partner Chani and his mother Jessica, respectively. Both actresses, especially Zendaya, provide nuanced perspectives on the women not just in Paul's life but the Dune universe as a whole, representing two important groups in the story — the Bene Gesserit nuns and the Fremen.

What especially drew me in was Zendaya's growth throughout the movie and how her relationship with Chalamet evolves. What begins as a playful rivalry slowly turns to a mentor-mentee relationship and finally blossoms into a love story.

The ending of the movie only cements Zendaya's ability to portray both internal and external conflicts within her character, marking a performance that rivals that of her in "Euphoria."

Supplementing these three lead performances is Javier Bardem playing Paul's mentor-turned-follower Stilgar, who provides genuine comic relief that helps balance the tone of the movie. The rest of the cast is still no joke — the main villains, played by Stellan Skarsgård, Dave Bautista and Austin Butler, all deliver frightening portrayals of their characters, and Butler gives a standout performance as the psychotic Feyd-Rautha.

Without a doubt, "Dune: Part Two" is a complete success and is sure to be a major contender in next year's awards season. But even more than that, Villeneuve's epic is a testament to the ability to tell stories through the medium of film. ♦



Graphic by LEYNA CHAN

# 'Mind of a Monster': a compelling true crime podcast that analyzes serial killer psychology

BY AnamikaAnand

"How do you begin to make sense of such a blatant disregard for human life, let alone catch those responsible?" I felt chills down my spine as the voice of criminal psychologist Michelle Ward filled my ears. As Ward described the crimes of killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, it was almost like I could see the gruesome scenes playing out in front of me.

I've recently entered the world of podcasts with "Mind of a Monster," a podcast that recounts the crimes of various serial killers, hosted by Ward. Some of my favorite shows are true crime documentaries, so when I came across "Mind of a Monster" when browsing through podcasts on Spotify, it seemed right up my alley.

The podcast consists of six seasons, each containing six episodes that focus on the lives and victims of one to two serial killers who went on killing sprees from the 1970s to the 1990s.

The stories themselves are extremely compelling, but it's the way that the aspects

of the podcast come together that conveys the ideas brilliantly. Ward narrates events in chronological order, describing the events herself but also incorporating expert interviews to help tell different parts of the stories.

Each season first focuses on the setting of the murders, making it easier to understand the context and how the murders affected the community.

Take Season 1 for example, which takes place in Santa Cruz where Ed Kemper — the "Coed Killer" — and Herbert Mullin committed a total of 21 murders from 1972 to 1973. Santa Cruz was very much a college town, with UC Santa Cruz and other colleges attracting many young people to the area and making them easy hitchhiking targets for Kemper and Mullin.

Since a key purpose of the podcast is to analyze the psychology behind the murderers' actions, Ward describes the environment they grew up in and the years leading up to their crimes.

She notes that Mullin grew up in a stable home and did well in school, but grew mentally unstable as he got older and experienced unhealthy relationships.

On the other hand, Kemper grew up with an abusive mother and showed unhealthy signs like killing his pets, eventually ending up in a mental institute before his release at 21.

My favorite aspect of the podcast is the

interviews. Ward includes snippets from her interviews with various people involved in the case or who lived in the area at the time.

In Season 4, she speaks with detective Terry Medina who worked on the case, and with author Emerson Murray to gain insight into the killers' childhoods, along with countless other people.

These interviews provide the details required to understand the context of the murders. For example, Murray explains how California's mental health systems experienced large funding cuts in the 1960s; these cuts meant thousands of mentally ill citizens, including Kemper and Mullin, failed to get the treatment they needed.

For me, the most compelling interviews are those with the victims' loved ones. One of Kemper's first victims was 15-year-old Aiko Koo, who hitched a ride with Kemper and was murdered. Ward interviews her close friend Hazel, who described the type of person Koo was and the impact of her death.

The podcast sometimes includes exclusive audio tapes from the killers themselves. Season 3 includes an interview between Gary Ridgeway, a.k.a., the Green River Killer in Washington state, and the lead investigator of the case, former King County Sheriff Dave Reichert. They talk about how the

sheriff stood on the banks of the Green River just hours after Ridgeway threw a body into it, and the way that Ridgeway talks so casually about how he got away with it sent shivers down my spine.

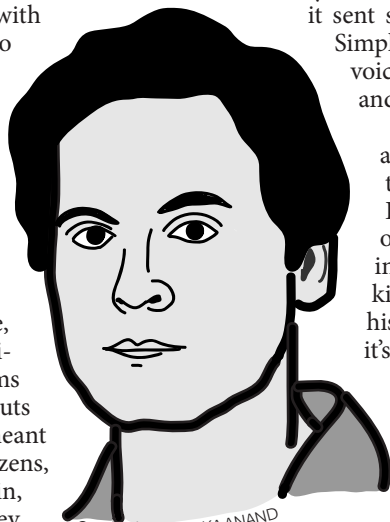
Simply just hearing what his voice sounds like is chilling and so immersive.

In Season 4, a voice actor portrays the notorious killer Jeffrey Dahmer. He easily and openly describes shocking details of how he killed and dismembered his victims, as if he thinks it's normal behavior. Hearing the killers talk about what they did shows just how psychologically disturbed they were.

Another aspect of the podcast is the music, which helps set the stage of the murders and convey the emotions of interviewees. Sinister music accompanies Ward as she speaks, while suspenseful orchestral music plays as interviewees describe the harrowing details of their experiences.

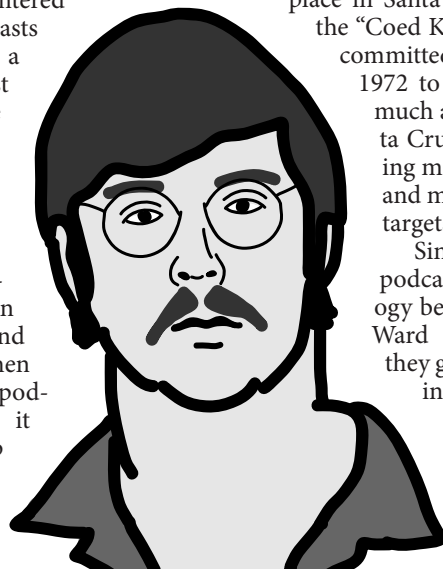
After finishing the podcast, I decided that I enjoyed it more than watching serial killer TV shows.

Somehow, simply listening to these stories and hearing the voices of the many who were affected by the actions of one person is more immersive and real than any documentary could be. ♦



Graphic by ANAMIKA ANAND

Ted Bundy



Graphic by ANAMIKA ANAND

Edmund Kemper



Courtesy of NETFLIX

Aang, Katara and Sokka on a journey to the Northern Water Tribe to defeat the Fire Nation.



# Senior grows up on historic family-owned vineyard

By SamBai

Imagining a home in the city of Saratoga, the first thought that might come to mind is the picture of a suburban landscape, uniform homes with grassy backyards lined up in rows and columns.

Growing up in Saratoga, senior Ryan Cagliostro has had an experience vastly different than most students: He grew up on a large ranch at the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains, being introduced to horseback riding and learning the ins and outs of wine-making. For him, the farm is not only his home, but also holds a rich history of its own.

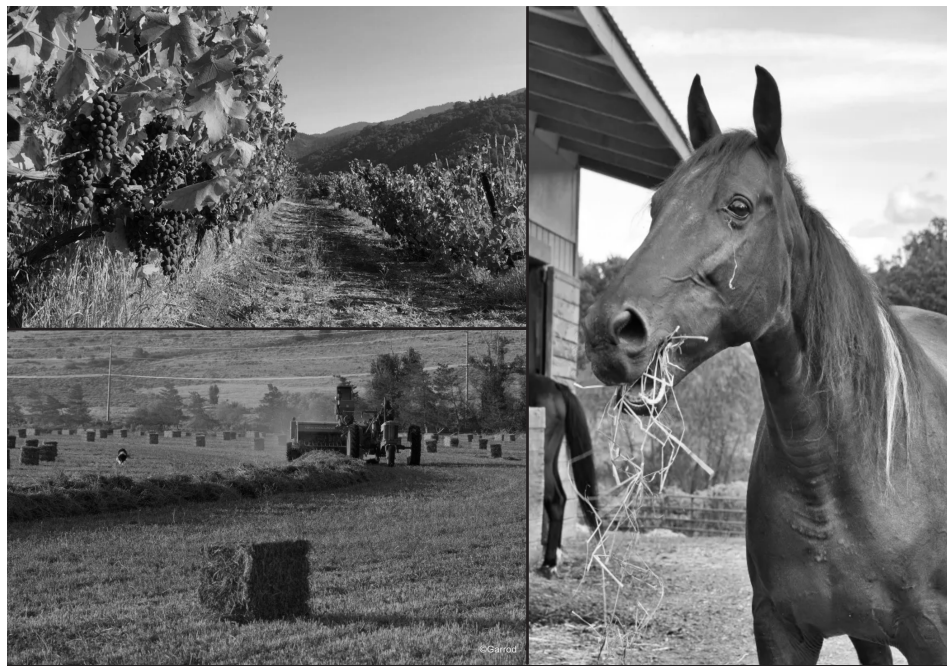
Cagliostro is part of the Garrod family, who co-founded Garrod Farms with the Cooper family. Living close to Saratoga High School, many of Cagliostro's siblings also attended the school, including Gianna, Sarah and Danny Cagliostro.

David Garrod founded Garrod Farms started in 1893, originally focused on farming and selling prunes and apricots, growing from 66 acres to 240 acres by 1916. Stables were opened in 1962, beginning the equestrian business while replacing the orchards. Vineyards were planted in 1972, beginning with the farming of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The ranch is split between Garrod Farm Stables, the equestrian stables with around 50 horses, and Cooper-Garrod Vineyards, the winery split between six different vineyards. Garrod Farms spans 28 acres and has been in operation for 129 years.

"We have a team of people who work at the ranch to take care of the horses and run the winery," Cagliostro said. "Living on the ranch has made me appreciate of everything nature has to offer."

The winery offers wine tasting and monthly shipments of wine. A single wine



Courtesy of GARROD FARMS

With a wide variety of scenic views and vineyards as well as activities such as horseback riding, Garrod Farms provides a memorable experience for all who decide to visit.

bottle sells for around \$45.

While all grapes are harvested once a year in the late summer and early fall, the wine making process is different for red and white wines.

For red wines, the grapes are harvested, de-stemmed and fermented with the skins native yeast to create the signature red color.

After fermentation, the grapes are squeezed into juice and placed into barrels to age. The wine is then aged for at least a year before being bottled.

For white wines, however, grape juices are pressed first before fermentation to prevent the color of the skins coloring the wine.

The juice is then fermented before getting barreled to age.

In total, about 1,800 cases of wine are produced each year with eight different varieties: Viognier, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, which is brand new and not yet on shelves. Although the wines are tart, the grapes can be individually picked and are very sweet.

In addition, Garrod Farms creates six proprietary blends named after Cagliostro's great-uncle, George Cooper, Garrod Tasting Room and Wine Club Manager Cory Bosworth said. Cooper flew as a Test Pilot

for NASA's Ames Research Center at Moffett Field, just below San Francisco Bay.

Beyond its winemaking services, Garrod Farm Stables also allows customers to stable their horses. A stall or space in the pasture can be rented out, and clients gain access to all of Garrod Farm's trails and horse arenas.

"About 3/4 of the horses on the property are privately owned, and the rest are ours," Bosworth said. "The horses that Garrod Farms owns can be used for both trail rides and horseback riding lessons."

Garrod Farms also offers summer camps where people can learn how to train, ride and clean horses. People can reserve horseback riding sessions.

Living next to the ranch, Cagliostro enjoys seeing horses walk by the road and truck drivers pick grapes off the vineyards.

Cagliostro said he loves having easy access to "so much land" outside his door. He can hike up his backyard trail a couple miles for a breathtaking view.

"Growing up on a ranch encouraged me to learn equestrian vaulting for a bit," he said. "That was my family's thing where everyone in my family did it."

Cagliostro has not been involved greatly in the family winemaking business, being more interested in acting or dermatology, but he occasionally helps out around the ranch when needed. His brother Danny, who majors in soil science, plans on continuing helping the family business once many of the older family members retire.

Cagliostro feels grateful for everything his family has built for themselves and other people. He appreciates how much love was put into the ranch.

"I've grown up there my entire life and it's so fun seeing people enjoy the wine we made and go on tours around my home," Cagliostro said. ♦

## >> falconfigures

129 years in the running    128 acres of land consisting of stables, the ranch and the winery    45 dollars per bottle of wine    1.8K cases of wine produced each year

# Junior places 2nd in nationwide Congressional App Challenge with self-designed water conservation project

By AmyLuo

As junior Tanuj Siripurapu watched the large solar panels glisten under the bright sunlight on his roof last summer, he was struck with an idea. With apps such as Enphase tracking the productivity of solar panels, giving homeowners a sense of how much energy a household is using and producing, Siripurapu wondered if he could create a similar app to track water usage and alert homeowners when they have leaks.

After noticing that his family continuously ran into the issue of paying excessively high water bills due to leaks, Siripurapu conducted preliminary research and discovered that there are around 900 billion gallons of water leakage per year nationwide, accounting for roughly 13% of each household's water usage.

"We have a pretty large house, so my parents would only find water leaks once there's been a massive flood of water somewhere," Siripurapu said. "If we could address [water leaks] much earlier on, it would save tons of water and hundreds of thousands of dollars

nationwide."

Hoping to alleviate this problem, Siripurapu began to create Droplet. After working on his project for five months, he submitted it to the Congressional App Challenge — an annual application software development contest offered to middle and high schoolers nationwide.

Siripurapu ended up placing second in California's 16th Congressional District, tied with two other contestants.

"Honestly, I was a little bummed I didn't get first," Siripurapu said. "But I was still very happy to be recognized for a project I worked hard on."

His project consists of four parts: a water meter and a user-friendly mobile app that tracks water usage, code that sends the data from the water meter to a central database and machine learning models that recognize leakages (irregular water data usage).

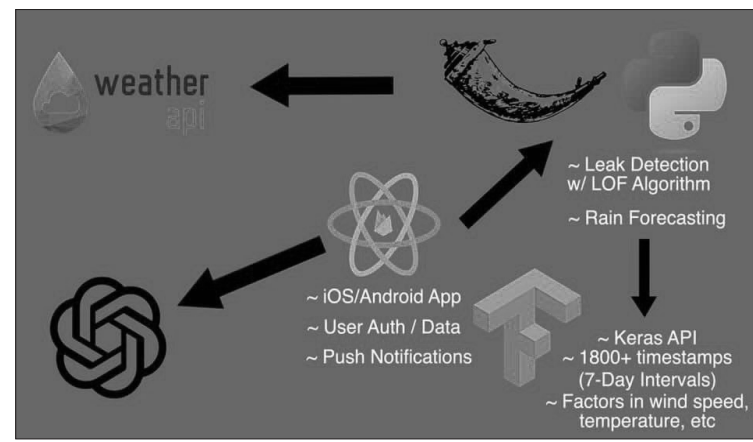
Siripurapu's app uses a Raspberry Pi (tiny single-board computer) attached to a small plastic flow meter. The small device can be inserted between water pipes, such as those that link a bathroom unit to the main water supply, to

measure how much water is flowing through. The Raspberry Pi can then be paired with the user's cell phone over Wifi to store the numbers into a database in the app. Such a function saves users the hassle of having to check the physical flow meter, as all of the data is accessible in a user-friendly app.

In the app, users can see their water usage displayed live as the amount of water is graphed against time. Data analysis is then run by an algorithm called local outlier factor, which flags irregularly distant data points, or spikes in the graph, that likely mean leaks.

Another feature of the app is that it can detect incoming rain and remind users to turn off their sprinklers and drip systems to conserve water. It does so by running a machine learning algorithm, long short-term memory, on weather data, such as temperature forecasts.

While creating Droplet, Siripurapu said the biggest challenge he faced was figuring out what type of machine learning model to use for effectively detecting water leakages. It took rounds of trial and error with various different methods (neural networks, z-scores, etc.) before he concluded that the local outlier factor algorithm was best



Courtesy of TANUJ SIRIPURAPU

A simplified diagram of Siripurapu's "Droplet" shows the app logistics.

suiting to the task, given it wouldn't flag routine usages — such as long showers — as leaks.

He submitted his project to the Congressional App Challenge in hopes of reaching a district-wide, and later state and nationwide, audience.

"I had done hackathons in the past, but they were all small and local," Siripurapu said. "So I was looking for bigger competitions for me to showcase my skills and ideas, and the Congressional App [Challenge] is among the biggest hackathons."

Now, with this recognition and

confidence in his project's ability to create a positive real world impact, Siripurapu hopes to continue refining the scope of his project. He's looking into internships with water companies such as San Jose Water Company and the Santa Clara Youth Water Commission, as many companies are focusing on these same problems.

"I didn't even realize how prevalent water leaks were before," Siripurapu said. "If we can apply some solutions to reducing the leaks, I think we can save money as a country by combining machine learning and water usage." ♦

# Disney Dysmorphia

HOW A BELOVED CHILDHOOD FRANCHISE INSTILLS UNREALISTIC BEAUTY STANDARDS AND GENDER NORMS

By ShirinaCao & EmilyWu

Sifting through hangers in her friend's walk-in closet, sophomore Esha Verma and her friend — who were both elementary schoolers at the time — remember gazing at the row of extravagant traditional Indian dresses. Fawning over their outfits, Verma put on one of them and felt like a true Disney princess.

Just like Verma, who has adored Disney princesses ever since she was 5, 96% of girls and 87% of boys in the U.S. have been exposed to Disney princess content in some form of media. However, that immense influence can be potent in cementing unrealistic beauty standards among children and sometimes contributing to dysmorphia.

Disney associates villains with features deemed as stereotypically unattractive

Traditional Disney villains often display undesirable characteristics such as long, crooked noses, pointed chins and plus-sized bodies — vilifying certain physical characteristics and potentially propagating body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a mental health disorder in which sufferers are upset with their appearance to the extent that it interferes with their everyday life.

During adolescent years, BDD can be one of the most important contributors to self-esteem, and negative self-image is linked to depression and anxiety. If a child notices that their facial features appear only in villainous characters, it can turn those features into upsetting ones.

"Disney has pushed this narrative that looking like a villain is bad and looking like a princess is good. As a kid, the ultimate compliment to me was being told I looked like a Disney princess," Verma said.

"Disney has pushed this narrative that looking like a villain is bad and looking like a princess is good."

SOPHOMORE Esha Verma

Think, for instance, of Captain Hook from "Peter Pan." He has a pointed nose that protrudes half the length of his face and an unrealistically long chin that mimics those of villains such as Maleficent from "Sleeping Beauty," and Jafar

from "Aladdin." Many villains also feature plus-sized bodies, such as Ursula from "The Little Mermaid" with her round belly and obscure neck.

By reserving these characteristics for villains, Disney animators draw an unconscious association between long noses and large bodies and evil and ugliness. Just as the characters who are ugly on the inside, they are also stereotypically ugly on the outside.

Disney princesses flaunt "perfect" unattainable bodies and facial features

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Disney princesses seem to fit the same body shape: thin waists, tiny hands, dainty feet and doe eyes. This approach contrasts with other animation companies like Studio Ghibli, who feature more realistic bodies.

Also, princesses like Ariel and Jasmine primarily wear revealing clothing such as Ariel's seashell bra and Jasmine's tight crop top, highlighting their unrealistic proportions. In fact, comedy writer Glenn Boozan from "Above Average" found several princesses with waists smaller than the distance between their eyes — an obvious distortion no one can live up to. Being exposed to models and conventionally attractive people with thin bodies in the media can induce body dysmorphia, especially in young girls who often idolize Disney princesses.

Sophomore Sophie Qin is among the millions of girls who grew up enamored with Disney princesses. When she visited Disneyland as a child, she remembers wanting to be like the princesses.

"These princesses have been brought to life, and they feel like something that could be achieved," Qin said. "But their body proportions in the cartoon movies were not made to be realistic. The Ariel movie further pushes the idea of an ideal body and gender stereotypes."

To try and achieve these looks, some girls and women eventually turn to cosmetic surgery. In 2022, according to Statista, all aesthetic procedures (surgical and nonsurgical) generated \$11.8 billion, of which \$8.5 billion were generated from surgical procedures.

Disney princesses model traditional gender roles and stereotypes

For many, not only do Disney princesses promote unrealistic beauty standards, but they also normalize stereotypes about submissive female behavior.

In a study conducted by James Madison University, researchers analyzed the three eras of Disney princess movies: the "housewife" era, the "transition" era and the most recent "girl

boss" era. The "housewife" era includes "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" (1937), "Cinderella," (1950) and "Sleeping Beauty" (1959); the "transition" era includes "The Little Mermaid," (1989), "Pocahontas" (1995) and "Mulan" (1998); and the "girl boss" era includes "Moana" (2016), "Brave" (2012) and "Frozen" (2013).

Disney princesses often played a role similar to one of the most women of the time held: household cook, cleaner and caregiver. Cinderella, for instance, spends her time cleaning the house, cooking and serving her evil stepmother and stepsisters.

Sophomore Mridhula Vudali, who has watched every single

SOPHOMORE Sophie Qin

"Cinderella has the transformation into a beautiful gown, and only after that does she become good enough to be a princess," Vudali said. "The media imposes this standard that women need to go through a transformation and only if they become more beautiful will they become 'good enough.' Movies like this strengthen biases like pretty privilege."

Additionally, Disney heroines are often romanticized to be submissive — reaching their "happy ever after" is defined by being saved by male counterparts who are often strangers. For instance, Prince Charming from "Snow White" lacks both a name and a presence in the story other than that of Snow White's love interest. Yet, after falling in love with Snow White "at first sight" — thanks only to her striking appearance — he sweeps her off her feet and brings her to "happy ever after," which is something she couldn't achieve alone.

"Disney has a very unrealistic way of going about how men and women should act," Qin said. "Their princess movies show relationships in a very unrealistic way that also enforces stereotypical gender roles. Women are often saved by a prince, and I think that sets an unhealthy mindset for kids when they grow up."

In contrast, the second era of princesses demonstrates greater female empowerment, including characteristics of independence, determination, mental and physical strength. For instance, unlike

"sitting duck" princesses in the first era who lack agency in their own stories, Mulan is a powerful warrior who saves her country after stepping in to relieve her father of his war duties.

But while some aspects of the transition era lean toward female empowerment, outward beauty remains important.

For example, in "The Little Mermaid," when the protagonist, Ariel, loses her voice in order to gain the ability to walk on land, she meets her love interest, Prince Eric and he instantly falls in love with her, only from her physical beauty, as she is unable to speak and reveal her personality.

In the third era, which began only in 2009 with the release of "The Princess and the Frog," many princesses start to embody a more "girl boss" attitude. The main storyline of these movies often go beyond finding a dream man. For example, Tiana, the movie's protagonist, speaks her mind and knows what she wants, working two jobs to pursue ambitious dreams of opening her own restaurant.

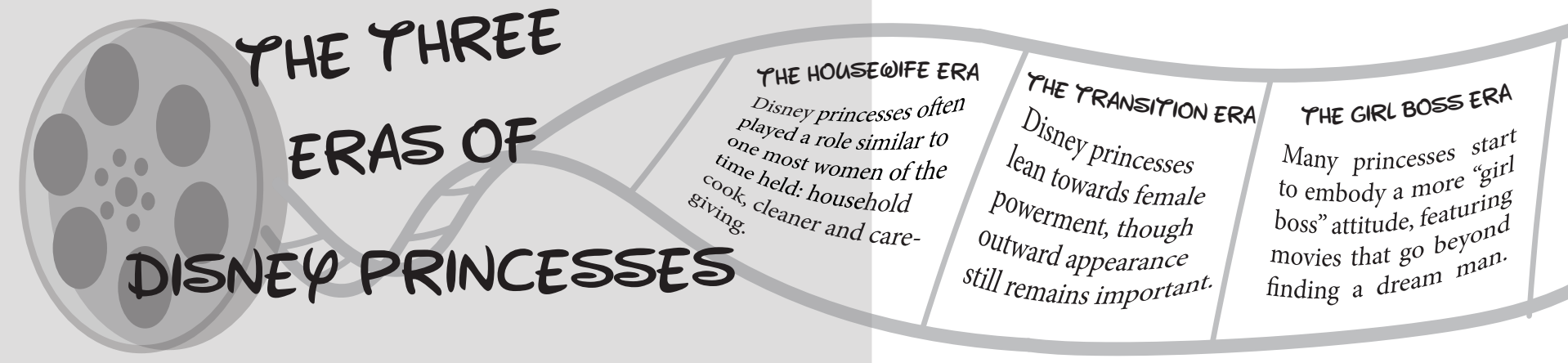
Disney attempts to promote different body types through new short film

After increased pressure from the public, Disney has introduced more films with body inclusivity to battle the restrictive beauty standards in their earlier movies. The studio's recent short film "Reflect" — which was released in September 2022 — tells of the struggles of a young, plus-size ballerina due to prejudice within the dance community. Dancers are often expected to have a skinny frame, much like those of Disney princesses. The protagonist in "Reflect" battles these expectations by accepting herself and finding joy in dancing. However, despite the initial joy of featuring a plus-sized main character, many Disney enthusiasts like Vudali were left unsatisfied.

"The whole point is that you want these body types to become normal," she said. "If you draw attention to the fact that they are plus-sized, you are separating them and acting like it is out of the norm."

Despite Disney's unclear motives for these changes, many hope that changing the unrealistic beauty standards presented in Disney films will help promote body inclusivity among adolescents.

"You cannot change the classics," Verma said. "Everyone knows Snow White and Cinderella. But going forward, Disney should bring more diversity to change the next generation of kids." ♦





# Track athletes' club experience pays off in competition

BY Derek Liang

At the sound of the starter pistol, junior runner Natalie Zaragoza sped off her starting blocks at the 100-meter event against Monta Vista on March 14. In an adrenaline-fueled final stride to the finish line, Zaragoza finished with a personal record of 12.65 seconds.

Another star track member, junior Dylan Wilson, also hit two personal records: 11.50 seconds in the 100-meter race and 23.64 seconds in the 200-meter race.

According to both athletes, a large reason for their success so far in their season is their competition training in the off season at the Virtus Track Club, a performance driven club striving to provide high level athletic training.

A key highlight of their time at the club was the competition they attended right as

the spring season for school started — the 2024 California Winter Track and Field Championships.

The state-wide competition was hosted at Arcadia High on Feb. 3. Zaragoza placed 71st out of 86 competitors in the finals of the 150-meter event with a time of 19.62 seconds. In addition to running the 150-meter, Zaragoza also ran in the 60-meter event — where she ended up placing 94th out of 162 competitors with a time of 8.34 seconds in the preliminary round. She was unable to qualify for the final round, which consisted of the top 35 competitors.

She — along with Wilson — were the only two track athletes from the varsity track team competing in the Winter Championships, which sees hundreds of top tier high school athletes from across the state.

“Going to such a massive competition for the first time made the experience feel sur-

real,” Zaragoza said. “Running alongside so many impressive runners felt really powerful and motivating for me, making me want to improve so I can beat them in the future.”

To be eligible for the Winter Championships, Zaragoza first attended qualifiers at Pittsburgh High on Jan. 20. She needed to run the 150-meter event under 19.75 seconds and the 60-meter event under 8.56 seconds. Running 8.35 seconds in the 60-meter and 19.67 seconds in the 150-meter, she qualified for both events.

Zaragoza's track journey began in middle school, where she was a member of the Redwood Middle track and field team. She continued her passion throughout high school, and now serves as one of the varsity track and field captains at school.

In an effort to improve her sprinting in the offseason, Zaragoza joined the Virtus Track and Field Club based in Los Gatos in October after hearing about the club from Wilson.

Like Zaragoza, Wilson also competed in the 60-meter event at the Winter Championships, qualifying after getting a 7.47 second time, just under the 7.54 cutoff. At the meet, he ultimately placed 185th out of 220 competitors, again with a time of 7.47 seconds.

Wilson said that he was not expecting to have an exceptional performance, so he wasn't very disappointed. He also found the experience of being surrounded by a large volume of skilled runners from all over California to be eye-opening.

While both Zaragoza and Wilson stopped training with the Virtus Club following the start of high school track season in late February, they feel that the skills they had learned while training have translated directly into their school track success. At the club, their training consisted of weightlifting and explosive plyometrics, along with sprint trainings which included form drills and fast sprints. One drill that Wilson found

incredibly helpful was a stride frequency drill, where specific marks were labeled on the track to help each of the runners adjust to their ideal stride length.

**“It's the [training at Virtus Club] that has gotten me a lot stronger.”**



JUNIOR Dylan Wilson

Wilson said that the Virtus Club focused mostly on sprint-focused training, predominantly working on short distance runs like 60-meter sprints.

In comparison, the school team focuses much more on endurance running, such as runs over 150 meters.

“It's the [training at Virtus Club] that has gotten me a lot stronger, a lot more balanced and really improved my mentality when running which really carries over to school meets,” Wilson said.

According to Zaragoza, the transition back into school track has not been a huge adjustment, but the intensity of training and the workouts have not been pushing her as hard or teaching her as much as club training did.

After the school season ends in May, Zaragoza is hoping to return to club training to further improve her athleticism and sprinting ability, while Wilson has decided to divert more time to pursuing other activities.

“Spending that time at the club with an incredible coach and really good athletes helped me a lot and encouraged me to help all of the underclassmen on the team,” Zaragoza said. ♦



Courtesy of JIMMY SU

Junior Natalie Zaragoza sprints at the Winter Championships at Arcadia High on Feb. 3.

## Sports legacies: Athletes follow in the footsteps of their family

BY Amy Miao & Sasha Prasad

At age 7, sophomore Matthias Casanova crouched at the starting line, preparing to race his 11-year-old brother, Class of '22 alumnus Etienne Casanova — now a California Institute of Technology D3 soccer player — on the field. Their father cued them to start and the boys sprinted across the field. Matthias passed the finish line just inches before his older brother and beamed with pride; it was his first time escaping from the shadow of the men in his family.

**“My father's high expectations push me to work harder.”**

SOPHOMORE Matthias Casanova

Matthias, influenced by many of his siblings and relatives, followed in their footsteps. For him, following older family members in soccer is both a blessing, as a way to bond with his father and brother, and a curse, as it puts greater pressure on him to succeed equally. Matthias began playing as a toddler at age 3 and grew up playing alongside his brother through personal training sessions coached by his father.

Casanova plays winger for De Anza Force's 08 Elite Clubs Na-

tional League (ECNL) team and was on the varsity boys' team. During the school season, he estimates he practices 8-10 hours a week and has games on Tuesdays and Thursdays. For the rest of the year, he plays for his club team, typically having games once or twice a week on the weekends, alongside high-intensity practices throughout the week.

Despite the competitive spirit he gained from rivaling his brother in races and 1v1 matches at home, Matthias feels that his father has been his main influence in the sport.

“My father's high expectations push me to work harder, but sometimes we get compared, which can mess up our mentality,” Matthias said.

Nevertheless, he is thankful for his father's high expectations as his desire to impress his family is one of his primary motivators.

**Love of basketball continues from one generation to the next**

Freshman Peyton Steffen is the daughter of Manny Steffen, a Redwood Middle School teacher who coached the girls' varsity basketball team this past season.

She has also continued her father's basketball legacy as he too began playing the sport when he was young. However, she said her father did not push her to start playing the sport; if anything, he pushed her more in the direction of softball, a sport he favored over

basketball.

Peyton first picked up basketball in second grade after playing on a Los Gatos recreation team. She admitted that when she began, she lacked skill, but her love for the sport was powerful enough to motivate her to improve, despite many others' expectations for her to quit.

In sixth grade, Peyton began playing basketball for the Top Flight Elite Club, an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) team. Currently, she plays shooting guard on the school's girls' basketball team that her father is coaching.

“He puts more pressure on me, but it's also helpful to be able to talk to him outside of practice,” Peyton said. “He treats me [as an equal to] the rest of the team.”

Mr. Steffen said his tone towards her is sometimes harsher, due to the fact he has individually coached her in the past and has clear expectations for her.

The balance between being a parent and a coach is delicate, and over the years, Peyton and her dad have sought to perfect the dynamic. He has managed to separate the role of coach from father and both benefit from this relationship.

“As a coach, there are many times where you feel like you've communicated effectively but your athletes might feel different,” Mr. Steffen said. “In our case, we always know where the other is coming from, so we can find a common ground.” ♦

## DANCE



The dance team poses during their pom routine. Despite not placing in the top 3 at Anaheim nationals on March 23, the team felt proud.

Sophomore May Gendeh feels the emotional lyrics of “Warrior” by Demi Lovato in her lyrical routine.

Senior Michelle Wan strikes a pose in her last high school jazz routine.

## snapshots

All photos courtesy of UNIVERSAL EVENT PHOTOGRAPHY

## SCOREBOARD | BOYS' VOLLEYBALL

Record as of March 28:  
El Camino Division: 5-2

### 3/27 Saratoga 1, Fremont 3

The Falcons started off slow in the first set with multiple errors, leading to a 25-16 loss; without their outside hitter Norris, who was sick that day, the team struggled to hit consistently and close blocks on the net. In the second set, the Falcons lost 25-16 once

again. During the third set, the Falcons made a comeback when down 18-12 with a 7-point serving run by senior middle Scotty Rich, earning the team a 25-22 victory; however, they fell short during the fourth set 25-20.

### 3/22 Saratoga 3, Los Gatos 0

In an intense matchup against the Wildcats, the Falcons won the first set 25-23 when Los Gatos missed their serve on match point. In the second set, Los Gatos started to catch up when they scored two points in a row; however, freshman middle Ahmed

Abdalla terminated this run, winning the final point of the second set 25-23. In the third set, Norris ended the game 26-24 with a line shot, successfully avenging the team's 3-1 loss against Los Gatos in their first league game on March 6.

### 3/20 Saratoga 3, Wilcox 1

The Falcons won 25-21 in the first set. However, during the start of the second set, the team missed their first five serves, giving Wilcox a huge advantage; the Falcons lost the second set 25-21. Determined to clean up their errors in the second set, the Fal-

cons used a strong service game to thump the Chargers 25-13. In the last set, both teams were neck to neck until the end when senior Eric Norris won three consecutive serves, pulling the Falcons ahead and securing a 25-20 victory.

## BASEBALL



Photo by ANGELA TAN

Junior Doug Bettinger pitches at home against Santa Clara on March 21. The team lost 14-0.

After the team lost five players to graduation and two key projected starters — senior pitcher Shane Timmons and sophomore outfielder Trenton Welsh — transferred to Los Gatos, the Falcons were left with only enough players to field a varsity roster. Of the 21 players, only eight are upperclassmen, giving freshmen consistent playing time.

With a 7-6 away loss at Lynbrook on March 28 and a 5-3 home win over Monta Vista on March 26, the baseball team stands third in the El Camino League with a 4-3 record as of March 28.

Junior pitcher Aiden Chen has identified their biggest weakness to be their defense, which isn't consistently making routine plays. The offense's performance has tended to fluctuate more and there have been some explosive innings throughout their games.

“It's frustrating because the group has a lot of potential and it's clear that we can play better,” Chen said. “I think we don't take enough pride in playing catch.” ♦

## BOYS' TENNIS

# Falcons maintain undefeated record

BY Daniel Wu

The boys' tennis team has settled into a winning groove as they ease into the mid-season. As of March 28, the Falcons were undefeated, holding a 7-0 record and standing in first place in the De Anza division.

Recent game results include beating Gunn 6-1 at home on March 27, taking down Cupertino 6-1 in an away match on March 21, beating Monta Vista 5-3 on the road and defeating Lynbrook 5-2 at home on March 14.

Senior captain Luke Stratakos, who plays No. 2 doubles with junior Teddy O' Yang, attributed the team's winning streak to a strong lineup of players consisting of veteran upperclassmen leading a strong group of underclassmen. In total, the team has 15 players: seven underclassmen and eight upperclassmen.

“Our roster from the top down across both singles and doubles is just so strong, so we find ourselves winning matches across the board,” Stratakos said.

Notably, the team has found reassurance with sophomore Somei Ogata and Nikhil Srivasta occupying the No. 1 and No. 2 singles positions often held by well-vetted seniors.

“They [Ogata and Srivasta] are basically guaranteed wins for us every match, so we hold that advantage over the other schools,” Stratakos said.

As the two continue to gain experience, Stratakos is confident the team will remain strong after the current seniors graduate.

As April turns into May, the team is looking forward to a deep CCS run.

Last season, the team made it to the

semifinals of CCS where they fell 7-0 to the No. 1 seeded Menlo Park. They also finished the season No. 2 in division.

Stratakos feels confident that the team can reach the semifinals or finals, given their relative success compared to the previous season, when they stood 3-3 at the end of March.

In stark contrast to some other racket sports on campus like badminton, the team has taken a relatively relaxed approach to practices, which are held every day. Head coach Florin Marica allows players to exercise a high degree of independence, allowing them to use practice times as they wish, whether it is working on serves or running practice matches with one another.

Stratakos mentioned the laid-back practice approach has been in place for years, as Marica's strong trust in his players allowed them to find and focus on the areas they most require work on. Senior Samik Pattanayak, who plays No. 1 doubles with senior Shrey Jain, emphasized the duty seniors on the team have taken in preparing freshmen for the upcoming loss of six seniors due to graduation at the end of the season.

“As a senior I definitely think most of us [seniors] are asserting a leadership role and setting an example for the underclassmen on the team now,” Pattanayak said.

The team has focused on training underclassmen who are playing doubles, notably freshman Joshua Amirineni and Sina Mohtaj-Khorassani, who currently play No. 3 doubles and will be expected to step up to the No. 1 or No. 2 doubles seats in the upcoming season.

“We're already looking ahead to upcoming seasons and ensuring the freshmen are prepared to take on a larger role in the more challenging positions,” Pattanayak said. ♦



Courtesy of LUKE STRATAKOS

Senior captain Luke Stratakos loads a forehand return on March 27 against Gunn in singles.

## TheStats

### Softball Soars

El Camino League: 3-1 record  
As of March 28: 3rd in league

3/28: 10-3 win vs Palo Alto  
3/26: 3-2 win vs Cupertino  
3/21: 13-4 win vs Monta Vista  
3/18: 1-0 loss vs Gunn

Junior Sydney Riera starred in the Falcons 10-3 win over Palo Alto on March 28, scoring two runs and stealing two bases, while getting on base three times. Junior Maggie Huesby contributed as well, scoring two runs while going 1 for 3 at the plate.

The Falcons also narrowly won the game against Cupertino 3-2 on March 26. Junior pitcher Saira Ramakrishnan went all seven innings pitching on the mound, piling up 11 strikeouts. Alongside Ramakrishnan, junior Dahlia Murthy and sophomore Vivian Lei both stepped up and scored runs for the Falcons. ♦

### Track's Top Runners

3/28 Meet: Saratoga v.s. Cupertino

#### Girls' Varsity

400 Meter:  
1st: Katie Lu (9): 1.03.28

100 Meter:  
1st: Natalie Zaragoza (11): 12.63  
2nd: Claire Chen (9): 13.18  
3rd: Annie Liu (12): 13.78

200 Meter:  
1st: Zaragoza: 26.31 seconds  
2nd: Chen: 29.04 seconds  
3rd: Kitty Gechlik (11): 29.17

#### Boys' Varsity

1600 Meter:  
2nd: Jacob Merrill (12): 4:58.38  
3rd: Jack Tong (10): 5:00.64  
4th: Jack Tong (10): 5:03.37

100 Meters:  
1st: Dylan Wilson (11): 11.42

200 Meters:  
1st: Wilson: 23.65 seconds

3200 Meter:  
1st: Pranav Rajan (11): 10:48.34  
2nd: Dong: 10:54.45  
3rd: Tong: 11:01.78

### Golf Stays Strong

El Camino League: 5-2 record  
\*As of March 28

3/27: 199-211 loss vs Los Gatos  
3/25: 200-216 win vs Monta Vista  
3/20: 205-216 loss vs Palo Alto  
3/18: 198-203 win vs Los Altos

The Falcons started the season strong with four consecutive wins, but the team encountered stronger opponents as the season progressed and has suffered some losses.

No. 1 player junior Aidan Smith, No. 2 player junior Oliver Pott and No. 3 player junior Nick Okada helped push the team to win the majority of their league games, according to senior No. 5 player Ryan Lin.

“Ultimately [our top three players] just spend more time playing golf, and that leads to more consistent shots,” said Lin.

In addition to these strong veteran players, the increased interest in golf this year has resulted in a larger talent pool to choose from, giving confidence to Lin that the team will remain strong for the rest of the season. ♦

Reporting by ANIKA KAPASI, JANE LEE, ERIC SHU, JEREMY SI and ANDY ZHU



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