eJOURNAL USA

SOCIETY & VALUES

AMERICAN TEENAGERS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY FIRST LADY LAURA BUSH

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS

SOCIETY & VALUES

Editor ..... Steven Lauterbach
Managing Editor ..... Neil Klopfenstein
Associate Editors ..... Michael J. Bandler
Mark A. Betka
Jeanne Holden
Reference Spcialists ..... Mary Ann Gamble
Kathy Spiegel
Layout Design..... Sylvia Scott
Min Yao
Cover Design ..... Thaddeus A. Miksinski Jr.
Photo Editor.....Gloria Castro

Publisher.....Judith S. Siegel
Senior Editor.....George Clack
Executive Editor.....Guy E. Olson
Production Manager.....Christian Larson
Assistant Production Manager.....Sylvia Scott

Editorial Board.....Alexander C. Feldman
Francis B. Ward
Kathleen R. Davis
Marguerite P. England

Cover photo: Students on their way to classes at Lowell High School in Lowell, Massachusetts. AP/WWP

The Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State publishes five electronic journals under the *eJournal USA logo—Economic Perspectives, Global Issues, Issues of Democracy, Foreign Policy Agenda,* and *Society & Values*—that examine major issues facing the United States and the international community as well as U.S. society, values, thought, and institutions. Each of the five is catalogued by volume (the number of years in publication) and by number (the number of issues that appear during the year).

One new journal is published monthly in English and is followed two to four weeks later by versions in French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Selected editions also appear in Arabic and Chinese.

The opinions expressed in the journals do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government. The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and continued accessibility of Internet sites to which the journals link; such responsibility resides solely with the publishers of those sites. Journal articles, photographs, and illustrations may be reproduced and translated outside the United States unless they carry explicit copyright restrictions, in which case permission must be sought from the copyright holders noted in the journal.

The Bureau of International Information Programs maintains current and back issues in several electronic formats, as well as a list of upcoming journals, at http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/journals.htm. Please direct comments to your local U.S. Embassy or the editorial offices:

Editor, *eJournal USA: Society & Values*
IIP/T/SV
U.S. Department of State
301 4th St. S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20547
United States of America
E-mail:ejvalues@state.gov

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

White House photo by Krisanne Johnson

Soraya Sulti, regional director of INJAZ, left, and students at the Discovery School of Swaifiyeh Secondary School in Amman, Jordan, share their experiences with Laura Bush and Queen Raina, center right, May 22, 2005. INJAZ promotes entrepreneurship and community leadership among Jordan's youth.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. We should have known what would happen. After all, we were once teenagers ourselves. A few of us, in fact, had even reared a teenager or two.

But, we were becoming increasingly anxious as weeks went by without a single reply to the message that we had sent out to secondary schools around the country, inviting students to submit essays about their lives and activities. The essays were to serve as the centerpiece of our journal about teenage life. We're going to have to cancel the issue, we thought. We quickly moved to salvage things by having our contributing writers interview some teenagers.

Then it happened, the equivalent of an e-mail tsunami. Essays from around the country flooded our mailbox on the day of the deadline we had given. And, of course, a few more trickled in over the days that followed. Procrastination, we then recalled, is one of the hallmarks of teenage behavior—others being energy and creativity. Suddenly we had a cornucopia of material in hand, and a new problem: What to do with it all.

After some discussion, we decided to group abridged excerpts under thematic sections. The resulting feature, along with the help of numerous photos, provides a wide variety of insights and perspectives into teenage life today in the United States.

There could be no one better to introduce our issue to international youth than First Lady Laura Bush. Since coming to the White House in January 2001, she has devoted considerable time and energy to issues of education, health, and human rights, traveling widely, and often speaking to young audiences. In a letter to readers, she writes, "Consider how to prepare yourself for the future. Think about the habits, skills, and knowledge that will help you succeed in school."

An educator we have admired over the years via the essays he often contributes to the *Washington Post, USA Today*, and other national publications is Patrick Welsh. He describes his experiences and observations as an English teacher at a suburban Washington, D.C., high school.

Associate editor Michael Bandler, always hard on the heels of a famous person to profile or to recruit for a State Department program abroad, arranged two interviews for this issue. His conversations with international football phenom Freddy Adu and National Teacher of the Year Jason Kamras provide inspiring stories of extraordinary accomplishments.

Hundreds of foreign exchange students enroll in U.S. secondary schools each year. Novelist Robert Taylor recorded the impressions of three of them who attended a high school in Ohio this past year. And since not all students actually enroll in an educational institution, we thought it would be interesting to profile a family engaged in homeschooling. Journalist Chuck Offenburger found such a family in South Carolina and tells us how they educated their four children almost entirely at home.

White House photo by Krisanne Johnson

The First Lady visits the Native American Community Health Center in Phoenix, Arizona, Tuesday, April 26, 2005.

Photographer Barry Fitzgerald relishes just about any assignment that will take him out of the office, so we asked him to go to central Virginia to spend a few days following students around during their last week in school. The portfolio he produced rounds out our coverage, providing views common to the high school experience of teenagers in the United States.

-- The Editors

SOCIETY & VALUES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / JULY 2005 / VOLUME 10 / NUMBER 1

www.usinfo.state.gov/journals/journals.html

AMERICAN TEENAGERS

3 Greetings from the First Lady
Laura Bush
In her travels throughout the United States and abroad, America's First Lady has asked teenagers to tell her about their plans and concerns, and has urged them to "choose friends who have admirable qualities … who bring out the best in you."

4 Touching Hearts and Minds
Patrick Welsh
One of the things that keeps the author, an English teacher, returning year after year to his students at a large metropolitan high school is "the challenge to be on their wave length and get them on mine."

7 How We Go to School
A chart illustrates the common breakdown of ages, classes, and schools in the U.S. educational system.

8 In Their Own Words
Students from around the United States talk about their schools and communities, their love of music and sports, their religious and volunteer activities, their encounters with temptations, and their plans for the future.

29 School at Home
Chuck Offenburger
A profile of a South Carolina family depicts a small but growing trend in the United States in which parents are educating their own children at home.

31 From Central Europe to Northern Ohio
Robert Taylor
Three international exchange students, two from Germany and one from Slovakia, talk about their year together attending high school in a small town in Ohio.

34 Lessons Learned: A Conversation with the Teacher of the Year
Interview by Michael J. Bandler
Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year in the United States, is committed to overcoming inequities in the public education system.

38 Scoring Young—as an Athlete and a Student
Interview by Michael J. Bandler
Freddy Adu became a national sensation by joining a professional football team and receiving a high school diploma, both at the tender age of 14.

41 Rite of Passage
Photographs by Barry Fitzgerald
Attending last classes, signing yearbooks, emptying lockers, and rehearsing music are among the photographed activities during the final week at James Monroe High School in Fredericksburg, Virginia, that culminate in graduation ceremonies.

45 Bibliography

47 Internet Resources

GREETINGS FROM THE FIRST LADY

Joe Cavaretta, AP/WWP

First Lady Laura Bush regularly speaks to education and student groups. For related photos, visit www.usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0705/ijse/firstlady.htm.

Dear Young Friends,

I am delighted that you are interested in discovering what American teenagers have to say about their lives, values, hopes and dreams. The essays and reflections in this e-journal will give you a glimpse into some of the many ways a teenager's day might unfold in the United States, as well as an insight into his or her goals, ambitions, and concerns.

As a mother, a former teacher and school librarian, and—a few years ago—a teenager myself, I am keenly aware that the health and welfare of a community or country depend to a great degree on the health and welfare of its young people. When teenagers know that the adults in their lives care about them and offer stability, guidance, wisdom, and love, they will blossom. When those factors are absent, healthy growth is stunted, and teenagers' hopes can wither.

In traveling through our own country and many others, I have learned from listening to teenagers that even though they might worry about the future, they are often more concerned about the present. Most of them are ready and eager to absorb the lessons that will help them succeed in life, and they are grateful to adults who are willing to invest time and effort in teaching them. When the teaching energy of adults is matched by the learning energy of young people, the results are stronger lives and a stronger society.

I am often asked to give advice to teenagers, and this is what I tell them: Remember that you are in charge of your own happiness, and find ways to spread happiness to others. Smile and say hello to someone at school who seems lonely or unhappy. Write to a friend who has moved away and might be having difficulties adjusting to new surroundings. Express your gratitude to a favorite teacher. Offer to help at home without being asked.

Enjoy the friendships you have and make new ones. Choose friends who have admirable qualities—honesty, intelligence, kindness, and humor—and who bring out the best in you.

Consider how to prepare yourself for the future. Think about the habits, skills, and knowledge that will help you succeed in school. They are the same ones that will make you successful in life. Spend as much time reading as you can, and read widely. You will learn a lot, always be able to entertain yourself, and be interesting to other people.

My greatest wish for teenagers everywhere is that there will be adults in their lives to show them, both by lesson and by example, the skills they need to take their place as secure, productive, and happy members of society. The most fundamental of those skills is the ability to read and write well. As Honorary Ambassador of the Decade of Literacy of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), I am working to ensure that everywhere in the world both boys and girls are taught from their earliest years to be the best possible readers and writers. With that crucial foundation, all other learning becomes easier and a successful life can follow.

I thank the Bureau of International Information Programs of the United States Department of State for the opportunity to greet each person reading this journal, and I look forward to hearing how it has been received by young people around the world.

Warmly,

Laura Bush

TOUCHING HEARTS AND MINDS

Patrick Welsh

A veteran high school English teacher discusses the joys and frustrations of teaching at a metropolitan school in the United States. With all their successes and problems, schools invariably are reflections of the society they serve. The author deals with unmotivated students, many from low-income families, as well as high achievers, among whom are a large percentage of immigrants determined to succeed. "One of the things that keeps me coming back," he says, "… is the exhilaration of being with young people—the give and take, the challenge to be on their wavelength and get them on mine, the being part, however small, of the lives of the next generation." The strength of America's economy and technological development would seem to belie the complaints, repeated over the decades, that schools are failing and that education reform is urgently required. "We teachers must be doing something right."

Patrick Welsh, who will begin his 36th year in teaching this September, frequently contributes essays about secondary school life to national newspapers in the United States.

I teach English at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. Often, when I share that fact with someone I have just met, I'll get reactions that border on condescension or puzzlement. "You must be brave! How do you do it?"

Sensational media stories about violence and declining achievement seem to have given some people the notion that American high schools are disorderly and dangerous places where no one who could find another job would want to work. Sadly, the complex, exciting, exasperating, challenging, and rewarding inner life of schools, a life that mirrors much of American society, remains a mystery to most of the public.

One of the things that keeps me coming back—in September I will begin my 36th year at T.C.—is the exhilaration of being with young people—the give and take, the challenge to be on their wavelength and get them on mine, the being part, however small, of the lives of the next generation.

A Special Excitement

There's a special excitement in teaching in a school like mine where 87 countries are represented in our student body. Over the years, kids from trouble spots all over the world have poured into Alexandria. I have taught kids who escaped from Vietnam on the last flights out of Saigon; kids who have fought in wars in Cambodia and Sierra Leone; kids who walked from El Salvador through Mexico and swam the Rio Grande into Texas.

Long before September 11, when many Americans could not find Afghanistan on a map, the cities of Kabul and Kandahar were familiar to my colleagues and me. They were the birthplaces of many of my favorite students. To me, the face of Afghanistan is not the images of conflict we see on the nightly news but that of Jamilah Atmar, who sold hot dogs at a food stand in downtown Washington and managed to send her three children—Harir, Zohra, and Raza—on to graduate from Virginia colleges. I often wonder if I have taught these kids half as much about literature as they and their families have taught me about the global village we now inhabit.

Immigrant kids often bring with them a work ethic and love of learning that put many of their U.S.-born peers to shame. This past year in my senior Advanced Placement (AP) classes I gave 11 awards for excellence. Three of them went to immigrants: Aminata Conteh, from Sierra Leone; Fajana Ahkter, from Bangladesh; and Essay Giovanni, from Ethiopia. While many of their classmates complained that reading Shakespeare or Faulkner was "too hard," Aminata, Farjana, and Essay just got on with their work and pulled straight As [perfect grades].

I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that I enjoy teaching those Advanced Placement classes (through which students earn university course credits) more than I do the so-called regular classes. Not only do I have more control, but also I can do more and better literature. Many students in my regular classes are so turned off to reading that they profess boredom even when, to spark their interest, I bring in sports pages from the newspaper for them to read.

Diamond in the Rough

Oddly, the classes with the best attendance are often the regular ones and where the students have given me the most trouble. For some of these students, school is the place where the action is, the place "to be with my friends." It is also

Patrick Welsh

the place that offers them the structured and consistent adult presence that many of them lack in their homes. Despite the difficulties they can cause, one of the biggest satisfactions I get as a teacher is discovering the diamond in the rough in my regular classes. These kids act hard, wearing the tough mask of the street to hide the fact that they are bright.

I think of a girl I had in a regular class a few years ago. To hear her talk on Monday morning you would think she was the queen of a girl gang of street fighters. But when I would give her a book that would take the other kids three weeks to finish, she'd come back in a day or two having breezed through the book with total comprehension and ask for another. I tried to talk her into transferring to my AP class but she told me there were "too many white people in those classes." (Unfortunately, the fact that so-called advanced classes are attended predominantly by white students makes some minority students feel uncomfortable about joining them.) No one in her family had gone to college, but I kept telling her she had to be the first. She took a year off after she graduated, but the last I heard from her she was attending a community college.

Some of the biggest thrills in teaching come out of the blue, years after a student has graduated. Sometimes it comes when I answer a knock on the classroom door. Two years ago I opened the door to see a distinguished looking man in a Navy officer's uniform. I hadn't seen Wyman Howard in 18 years, but I recognized him immediately. The guy I remembered as a fun-loving, rambunctious, and not horribly disciplined teenager had become a Navy SEALS commander. He was back in Alexandria visiting his mother after an overseas mission, and had dropped in to say hello. Another time when I answered a knock on the door, a tall, sophisticated looking black woman was standing there. She looked too young to be someone's mother, but as soon as I heard the voice I knew it was Lettie Moses. She had just graduated from Smith College and was on her way to the University of Michigan Law School. Lettie grew up in "the projects"—the federally supported housing for low-income families. Lettie's mother and father were determined to see her succeed. "I just dropped by to say hello," she said. We talked awhile, catching up on the past four years. I think what Lettie was really saying to me was: "I just wanted to let you know I made it." What I wanted to say to her was: "If you only knew how thrilled I am to see you. This is what teaching is all about."

The most shocking, out-of-the-blue moment came last year while I was working late in my classroom. The television was on, tuned to the Public Broadcasting System's *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*. I didn't even look up when Lehrer said, "Now reporting from Baghdad, *New York Times* correspondent Edward Wong." Then suddenly I recognized a voice from 15 years ago and looked up to see Ed Wong, TC class of '91, standing in the Baghdad night discussing details of an insurgent attack earlier that day. I remembered a great imitation Ed had done of me looking for papers on my messy desk, but had thought he had gone to medical school. I was at once shocked, thrilled, and worried for his safety when I saw him. When he was back home at Christmas, we went out for coffee, and Ed told me that my class and that of another teacher, Jacqueline Hand, had turned him on to literature; I took the compliment, knowing in my heart that you don't teach a guy like Ed—you step back, and get out of the way, and try not to do any harm. But when I now read his reporting on the front page of the *New York Times*, I will boast about one thing: I was at least able to recognize that talent when he was 17.

Recognizing Talent

Thank goodness I knew enough to recognize Kathryn Boo's talent. I remember marveling over an essay she wrote on James Joyce's short story *Eveline*. Here was a slender 17-year-old red head who looked as if she was about 12, writing with the insight of a woman twice her age, and in a style so graceful and clear I was astounded. Toward the end of the year, when it came time to give out a writing award, I was torn—no other student was even close to Kate, but she had cut a lot of classes as the year was ending. Going against my instincts about discipline, I ended up giving Kate the award. Years later when she won a Pulitzer Prize for a brilliant series of articles she wrote for the *Washington Post*, and shortly thereafter a MacArthur Genius Award, all I could think was: Thank goodness I didn't make a fool of myself and refuse to recognize her great gifts when she was a kid.

In a way, I never see change from year to year. The kids in my classes start off as strangers in the beginning of the year, and by the end I often have to hold back tears as they are about to leave. However, I know that in reality things have greatly changed since Kate was in my class in 1981 and Ed in 1991. Today, more than ever, teachers are in a growing battle for the hearts and minds—indeed, just the

attention—of teenagers. With instant messages, e-mail, the Internet, computer games, DVDs, videos, cable TV, and a myriad of other forms of escape and amusement beckoning from the electronic media, it's harder than ever for kids to curl up with a book, to find the quiet time to concentrate, and get in the frame of mind that reading a novel or solving an equation demands.

Some of the victories I have had over the electronic media have come when I least expected them. Two years ago, I got up my courage and taught Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time in 20 years. While I was confident girls would like it, I was sure that boys would hate it. But the reaction of Luis Cabrerra was almost enough to make my year. Cabrerra is a rabid sports fan who seemed to know every arcane detail about the local professional teams, especially the Washington Redskins. He never impressed me as a candidate for the Jane Austen Society, but I was wrong. "Once Darcy came into the picture," said Luis, "I really got into it. He was so cool the way he treated girls, how he never got pressed about them. I stayed with the book because of him."

The Myth of Schools in Trouble

Like American society, schools are full of challenges, but I still don't think that my school or the schools nationwide are in as much trouble as many politicians and education experts would have us believe. The myth that American schools are in bad shape has a long history. Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, points out that today's complaints about students' poor reading and math skills, ignorance of history, inadequate preparation for the work force, unfocused curriculums, lack of moral education—you name it—have been echoed for more than a century. In 1892, when fewer than 6 percent of high school graduates went to college, the Harvard Board of Overseers issued a report complaining that only 4 percent of the Harvard applicants "could write an essay, spell or properly punctuate a sentence."

In 1983, a study commissioned by the Reagan administration, "A Nation at Risk," warned that a "rising tide of mediocrity" had so engulfed our schools that the very future of the U.S. economy was threatened. "If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets," wrote Terrell Bell, then secretary of education, "we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system."

Common sense leads me to a rather different conclusion: If our schools were so bad in 1983 and, in the opinion of many so-called reformers, are just as bad today, how is it that America's economy and technology are the envy of the world? We teachers must be doing something right. It seems that the further one is removed from the everyday life of schools, the more negative—and unrealistic—the perception becomes. Gallup polls, for instance, show that while only about 20 percent of adults nationwide give schools a grade of A or B, 72 percent of parents give the schools their own children attend an A or B. Familiarity breeds contentment.

My school takes in refugees from all over the world, teaches them English, and in many cases sends them off to the nation's top universities. We create programs to keep girls with babies in school so that they can get decent jobs and stay off welfare rolls when they graduate. We send our women's varsity crew [rowing team] to England to row in the Royal Henley Regatta, the world's most prestigious race of its kind. The kinds of kids we have under one roof, and the services we perform for them, are as varied as the country itself. We don't always succeed, but those who constantly criticize public schools are failing to accept the reality of American society as it is today, its social problems, its glory, its wonderful variety. The public high school has no choice but to accept the reality as reflected in America's children and the challenges they pose. Anyone who takes time to look closely at what schools are doing and what our teenagers are accomplishing can't help but be impressed. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

HOW WE GO TO SCHOOL

Education in the United States is locally controlled and administered. Consequently, there is a great deal of variation from one state to another, and even within a state. The basic structure, however, includes 12 years of regular schooling, preceded by one or two years of pre-school education, and followed for many by a four-stage higher education degree system (associate, bachelor's, master's, doctorate) plus various non-degree certificates and diplomas.

This chart shows the progression students follow through the primary and secondary school systems.

Elementary School

Grade	Age
Kindergarten	5-6
1 (First)	6-7
2 (Second)	7-8
3 (Third)	8-9
4 (Fourth)	9-10
5 (Fifth)	10-11

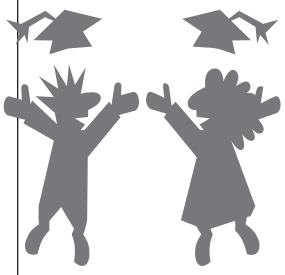
Middle School

Grade	Age
6 (Sixth)	11-12
7 (Seventh)	12-13*
8 (Eighth)	13-14

*Some systems have Junior High School for Grades 7 and 8.

High School

Grade	Age
9 (Freshman)	14-15
10 (Sophomore)	15-16
11 (Junior)	16-17
12 (Senior)	17-18



Source: Adapted from *General School Information*, an online publication of the Colorado Department of Education. [www.cde.state.co.us/index_home.htm]

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

AMERICAN TEENAGERS PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO WHAT THEY THINK, DO, AND FEEL

There is no shortage of books, articles, and academic research papers describing teenage life and behavior in the United States. Rather than add more adult voices to the mountain of analysis and opinion, we decided to ask teens to tell us a bit about themselves. With assistance from some national educational organizations, we sent out an invitation for students to submit essays—written and video—about such topics as their schools, religious practices, hobbies, social lives, temptations, work experiences, and plans for the future. We promised a small prize for the best submission in both categories.

In the video category, we gave the prize to David E. Currie, 17, a student at the Baltimore School of the Arts in Maryland for his production of *Skating is Art*. You can view the video on the Internet at www.usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0705/ijse/skating.htm.

Among the many excellent written essays, we selected the one drafted by Ian McEuen of Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, as the best. You can read it in its entirety on the next page. It is followed by abridged excerpts from numerous other essays that were submitted as well as from some interviews of students conducted by our contributing editors. Represented are high school students from Montana to Florida, from California to New York, and places in between. Most of them are planning to attend college, but a few have chosen different paths for their lives. You can read of their passion for music, commitment to volunteer activities, dedication to sports, and excitement over their plans for the future. Of course, there is no way to represent all the views, opinions, and experiences of U.S. teenagers; nevertheless, we hope the comments on the pages that follow will reveal some insights into what they think, how they spend their time, and the dreams they have for the future.

Exuberant youth attending a Live 8 concert in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 2, 2005, one of numerous events around the world to promote economic development in Africa.

Joseph Kaczmarek, AP/WWP

I SING THE BODY ELECTRIC

Ian McEuen

I am a musician. I'm 17 years old and in 11th grade. My school, Walt Whitman High School [http://www.waltwhitman.edu/], is named after the great American poet of the U.S. Civil War and the era of immigration that followed it—when America experienced its greatest pains of division, then the growing pains of diversity, and became a "melting pot" of nationalities.

Walt Whitman is considered to be the greatest American poet, and the greatest poet of democracy. Perhaps because he saw the wounds the Civil War caused (he was a medic for a time), Whitman espoused brotherhood, the common man, and an inclusive vision:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear ...
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else ...
("I Hear America Singing," by Walt Whitman, stanzas 1 and 7)

Marcus DePaulo

Big Black Cat members, from left, Michael Barrett, Ian McEuen, Colin Kelly, Will Donnelly, and Will Maroni.

He is best remembered for his book-length poem *Leaves of Grass*, also known as the *Song of Myself*.

I mention this for more than historical interest. As I said, I am a musician. But the musical instrument I play is *me*: I am a singer. And as a singer, I have experienced what Whitman meant—the power of the voice to break down boundaries and open doors. When I sing, I open a doorway for the audience to pass through and share the beauty of the music. This sharing can happen between peoples, too. Music is the only universal language, and musicians can open doors between cultures, bringing nations together.

Whitman's poems celebrate immediacy and physicality: "I sing the body electric," he wrote, "the present now and here, / America's busy, teeming, intricate whirl." ("I Sing the Body Electric" stanza 1, and "Eidolons," stanzas 25 and 26). In this spirit, I will describe the "now and here" in the "whirl" of this particular American teenage singer's life. My day begins at 5:45 a.m., when I wake and shower. For me, singing in the shower is a necessity! I need to warm up my voice at the very start of a long vocal day.

My vocalization has been known to awaken my parents and our four housecats. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," Whitman wrote. My goal is not to *yawp*, actually, but to sing beautifully. I may not be a big guy, but I have big dreams. I dream of singing "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's *Turandot* on the Metropolitan Opera stage one day. I dream of being a great opera singer.

I also sing and act in musical theater—in the summer of 2004 I sang in *Sweeney Todd*, produced by Wildwood Summer Theatre, an all-youth theater company, and in the fall I played Marius in my school's production of *Les Misérables*. I sing rock 'n roll, too. I am lead singer for a band made up of friends from school, Big Black Cat. We compose original songs (I write the lyrics) and maintain a Web site (http://www.purevolume.com/BigBlackCat). Walt Whitman would relate, I think: "If he were alive today, old Walt would be playing rock and roll." (David Haven Blake, cited in Peter Carlson, "Walt Whitman, Taking Poetic License"). We have played at nightclubs in Washington, D.C., to raise

Courtesy Bartleby.com

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

money for Parkinson's disease research and for victims of the 2004 Asian tsunami.

Back to everyday life. After a quick breakfast (with my daily cup of tea with honey), I head for school, which is only a couple of miles from my house. Classes begin at 7:25 a.m. This semester I study Latin, pre-calculus, English, psychology, men's chorus, and chamber choir, and for one class period I work as student aide to the master of choirs. I begin my day singing, sing with the men's chorus before lunch, practice singing during my lunch period, and end my school day singing with the chamber choir. More often than not, I stay after school ends at 2:10 p.m. to practice singing or to rehearse for a school play, concert, arts festival, talent show, or "battle of the bands."

Then it is home again, where I listen to rock and opera recordings and prepare music for performance. Right now I am perfecting songs in French, Italian, and English: "Lydia" by Gabriel Fauré, "Amarilli, mia bella" by Giulio Caccini, and "The Roadside Fire" and "Loch Lomond" as arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams. With the first three of these, I placed first among high school advanced male singers in the 2005 Mid-Atlantic Regional Student Auditions of the National Association of Teachers of Singing. I was soloist in the last song in Orlando, Florida, during my school's 2005 music field trip.

Daniel Hoffman

Ian McEuen, second from left, in the Wildwood Summer Theater production of Sweeney Todd, on stage at Quince Orchard High School, Gaithersburg, Maryland.

After these private hours with my music, I often go for a run in the neighborhood to clear my mind. Next, I do homework until my parents return home from work and we have dinner. Then I finish my homework and, before bed, watch television or a DVD (often an opera) or download songs from the Internet. On weekends I have a lesson with my voice teacher, Dr. Myra Tate, catch up on sleep and school assignments, and go out with my friends.

It is a demanding life, much like that of an athlete, but worth it. My goal is to study vocal performance at a university or conservatory next year and, someday, to sing at the great opera houses of the world. As Dr. Tate tells me, "Opera singers are the Olympic athletes of vocalism." So far, music has opened the way for me to perform on the high school and community stage, at university and arts center recital halls, and at major rock venues in my area. This summer, I will perform my first operatic role, as Borsa in Verdi's Rigoletto, in a production of the Bethesda Summer Music Festival—the same role played by Placido Domingo, the great tenor and General Director of the Washington National Opera, in his own operatic debut.

So, I live each day fully, energized by my passion for music and my growth as a singer. For me, again Walt Whitman's words ring true:

If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die. ("When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," stanza 4)

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS

Schools reflect the diversity of the nation's cities, towns, and villages. In addition to their paramount role in education, they are often focal points of community activities. They may serve as places to host civic group meetings, stage community theatre productions, and set up polling stations during local and national elections. The 2000 Census, the latest available, provides regional snapshots of the 16.3 million students enrolled in high school that year and the rates of graduation. The populous South had 5.7 million students in high school, the West 3.8 million, the Midwest 3.7 million, and the Northeast, the lowest number of high school students, 3.02 million. In addition, an estimated 1.1 million pupils are "homeschooled," that is, they stay at home to be instructed by their parents instead of attending public or private institutions.

© Paul Warchol Photography/Long Island City High School, Gruzen Samton LLPy

Luke Palmisano, AP/WWP

Don Ryan, AP/WWP

Photos from top: Long Island City High School, just outside New York City; Hudson High School, Hudson, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland; Adel Middle School in Adel, Oregon.

There are 53 students in my class. We've gained a few and lost a few through the years, but most of us have been going to school together since we were in kindergarten. You know everybody in your class really well—you can call them all by name—and you can pretty well do that for the whole high school and most of the people in town, too.

Chuck Offenburger

Anna Peterson in front of a barn on her family's Iowa farm. A top student, she also plays on her school's volleyball team, sings in school productions, and is active in church and service organizations.

People who go to larger schools probably think we don't have as many opportunities in a small school as they do, but I don't think that's true. Fewer students actually means more opportunities for all of us who are here. You can be involved in a lot more activities, because they all need people. So if you want to go out for a sports team, a school play, music groups or whatever, you pretty much have a good chance that you're going to get to play or perform.

In academics, we might not have as many courses as some of the large schools do, but I feel like our school does a really good job. If we don't have an upper-level course that you need, the school helps us take it from the community college or over the ICN [a statewide interactive telecommunications network that links all the schools].

One of the things I love about going to a small school like ours, with these smaller towns and all the farms, is that the school is the thing that links them all together. It's a central focus of life here. Games are a big deal in a smaller school. American football, volleyball, and basketball games draw crowds of several hundred people, but what I really like is that the musicals and plays are attended as much as the ball games.

This has been a great place to grow up. And when I walk down the street in town, everybody knows my name. I like that.

Anna Peterson, 17, grade 11, Prairie Valley High School, Gowrie, Iowa [http://www.gowrie.k12.ia.us]

I am currently in my final year attending a mid-sized school in a Minnesota suburban community. The school,

Centennial High School, has an average class [grade] size of around 550 people, and receives students from a few nearby small cities. The high school is a source of life in our community for both the young and the grown.

The support our community gives toward our school can be seen by the turnout of people from all stages of life when a Friday night American football game is being played. Among the crowd are families watching their sons play, local sports enthusiasts, and the occasional senior citizen who could tell us about the early days of the team. The best example of this generally occurs in the fall, when the school holds the annual "homecoming" American football game. Alumni return home to see the biggest football game in the regular season. Before the game, students hold a parade, paint school colors on their faces, and display an incredible amount of school spirit.

Centennial High School offers classes that challenge even the brightest students. Classes cover a variety of topics—from learning how to bake cookies to learning college-level science and math. Counselors, coaches, and teachers all help prepare students for the road ahead. A student has four classes during the day, each held in a different classroom. There is a half-hour lunch break during the day. The school, in the suburbs [of the twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul], is the center of teen life, and a part of who we all are.

David Lucas, 18, grade 12, Centennial High School, Circle Pines, Minnesota [http://www.centennial.k12.mn.us/chs]

My school, which is private, has about 650 girls ranging from kindergarten through grade 12. It is located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City. I love my school! There are so many cultural and educational opportunities. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is five blocks away, and we often go there to actually experience things we have studied in class. Another thing I like about my school is that it is relatively small and close-knit, and all of us form a close community. I participated in community activities and sports, including softball and volleyball. In fact, we were the New York State Champions in volleyball this past year. My school also does an excellent job preparing us academically for college. I will be enrolling at a university in Pennsylvania this coming fall. About the only negative thing I can think of about my school is the fact that I have a long commute back and forth. I live in the Bronx, and I take the subway and a bus to get to my school in Manhattan. It takes me about 45 minutes to an hour each way.

Denise Bailey-Castro, 18, grade 12, The Chapin School, New York, New York [http://www.chapin.edu]

This is a great place to go to high school, because this community is so united, and probably the thing they support the most is the school. People have moved here from all over, to work in the mines or on the ranches, for hunting and fishing, all the outdoor life. So new people are coming in all the time, and Big Timber is small enough that it's real easy to become part the community. Friends from school usually hang out at each other's homes—especially at anybody's place that has a pool table or ping pong table.

David Foster attends a school that serves a Montana county 89 kilometers long and 56 kilometers wide with a population of only 3,584 people.

Many people—newcomers and those who have lived in this area for generations—get to know each other by attending school events. I'd say at least half the town and a whole lot of people from out in the country go to our football games. Not quite as many come to basketball games, but we usually pretty well fill the gym. And it's the same thing for concerts, too. The games, the concerts, and the other school stuff are where everybody gets together.

I'm very fortunate to be where I am. I'm pretty sure I know everybody that was in the senior class last year, and everybody that will be in the top three classes this next year. There might be a few new freshmen I don't know yet, but I'll know them before long. I think about that sometimes—how it's good to know everybody you're going to school with. In the big schools, you're probably meeting new people in your own class every day.

David Foster, 17, grade 11, Sweet Grass County High School, Big Timber, Montana [http://www.sweetgrasscounty.com/sghs]

CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The wide diversity of American society is on display in the faces of American teenagers. Young people are especially adept at making friends across ethnic, religious, and racial lines. As in decades past, new immigrants continue to settle in the United States, including sparsely populated rural areas, in search of the American dream. Today, Hispanics make up the country's fastest growing minority population with an estimated population of 41.3 million. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in July 2004, 240 million Americans identified themselves as white, 39.2 million as black, 14 million as Asian, and 4.4 million as American Indian or Alaskan native.

AP/WWP

Morry Gash, AP/WWP

AP/WWP

Photos from top: participants in a year-long program involving Jewish and black high school students to foster better race relations, recount details of a trip they have just taken from New York City to Memphis, Tennessee; a teaching assistant and students, all Hmong immigrants from Cambodia, recite the Pledge of Allegiance at Sheboygan South High School in Sheboygan, Wisconsin; student teacher Amelia Rivera, a member of the Tlingit Indian tribe, stands next to a Sealaska poster at Ytaakoosge Daakahidi, an alternative high school in Juneau, Alaska, which has a special grant to develop an American Indian-theme curriculum.

Cindy with two friends during a visit to Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

My name is Cindy Ramirez. I am 17 years old, and I am originally from Mexico City, but right now I am living in Lafayette, Indiana. I arrived in the U.S. two years ago because all my family was living here and I wanted to learn more English. Now that I am here, I am trying to meet new people and learn more English because all my classes are in English.

When I arrived in the U.S. I did not know English very well, but with time and my teacher's help I am learning more. Now I can speak, read, and write more than before I arrived; the important thing is that I need to try to learn more and more. I try to pay attention during any conversation, and I am very focused on pronunciation.

I hope to use all the English that I am studying in the future because I want to go to college and I need to speak and write very well. It is my big dream to go to college.

Cindy Ramirez, 17, grade 11, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

After two years of studying Latin in high school, I am now using it everyday! Almost everything I say and write in English is derived from Latin.

My favorite part of Latin class is the mythology and history. Using the old fables we translate and the valuable knowledge we gain on culture day (a day at the end of each week devoted just to Roman/Greek culture), I am able to trace the origins of words. In my psychology class, I learned that some prominent theories are named after such tales. For example, Freud's theory [of the Oedipus Complex] is named after Oedipus. In my preparation for the general college admissions test, I use Latin to derive the meaning of words I am unsure of, thus allowing me a greater chance at improving my score.

I can only imagine the day when I can explain Greek culture and mythology, Roman society, scientific roots,

and classical Latin religious references. I am taking a class trip to Italy to expand my cultural experiences of Italian history first hand.
Kimberlee Lowder, 17, grade 11, St. Mary's Ryken High School, Leonardtown, Maryland [http://www.smrhs.org]

Every possible ethnic group and faith are represented in the United States, and the fact that it all comes together in the United States and is largely harmonious is really great. There is no way that this can be captured in the media; you have to actually be here to experience it. I have visited Canada, Japan, and Vietnam, where my parents were born. I am glad that I can speak and read Vietnamese, since this is an important aspect of my life.
Huyen Nguyen, 18, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia [http://www.cityschools.com/jmhs]

Family photo

Huyen with his parents just after receiving his high school diploma.

I was born in Mexico. My first language is Spanish, and my second language is English. I want to learn a third language, probably Portuguese or Italian. I am the first one in my family to go to school in the United States.

When I came to the United States, I was only 12 years old. My English skills were very poor. The language was the first problem I faced, and I still have trouble speaking sometimes, but there are people who help me out. The second problem I faced was the culture and a different way of life. The cultures of Mexico and the United States are not too different but still there are some things that are very different. The food, such as the lunch in school, was very different from what I used to eat in my country. With time, I started to get involved with my new lifestyle.

Courtesy of José F. Ponce Granados

José, all dressed up and ready to go.

Now I am in my junior year, which means I am in 11th grade. Only one more year and I will receive my diploma. I am planning to go to college in Mexico. I hope you learn something from me and my experiences. Remember that everything is possible if you really want it.
José F. Ponce Granados, 17, grade 11, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

Barry Fitzgerald

Ghizal believes in the importance of showing respect.

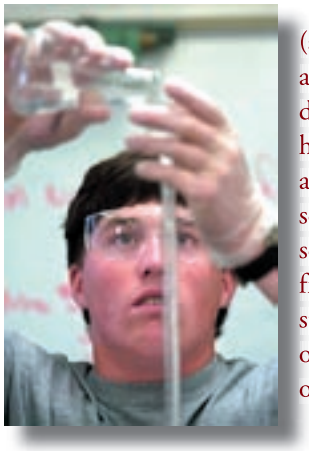
I arrived in the United States on August 14, 2004. This is the first time I have been among American teenagers, and it is much different than in Afghanistan. I have had a great experience. The teaching process here is different; for example, you choose your own classes, which I think is a good idea. The relationship between teachers and students was surprising to me, because it's a more friendly, free relationship, not as formal as in Afghanistan. That's what I like about it. At the same time, it is important not to go beyond the borders of friendliness and become disrespectful. I see some disrespect of teachers by students, and I really don't like that.
Ghizal Miri, 16, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia [http://www.cityschools.com/jmhs]

FUTURE PLANS

Education opens doors to any number of career pursuits. Research shows that by the year 2010, one out of every five jobs in the United States will require a college degree and that nearly one-third of all jobs will require at least some college preparation. It therefore is no surprise that 34 percent of the American young-adult population (aged 18-24) attend university after high school. Those who do not pursue higher education have a myriad of other choices after graduation—the trades, service industry jobs, military service (which often provides financing for university study later), and family-owned businesses all offer opportunities.

Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP/WWP

Richard Drew, AP/WWP



AP/WWP

Photos from top: A counselor, left, gives academic advice to a student at San Rafael High School in San Rafael, California; a student from A.E. Smith High School in New York City, tries the controls of an earth mover at a construction-skills fair designed to interest students in the building trades; a student performs a science experiment at Ione High School in Ione, Oregon.

For me, planning for after high school is a scary thought. The idea of having to leave my comfort zone and go out into the "real world" is a little frightening. Some people go to a community college, some go to a university, and others go to a regular college. I wish to attend the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. I have decided to push myself to my limits—physically and mentally. This also means that I will be an officer in the United States Navy. The Naval Academy offers many different studies, from aerospace engineering, to political science. I would like to major in either business or political science.

Graduates of military academies are very strong-willed and well-structured individuals. Another advantage to going to an academy is that you automatically have a great job when you graduate, and the pay is pretty good! There isn't much of a downside, [but] I guess if you had to choose something it would be that the individuals that attend the Academy are not as free to do what they please [as in] other colleges. To me this is a good thing. It keeps young individuals out of trouble, and keeps them in line to succeed.

Casey Czarzasty, 17, grade 12, St. Mary's Ryken High School, Leonardstown, Maryland [http://www.smrhs.org]

For some people it is hard to figure out what they want to do after high school. For me it is not so hard—I already knew in the first grade that I wanted to become a teacher. I thought about becoming a teacher because of my first grade teacher; then, when I got into third grade, I knew for a fact that that was what I wanted to do. I have had wonderful teachers throughout my school years, which I feel has helped me make my decision.

Some of the good things about knowing what I want to do and where I want to go are that I can focus on doing my best in trying to achieve my goal. I also can make sure that I am taking the correct courses in high school to become a teacher after college.

Kelsey C. Bell, 15, grade 9, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

I want to be a neonatologist, which is a doctor who specializes in the care of newborns, especially those who are premature, or have jaundice, or some problem like that. It all started out when I was little. I went to a babysitter, a girl who later went to Duke University.

She wanted to be a doctor, and she got me interested in medicine. So, from the seventh grade on, I have been focused on being a neonatologist. This year I took a special class, called "independent study," in which you can choose something that you are interested in. You do research, have a mentor for 18 weeks, and do a project at the end. I got a chance to shadow a doctor at the hospital, a neonatologist. I got to see exactly what they do, and the different technologies that are used to keep the babies alive.
Kristen Grymes, 17, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia [http://www.cityschools.com/jmhs]

I've decided to join the U.S. Air Force. This is partly for financial reasons, but I've always believed that people should do their part to help make a better future and help defend what we have.

If I end up liking the Air Force after I'm in there for four years, I'll probably stay in and make a career of it. But for now I plan on using the G.I. bill [which pays college tuition for military veterans] to go to college and study psychology, which is what I think I want to do as a career.

I am interested in psychology in general, because it fascinates me the way the brain works and makes people act one way or the other. I am looking into counseling, because I would like to be able to help people who have problems live happier, healthier lives. I am also interested in forensic psychology where I could help track down criminals and insure justice, making the world safer for my family and everyone around me.
Evan Hoke, 19, grade 12, Red Land High School, Etters, Pennsylvania [http://classrooms.wssd.k12.pa.us/red_land.cfm]

I have strong beliefs in the laws that our country, states, and cities are governed by. But as with anything, there is room for improvement and change. I believe that I am the person that can help change some of the existing laws for the better.

The foundation to my future begins with summer internships in a government office throughout my high school and college years. There is only so much a person can learn from a book. In college, government and psychology will be my areas of study. I believe that knowing how my government works is a must, but being able to understand how the citizens of my country think is just as important.

After college, I think travel abroad will be important to me. Taking the knowledge and experiences gained through my travels, I will plan to attend graduate law school. I believe a person may not have too much knowledge. I plan to earn my doctorate degree in government and psychology and also a law degree. I would also like to have the title Judge Morgan Atwell. Working hard and holding an exemplary standing with the people, it will only be a short period of time before I run for senator. The hard work has just begun.
Morgan Atwell, 15, grade 9, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

I'm not a school type of person like a lot my friends and classmates. I'm looking for a hands-on experience and have joined the U.S. Marines. I'll attend boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, and then train for six more months in Pensacola, Florida, to become an aviation mechanic. Maybe I'll stay in, make the Marines a career. I don't know. If not, I'd like to use the training I get in the Marines to work as an aviation mechanic in the civilian world.

But of course, first off, I've got to get through basic training. I know there are risks, but I'd like to protect my country because, first off, I have a lot of faith in my country.
Colin Smith, 18, grade 12, W.T. Woodson High School, Fairfax, Virginia [http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/WTWoodsonHS]

I want to study international law. I'm interested in law because I see that in my own country, there are few women working in this field. I want to work for women's rights, which is very important. I want to go back to Afghanistan and help my country.
Ghizal Miri, 16, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia

WORK EXPERIENCES

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Working hard and paying your own way are strong values in the United States. Many children first learn this by receiving an allowance—a modest weekly or monthly payment—for doing chores around the house. Later, they often take part-time jobs after school or on weekends to earn spending money, save for college, get practical experience, and gain a sense of independence. Opportunities are numerous and varied—from delivering newspapers to babysitting for neighbors, from bagging groceries at a checkout counter to bussing tables in a restaurant. In fact, many youth, regardless of the economic status of their families, receive their first paychecks before they even reach high school. But to protect children from labor abuse, U.S. law sets the minimum age for employment at 14 years of age for most non-agricultural work and limits to 18 hours the number of hours that minors under the age of 16 may work during a school week.

Joel Page, AP/WWP

Daniel Hulshizer, AP/WWP

Al Goldis, AP/WWP

Photos from top: High school students in Maine get time off from school to work during harvest season; disc jockeys discuss music selections at radio station WCVH, which broadcasts from Hunterdon Central High School, Flemington, New Jersey; students work at Gibson's Book Store in Lansing, Michigan.

Laura with her first paycheck.

I got my job almost by accident. My brother had just become a Boy Scout, and we needed to buy his uniform. While my parents shopped for him at the Boy Scout Supply Shop, I stood in the doorway. After a few minutes, the store manager came and asked me if I was interested in a job. At the time, my only income came from occasional babysitting, so I accepted, and was interviewed and hired on the spot.

From then on, every Thursday and Saturday, my mother drove me to the shop where I am a clerk. I ring up customers' purchases, put their items in bags, hand them their receipt, and send them on their way. In addition to operating the cash register, a clerk has to fill out reports that allow the Boy Scouts to move up in ranking, take orders over the phone, and guide first-time parents of Cub Scouts (Boy Scouts for boys ages 5 to 10) through buying their first uniform. It's not easy—early in September, when boys join the Cub Scouts in huge numbers, the store is flooded with new, confused parents who need to be guided, step by step, through the whole process. The shop isn't as busy at other times of the year, though, so I usually have time to get a soda from the vending machines, do some homework, or talk to my co-workers.

Even though I don't have as much free time anymore, I still love my job. The people I work with, including my boss, are kind, helpful, and fun to talk to; also, because most of them are adults, talking to them gives me a unique perspective on life in the "real world." I'm also finally earning my own money, which means I no longer have to borrow from my parents every time I want to buy something. I have a degree of independence that I haven't had before. Having a steady paycheck has taught me how to manage my money effectively, how much to save, and how much to spend, and just how much some of the things I take for granted actually cost. (I had no idea how expensive shoes could be until I bought my own pair.)

In addition, my job has given me better communication skills; it has taught me how to speak to people professionally, how to understand what customers are looking for just by talking to them, and even how to quiet a screaming toddler. Although my job cuts into my

free time, I wouldn't trade it or the skills it's given me for anything.
Laura Voss, 16, grade 11, Thomas S. Wootton High School, Rockville, Maryland [http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/woottonhs]

Although I'm not actually holding a job of any kind, I do a lot of work after school. One of the things I do after school is all of my chores because I raise rabbits and swine to show for my local Four-H club. Four-H is a national organization that helps develop skills among rural youth. It's a place where you get to meet a lot of new people and make a lot of new friends and have a great time during the summer.

I also help watch my little brother during the summer and after school. I like to hang out with my friends as much as possible. I also work at my grandparent's house, cutting the grass in the yard and picking weeds from the garden. I like to work. It's a lot of fun and gives you responsibility. The life lesson I have learned is that you have to work for what you want.
Danielle Burdine, 17, grade 11, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

School, studying, extracurricular activities, religion, movies and… work, so many things to do, so little time. But jobs can have advantages and disadvantages.

Some advantages are the extra spending money and the experience of the working environment. Another advantage is that a job makes you feel more independent because you can satisfy some of your own needs. You can also choose to save for college or other future plans. Some teens also help with family needs.

One disadvantage is that teens may not grasp the meaning of work because most teens don't pay bills but instead spend their money on expensive luxuries. So they may end up thinking that money is only for spending, and they may not learn how to save. Working students might also have to cut down on studying because they don't have time for it or for other activities such as socializing with friends and family.
Tirza Sevilla, 15, grade 10, Wakefield High School, Raleigh, North Carolina [http://wakefieldhs.net]

I started working at Hecht's [a chain of department stores in several Eastern U.S. states] last summer, actually for school. I am in a class called Marketing III, and as part of that class you are required to get a job. You have to accumulate 396 hours of working time, so you actually get a second credit. So I started my job at Hecht's last July 12, and I work in the junior clothing department, which is hard for me, because I try not to spend all my money buying clothes. But it's actually fun, and it has helped me learn a lot. I am a relatively shy person, but in that position I work at the cash register, and I have to talk to people, make conversation, and control my emotions.
Kristen Grymes, 17, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia

INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

America is a land of many faiths, and teenagers in America practice their religions in a variety of ways. Early in their study of U.S. history, American children learn that freedom of religion and separation of church and state are among the basic principles guiding their nation's government. It is up to each individual to decide what and how to worship. Many teenagers' decisions about religion are influenced by their families. Some attend schools that are run by religious groups, and others join after-school and weekend programs sponsored by their churches, synagogues, or mosques. Still others choose not to practice any particular religion at all. Many religions have adopted the hallmarks of contemporary youth culture to reach out to young people. Thus it is not uncommon to see a Christian rock group or Muslim rappers or youth-oriented religious services at any number of congregations.

Mark Humphrey, AP/WWP

Daniel Hulshizer, AP/WWP

Jim Cooper, AP/WWP

Photos from top: Youth pray in small groups at the People's Church in Franklin, Tennessee; students from Noor-Ul-Iman School attend afternoon prayer at the Islamic Society of New Jersey mosque in South Brunswick, New Jersey; a student at Solomon Schecter High School in New York City holds the Torah while participating in morning prayers.

I practice my faith through my everyday actions. I try to lead others by my example and I always make choices that would be acceptable to my strong values. Attending a Catholic school has been a major influence on the way I practice my faith and has truly helped me through all the struggles of school. My faith has given me a strong foundation to base my life on and has been an important influence throughout my entire life.
Maggie Boyle, 16, grade 11, Saint Mary's Ryken, Leonardtown, Maryland [http://www.smrhs.org]

Spiritually, people need a sense of where they came from, how they got here, and where they are going. Americans are lucky enough to have the freedom to choose which path of religion to follow. I have grown up in a strong and supportive Christian family, and the values that my parents instilled in me as a child haven't changed much as I'm growing up. But, as teenagers, we are most influenced by our friends. My best friend is just as strong in her faith as I am, and we use this to hold each other accountable. Once people know your values they won't pressure you as much to do things you would rather not do.
Ashley Voigtlander, 18, grade 12, Centennial High School, Lino Lakes, Minnesota [http://www.centennial.k12.mn.us/chs]

My religion has a fairly big influence on who I am, how I act, and how I write. Being a Jew has taught me to question, and to come up with meanings of my own from the Torah [Old Testament], not just take what most people assume it means as set in stone. You can take passages in the Torah, and connect them to everyday life, and understand them better for it.

Being a Jew does not mean going to temple every Friday night and Saturday morning, or that you have to be a bat-mitzvah or bar-mitzvah (a Jewish girl or boy who at about age 13 takes on adult religious responsibilities), or that you have to always wear a skullcap and fringes (a close-fitting cap and an undergarment with knotted fringes worn by men who are Orthodox Jews). It does not mean that you must always believe one thing, or that you cannot believe one thing because of another.

Being a Jew is how you act and what you believe in, like showing respect for diversity, and being open to learning new things, and helping to teach others. We are

taught that the most important things for people to do are to show respect for one another, do acts of kindness and to make peace. In our prayer book, it is taught that "What is hateful to you, do not do to any person. That is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary." Kids are influenced a lot by their religions because that is what they are taught from the beginning of their lives, and no matter how much other things change, they know that it will stay constant.

Cindy pictured with her father at a country and western theme barn dance, sponsored by her synagogue, Beth El Hebrew, in Alexandria, Virginia.

Even in America, there are plenty of stereotypes about other religions, and my friends and I talk about each other's religions. We teach each other, and we learn that the stereotypes are rarely true.

Cindy Holden, 14, grade 9, West Springfield High School, Springfield, Virginia [http://www.fcps.edu/westspringfieldhs]

My family is from India, and we are Hindus. I was born in England. We came to the United States when I was eight years old, and we are American citizens now. Every Sunday I go to meetings of a group called Swadhyay [which means self-study in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India]. We discuss not only cultural issues, but ethical ones as well. It helps me to understand myself better, and keeps me in touch with my cultural heritage.
Aakash Chudasam, 14, grade 11, Oakton High School, Herndon, Virginia [http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/OaktonHS]

I was born in the United States, and my family is from India. We are Muslim. I belong to a youth group called "Muslims in Action" or "MIA." The members of our MIA group come from many different countries, and many, like myself, were born in the United States. We have a lot of different activities, including fund raisers for such things as tsunami relief and humanitarian aid for people in Iraq and Afghanistan. We raise money in a lot of different ways, including bake sales and car washes. I'm proud to be a Muslim, and my religion is an important part of my life. The majority of the students at my school are not Muslim, but that has never presented any problem for me. I have lots of friends from many different religious backgrounds.
Ambreen Ali, 16, grade 12, Westridge School for Girls, South Pasadena, California

My religion has shaped my life in many ways. The most important lesson that my religion, Roman Catholicism, has taught me is that I have to live my life around the church. By attending Mass on a regular basis, it has taught me how to prioritize things in my life. To me the church comes first, then family and friends, and then everything else.

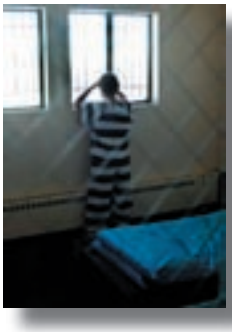
Alisha, on the occasion of her first Holy Communion several years ago.

It is easy in today's world to get sidetracked and caught up in materialism, and the things and lifestyles that are supposed to make you "happy." My religion has taught me the true meaning of happiness, and what is truly important in life.
Alisha Weisser, 17, grade 11, St. Mary's Ryken High School, Leonardtown, Maryland [http://www.smrhs.org]

I was born in the United States, but my parents are from Burma. We are Buddhists. Every other Sunday I go to a Buddhist temple in Maryland and take a class in the Burmese language. I also go to religious services at the temple, and take part in charitable works, such as food donations to the poor. When we moved from one house to another, monks from the temple came over to bless our new house. I once spent a weekend at the temple, staying with the monks, and living the monastic life for the weekend. This was a very valuable experience for me, and I hope to do this again in the future.
Nay Soe Lwin, 13, grade 9, Oakton High School, Herndon, Virginia [http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/OaktonHS]

AVOIDING TEMPTATIONS

Teenagers face many challenges on their journeys through adolescence. The vast majority of U.S. teens are able to cope with the pressures. But the desire to exercise independence and to distance themselves from parents and other authority figures sometimes leads teens to act in ways they later regret. The media tend to exaggerate or sensationalize such teen behavior, but there is no denying that problems exist—and the results can be very serious. A willingness to explore, to test boundaries, and to try new things—often coupled with a sense of invincibility—lead some teens to experiment with dangerous behavior. In 2003, the United States government reported that 30.5 percent of 12 to 17 year-olds said that they had tried an illegal drug at least once in their lifetime, with marijuana being the major drug used. Teens engaging in premarital sexual activity place themselves at risk for pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Numerous community groups and nongovernmental organizations have formed in recent decades to help parents, schools, religious congregations, and law enforcement authorities deal with these issues.



Matt York, AP/WWP

Joe Marquette, AP/WWP

William Thomas Cain, AP/WWP

Photos from top: A teenager looks out her cell window at a youth detention center in Tohaci, Arizona; members of Students Against Drunk Driving demonstrate in front of the U.S. Capitol to launch a program to reduce the number of alcohol-related motor vehicle deaths involving teenagers; a passerby observes a makeshift memorial in Upper Providence, Pennsylvania, dedicated to five girls killed in an automobile accident, four of whom had traces of the chemical difluoroethane in their bloodstreams.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

During high school there are so many bad decisions a student can make. No matter how independent people think they are, other people still influence their thoughts and their decisions. I always said that I would never give in to peer pressure, however this was not as easy as I thought.

It's only after someone does something wrong that they realize how stupid it was. I tried drugs and got in a lot of trouble. Now I have something to learn from. So please listen to yourself and only yourself. You can make your own decisions if you can learn from my mistakes.

Tyler Tenorio, 16, grade 11, Fort Lupton High School, Fort Lupton, Colorado

I am 15 years old. Even as young as I am, I have struggled with a drug abuse problem. I have been in and out of rehabilitation programs for the past year and a half. But I finally realize the effect drugs have had on my life.

For about seven months I struggled with methamphetamine addiction. Now I am in the legal system because of bad choices I made during this period. But it has helped me a lot. I have been free from drugs for almost six months now, and I am very proud of myself. I have been involved in a program called Intensive Out-Patient Program as well as attending meetings of a group called Narcotics Anonymous. They are both great programs that have helped me a lot. They help you to see the full picture of what drugs really do to your life.

I have let lots of people down. Disappointing someone I care about more than anything in the world is the worst feeling I have ever felt. They tell you in [NA] meetings that you can't change overnight. This is true you have to take recovery one day at a time.

Tenneil Ewing, 15, grade 10, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

VOLUNTEERING

Many teens want to be involved in their communities, to use their energy and enthusiasm to help others. According to Youth Service America, an organization that partners with thousands of volunteer organizations and provides volunteer opportunities for young people in the United States, millions participated in the 2005 National Youth Service Day, making it the largest annual service event in the world. Young Americans tutored school children, registered new voters, educated their communities about good nutrition, and distributed HIV/AIDS prevention materials, among many other activities. As we see in the following essays, local and global events motivate American students to volunteer their time and energy to others.

Christopher Berkey, AP/WWP

Jim Cole, AP/WWP

Allen Oliver, AP/WWP

Photos from top: Volunteers plant seeds at a Methodist camp in Tennessee, produce from which will be distributed to low-income families; members of a volunteer service organization called Service for Peace, help open a large summer camp at Geneva Point in Moultonboro, New Hampshire; at Chestnut Ridge Middle School in Washington Township, New Jersey, a student helps an older student in a computer class sponsored by the school district for senior citizens.

The tsunami that struck South Asia the day after Christmas affected all Americans temporarily; however, it changed me permanently. Like countless people all over the world, my family and I were glued to the television in the hours after we first heard of this catastrophe. The thought of hundreds of thousands of people being wiped out within minutes was impossible for me to comprehend.

The name Chennai, India, which was frequently mentioned in news coverage, took on special meaning for my family. My mother had worked with a woman, Becky Douglas from Atlanta, who had recently founded an orphanage there. It suddenly struck my mother that the orphanage was right in the path of the tsunami. We learned from Becky by phone that all of the children in the orphanage, which was only a few hundred feet from the beach, were safe, but that nearly all the children in a nearby orphanage had been killed. We also learned that the economy of the fishing villages along the beach had been destroyed. When we asked what would be the best way of helping these people, Becky replied that the long-term welfare of the people would depend on their ability to return to the sea and fish. How much would that cost? Becky said that $11,000 would repair or replace the boats and nets of a village of 500 people. When I got home from our holiday break I spoke with our headmaster and asked his permission to have a fundraising drive at The Bullis School [a private school in a wealthy suburb of Washington, D.C.]. He gave his consent, and three days later I gave a presentation to the entire student body to kick off the campaign. On the first day of the campaign—and to our great surprise — we raised more than $4,000. By the end of the weekend we raised more than double the amount of our goal, and to date we have raised more than $100,000. One hundred percent of this money has gone directly to India.

Eight of my classmates and I, along with our headmaster and several other adults, decided to spend our spring break in India, with each of us paying our own way. What we learned in India far exceeded what we had learned from raising money.

We spent a week in Chennai, with half of our time devoted to the orphanage and school that had first gotten our attention, and the other half split among three colonies for people afflicted with leprosy. Working in the orphanage was easy for all of us, because the children were all adorable. Leaving them after such a short stay turned out to be quite difficult, and all of us cried as

we left. Our work in the leprosy colonies was much more difficult, but in the end it was probably the most valuable. None of us had ever been around a patient with the disease. At first, we were afraid even to go near the residents of the colony, much less touch them. But our fears quickly vanished as we saw how excited these people were to have outsiders come to them in a spirit of love and help. We helped them with community needs, such as planting bananas to assist their efforts to become self-sufficient, but the best part was helping them individually. The highlight of my trip, and one of the most moving things of my life, was combing and braiding the hair of a woman who had lost both hands and both feet to leprosy. Until then, I never appreciated how much some simple gestures of love can do for someone else.

Lauren Elyse (Ellie) Prince, 16, grade 11, The Bullis School, Potomac, Maryland [http://www.bullis.org]

Ellie with children from the Rising Star Outreach Orphanage in Chennai, India.

All young people must take a stand to become good stewards of the environment for the sake of future generations. From early childhood, I have experienced a developing interest in the environment. In the second grade, I joined the Ecology Club at my grammar school. We tried to beautify the school grounds and to oversee recycling projects. Even at the age of eight, I learned that this good stewardship of the environment is a necessity.

In late 2004, I presented a paper to the U.S. Forest Service's Centennial Congress in which I addressed the issue of what is needed to ensure that young people hear and answer the call to developing sound environmental practices, not only for this generation, but for the future. It was a pivotal experience in my life. The exposure to differing political philosophies and the awareness of the conflicts involved in natural resource management opened my eyes to the difficult choices needed to be made by those responsible for environmental stewardship. By urging national policymakers to consider bringing youthful enthusiasm into the complex process of solving environmental problems, I have hopefully contributed to future involvement by interested and concerned young people of our country.

My interest in the environment has afforded me extraordinary opportunities to contribute my time and talent. Anyone who truly feels passionate about any issue needs only to volunteer and opportunities will present themselves that will help that person pursue his or her cause of interest.

John T. Vogel, 17, grade12, Jesuit High School, San Antonio, FL [http://www.jesuittampa.org]

The media often cover teens that get into trouble, but there are many more teens in America making a positive impact on their communities.

One program that I volunteer for is the mentoring program at one of our local elementary schools. Once a week, I go to the school and spend time with a fifth grade student. We play on the playground or go to the library, and we talk about how her week is going. The program is set up to help guide the children who might be at risk of having problems in the future. In my opinion, this is one of the more successful programs that our high school has because the children are gaining their confidence at a younger age. I have seen a lot of improvements in the children who have mentors, and those improvements will carry through the rest of their lives.

Being able to impact another person's life is one of the reasons why so many teens are willing to give up their time to help others. Something as simple as dedicating one hour of time, less than one percent of your week, can drastically change someone's life. Teenagers volunteer their time because they want to. They are doing it out of

the goodness of their hearts, with no rewards in sight. But even though there are no concrete rewards, the skills and confidence that one gains are priceless.

Kelsey Blom, 18, grade 12, Centennial High School, Circle Pines, Minnesota
[http://www.centennial.k12.mn.us/chs]

Every year my church takes its active young members on a youth trip. Last year we went to Chicago and worked in a Salvation Army shelter—well, they don't want to call it a shelter, they call it "living assistance" or something like that—but we worked there. We decorated the day care center and cooked meals for the residents. This year we are going to Canada, and I'm looking forward to that. For the past two years, I have also been going to a Christian camp called "Friend Camp." Area teens from different churches gather at Fredericksburg Christian High School, which is a private school, and we stay there for a week, and we trade in our beds for air mattresses, and we sleep on the floor.

In helping to repair houses of the poor, Kristen Grymes, shown here at her graduation, is demonstrating that young people care.

The organizers choose ten houses belonging to poor people, and we repair them. It's pretty cool, because they separate us so that we are not only with people from our own churches, but with people from all different churches. We work together, and really get our hands dirty. For example, we had to repair the roof of one house, which entailed taking off 11 layers of old linoleum and replacing the roof. I got to do things I had never done before. Some of the people we helped had believed that young people don't care, but we proved to them that we do.

Kristen Grymes, 17, grade 12, James Monroe High School, Fredericksburg, Virginia
[http://www.cityschools.com/jmhs]

Practically all teenagers in the United States love to listen to music and are devoted to particular artists and musical styles. Hip-hop, rock, rap, country, jazz, heavy metal, and ingenious combinations of various styles draw legions of young fans. The Internet and portable MP3 and CD players are among the high-tech innovations that keep teens plugged into their favorite artists. But teens do more than listen. Some three million young Americans between the ages of 13 and 18 study music in school, through private lessons, or simply on their own, and hundreds, maybe thousands, of teens participate in informal "garage bands," practicing and creating songs in the garages of their or their friends' homes.

Steve Rouse, AP/WWP

Chitose Suzuki, AP/WWP

Photos from top: Select high school band students from several Southern U.S. states take part in a rehearsal during the All-South Honor Jazz Band event at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg; fans cheer singer Stevie Wonder at the Live 8 concert in Philadelphia, July 2, 2005.

Music is a huge part of a teenager's life. Whether it's playing in a school band or having an informal "garage band," music is everywhere in a teen's life. We just can't live without it.

I play trombone in the Wakefield High School band, but I also play electric guitar for my rock band. I have to say music is in my life all day, every day. I decided to join the school band to learn more about the theory of music. I wanted to learn more about each note on the page and how they play a part in every piece of music. I then took my knowledge from that class and applied it to what I really want to do, play guitar.

I love rock music with a passion! Ever since I was 14 years old I have been fascinated with how much talent it takes to play the electric guitar, bass guitar, drums, and sing in front of a huge audience. I have had many influences on my path to becoming a rock star. Bands like Breaking Benjamin, Adema, KoRn, and a bunch more motivated me to want to play my guitar in front of a wide audience.

Music has changed my life.

Ben Ceplecha, 17, grade 10, Wakefield High School, Raleigh, North Carolina [http://wakefieldhs.net]

Music can be used to join different cultures, form everlasting friendships, and even bring out a musician's soul. It's no wonder why so many high school students in America have such a strong passion for music. For me, music is a way of life.

I believe that motivation and inspiration are vital for a successful musician. My father and mother both immigrated to America from China. For various reasons, they never had the luxury of learning music. When I was young, my parents made me learn how to play the clarinet and the piano. Everyday, they watched over me when I practiced, and [they] scheduled private lessons for me. For the first few years, I hated spending my time practicing instruments that I didn't want to learn. When I started middle school, my parents made me sign up for the middle school band, and my piano teacher put me in a very good orchestra. This was the first time where I could see my fellow students playing in harmony. As the year progressed, I learned more and more. Eventually, I grew independent enough to practice as soon as I came home from school. The better I got, the longer I

practiced. I finally began to appreciate my parents for pushing me towards becoming a better musician.

Although I do not play in my high school's band, I play in the Chinese Music Society of Greater Washington. Our orchestra's goal is to bridge cultural differences between Americans and Chinese through Chinese and American music. As a Chinese-American, I am very proud to preserve and introduce ancient Chinese music and promote cultural exchange between Chinese and American people. I believe that I have found a great way to combine my love of music with my Chinese heritage.
Elwin Wang, 15, grade 9, Walt Whitman High School, Bethesda, Maryland [http://www.waltwhitman.edu]

High school can be a very stressful time in a teenager's life. Music gives teens an outlet to express their emotions and comforts them when they feel no one understands how they feel. The beauty of music is that there is no single type of music.

My passion is for music that tells a story. I also love music that has a new sound or something that sounds classic and raw, like live performances using acoustic instruments. Music also has the power to express opinion. Opinions on politics, religion, and people can be found in some of my music, but the music I like most is free of any politics since I feel there is too much politics in everything else. Music should be a unique expression of an artist's feelings and views on the world. I like being able to mix the past and the present. Bands from the past let me get an idea of what life was like before I was born.

Music helps me and many other people my age cope with the daily stresses of high school and helps us avoid the pressure from our peers. We can listen to some music in our rooms to escape from the world [and] to get over things like little fights with our parents.

Music affects every part of my life, the way I dress, my art, [my] language.
Kim Cline, 15, grade 11, Belpre High School, Belpre, Ohio [http://www.seovec.org/belpre/bhs.htm]

I am one of the typical teenagers who loves to listen to music. However, I am slightly different from most others. While a majority of teens listen to a specific type of music, such as modern rock or alternative pop with electric guitars, I listen to a wide variety of styles. Of course, I love the same music that my peers tend to like, but I also have a passion for some country music, jazz, "oldies," classical, and even opera.

Music plays an important role within my family. All of us share it as a common interest. For birthdays, we have even developed a version of the traditional "Happy Birthday "song with a harmony part for each person in the family to sing. At church, we sing together for special services. My father has a passion for his acoustic guitar, while one of my sisters, Corinne, plays both piano and trumpet. As for myself, I have been in a choir every year of my life that I can recall.

Music calms me and relieves tension caused by a stressful day. I can temporarily escape reality as I drift into the music around me. Songs allow people to express themselves, and in some cases, build bridges between cultures. My chorus class has learned songs in German, French, Latin, Italian, and other languages, like Samoan. We become more accepting towards other cultures, simply by being exposed to new and unfamiliar songs.
Andrea Bohling, 16, grade 10, Wakefield High School, Raleigh, North Carolina [http://wakefieldhs.net]

SPORTS

Youth is synonymous with energy—mental and physical. Organized and informal sports provide teens with an opportunity to expend some of that energy and, more importantly, to learn the value of fair play, to achieve goals, and to just have fun. In 2003, 58 percent of boys and 51 percent of girls in high school played on a sports team. The most popular sports for boys are American football, basketball, track and field, baseball, and international football. For girls, the most popular are basketball, track and field, volleyball, softball, and football. As a result of a U.S. law that encourages women to take part in athletics, girls' participation in high school athletics has increased by 800 percent over the past 30 years! Other organized high school sports often include gymnastics, wrestling, swimming, tennis, and golf. Away from school, teenagers participate year-round in community-sponsored sports leagues. In addition, particularly in the summer, they engage in informal "pick up" games of one sport or another in the streets and parks of their neighborhoods.

Scott McCloskey, AP/WWP.

Charlie Neibergall, AP/WWP

AP/WWP and McDonald's

Photos from top: A coach instructs wrestlers at Oak Glen High School in New Manchester, West Virginia; a shot-putter at Iowa City West High School competes in Des Moines, Iowa; battle for a rebound in the 2005 McDonald's All-American High School Basketball Game in South Bend, Indiana.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

After school I play two kinds of sports —volleyball in the fall and basketball in the winter. Volleyball is my favorite sport. I play volleyball after school. When practice starts, the team runs a couple of warm-up laps, and then we start a fun-filled practice of many drills. Some of those drills are digging, setting, spiking, diving, and much more. When we have a game, we wear some kind of shirt that represents the volleyball team and that tells kids at our school that we have a game that night.

During the winter, I play basketball. Like volleyball, we start practice right after school and we run warm-up laps before a long hard practice. We first start drills that involve shooting to make our shots better. Then we do drills like ball handling, shooting drills, press drills, and we work on our defense and offense. In the spring, I don't play any sports so I go to physical conditioning so I can stay in shape for volleyball and basketball.

Paige Caldwell, 15, grade 9, McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana [http://www.wvec.k12.in.us/McCutcheon]

I started running track in the seventh grade because I was good at running in football. I just never got tired. Sports have played a huge role in teaching me discipline, actually waking up at 5:45 in the morning to go train and to go to practice seven days a week.

My father, who died last year, has really served as my motivation whenever I wanted to give up, whether in school or in running. He fought cancer for nine years, went through two 14-hour surgeries, chemo[therapy], and radiation. My parents came from Nicaragua, but I was born and raised in Miami in a neighborhood that is 90 percent Hispanic.

Eduardo (Eddie) Arguello, 18, grade 12, Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, Miami, Florida [http://www.belenjesuit.org]

Eddie Arguello, one of the top high school runners in Miami-Dade County, Florida, will attend Florida International University on a track scholarship to study business and finance. His goal is to become a financial adviser or bank president.

I'd estimate that I spend two to three hours per day—year round—practicing American football and/or basketball, including weight lifting. In fact, the first few weeks of American football practice, in the late summer and early fall, I spend five hours or more per day. Why? Well, the first reason I put so much into it is I love sports. It just comes natural to me that I want to play.

And I realize it's pretty much a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Twenty years from now, you're not going to able to play American football and basketball, and when I get to that point, I don't want to have any regrets that I missed out on the chance to play.

My sport in college is probably going to be basketball, but I've made up my mind that I want to play at the highest level of college competition I can. So if I get a better opportunity of a scholarship for playing American football than basketball, I'd play football. But most likely, it will be basketball.

In addition to being a top receiver in football and the leading scorer on the basketball team, six-foot four-inch [1.9 meters tall] David Foster is a class officer and an outstanding student.

When you've got a team doing well, everybody [at school] is so much more involved in everything. You have more kids wanting to come out for sports, you have more people coming to the games. It unites the community, and all that motivates us who are playing. People may not get quite as excited if you're not winning, but even then, it's still fun.

The other thing I'm sure of is that being in sports makes me a better student. If you don't have good enough grades, you don't get to play. I know during a sports season, I've got less time for studying, but what winds up happening is that I work harder on my studies. I'm more focused on just what I have to do, and when I have to get everything done. I know I've got to have more drive in my studies than I might at other times of the year. I almost always get better grades then. So sports really help me academically.

David Foster, 17, grade 11, Sweet Grass County High School, Big Timber, Montana [http://www.sweetgrasscounty.com/sghs]

SCHOOL AT HOME

Chuck Offenburger

Sam and Stan Scoma represent a small but growing trend in the United States. They have completed almost all their elementary and secondary courses by studying at home, just as an older sister and brother did before them. (Typically, home school programs are organized by parents in cooperation with state and local government authorities and with the help of national organizations such as the National Home Education Network [www.nhen.org].) By studying at their own pace, Sam and Stan say they learned a lot about self-discipline and feel they received an outstanding education. Along the way, they participated in sports, music, and church activities. Excellent students in math and science, they have won scholarships to begin their higher education at a two-year community college in their hometown of Columbia, South Carolina, and are thinking about pursuing careers in engineering.

Journalist Chuck Offenburger writes from Simple Serenity Farm near the tiny town of Cooper, Iowa, population 30. He has been covering the changing face of America for 40 years and can be reached by e-mail at chuck@Offenburger.com. For more information on home schooling, see the Internet Resources section at the end of this publication.

Twin brothers Sam and Stan Scoma, who graduated from high school this year in Columbia, South Carolina, did most of their academic work at home. They learned at their own pace; when things came easy, they would go faster, and when they were difficult, they would slow down. When some topic seemed ripe for a "classroom discussion," they would conduct it between themselves. They had some unusual teachers, like the local politician who taught them public speaking. And they were taught a wide variety of other subjects by their parents, Steve and Sandy Scoma, and by each other, too.

The Scoma twins were "home schoolers," part of a small but growing trend in the United States of parents educating their own children in their homes. In Columbia, a metropolitan area with a population of 516,000, it is estimated that 2,000 students are being home schooled each year, with about 120 of those graduating from high school each spring.

Steve Scoma

Sam writes out one of his assignments in the living room.

Home schooling has grown over the past 20 years or so for a variety of reasons. Some families choose it for religious reasons—for example, to make sure that lessons are consistent with their religious teachings or to teach religious ethics. Others do it believing their children will learn better at home than they would in a classroom full of students. Others make the decision for logistical reasons, such as living so far from schools that daily trips would be difficult.

Two Special Lessons

The Scoma boys, now 18, look back on doing their entire elementary and secondary education at home and say they have learned a lot. But two special lessons stand out: learning how to learn and self-discipline.

"One of the things I like best about home schooling is you learn how to teach yourself," said Sam. "You can go to your parents for help, if you don't understand something, but you learn how to do research and find answers yourself."

Stan said most home schooled students go through a stage where "there's a temptation to let the work slide. But you reach a point where you realize that either you're going to push yourself and succeed in life, or you're not going to do what's required and you're going to fail in life. We learned enough about self-discipline that, by this last year or two, not doing the work hasn't really been a temptation for us anymore."

Sam said he always liked the idea that "there was no set schedule unless we wanted one. Our parents didn't mind if we wanted to sleep in, as long as we got our

Steve Scoma

Stan studies at the kitchen table.

work done." Which they did. And they excelled.

Indeed, they graduated with grade point averages of 3.9 and above, on a 4.0 grading scale, more than meeting the requirements of the South Carolina Independent Home School Association. That agency monitors and measures the progress of home school students and issues their diplomas.

The Scomas' academic standing is so strong that they won full scholarships that will pay their way at Midlands Technical College, a two-year community college in Columbia. Eventually they plan to get bachelor's degrees from the University of South Carolina.

Both loved taking mathematics and science courses. Sam thinks that might lead him into a career in space or aviation programs. Stan is fascinated by chemical engineering, and might go into research and development of medications.

Making the Decision

So why did the Scoma parents decide to home school their children?

Steve and Sandy Scoma were living in the Dallas, Texas, area when their two older children, daughter Stacy and son Steve Jr., reached school age.

"We started home schooling there, thinking we could give the kids a good start in schooling prior to putting them in a competitive classroom situation," said Steve Sr. He was working then in information technology. Sandy stayed at home to be their children's chief teacher. In 1990, they moved to South Carolina and became involved in the development and operation of an indoor sports arena. Sam and Stan have worked at the arena part time.

"When we moved to South Carolina, our reason for home schooling changed a little," Steve Sr. continued, noting that the public schools in general were considered to be weak. "Even though the school district we lived in did have pretty good schools, still, we felt that the test scores for kids in public education in South Carolina wouldn't be competitive with the scores for students coming out of schools in other areas of the United States. We might have considered sending them to private schools, which had better academic programs, but we couldn't afford that. So we chose to continue to home school them."

Stacy Scoma, now 26, and Steve Jr., now 24, went on from home schooling to graduate from the University of South Carolina. Stacy is now a kindergarten teacher, while Steve Jr. will be going to work in computer engineering.

Involvement in their church, the Christian Life Assembly of God, has been an important part of the Scomas' home school program. Sam and Stan have learned a great deal about other cultures during church-sponsored work trips they have taken to Mexico, India, Romania, and other countries. They have also benefited from the church's extensive music program. Stan is an excellent pianist. Sam also plays piano as well as guitar and bass. They are key members of the church's youth band and choir.

The boys are also talented athletes, and they have relied on community resources to get experience playing team sports.

Ready for the Future

They say they feel more than ready for the rigor of academic life in college.

"We have taken some higher-level math and science classes with other home school students," Stan said. "We've done all right in those, and actually, I'm really looking forward to having more group discussions in our college classes."

Both Sam and Stan say it's a great time now to be a young person. "I think our generation has the greatest opportunities ever to pick our career fields," said Stan. "There are opportunities galore. You can pretty much do whatever you want to do, and no one is limited because they're in some certain financial group or some ethnic group. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

FROM CENTRAL EUROPE TO NORTHERN OHIO

Robert Taylor

Louisa Fricke and Arne Schlegelmilch from Germany and Zuzana Oravcova from Slovakia spent their 11th grade year attending a public high school in Amherst, Ohio, with the help of the International Student Exchange organization. They sat down with author Robert Taylor to discuss their impressions and experiences in making friends in a new country, dealing with a different academic environment, and adjusting to America's automobile and fast-food culture, and their plans for the future.

Taylor has written three novels— The Innocent, All We Have Is Now, *and* Whose Eye Is on Which Sparrow?— *and is an affiliate scholar at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio.*

The International Student Exchange [www.internationalstudent.com] makes it possible for students around the world to attend schools in countries other than their own. During the 2004-2005 school year, three exchange students came to Amherst, Ohio, just west of Cleveland, to spend their 11th grade year at the Marion L. Steele High School. Louisa Fricke and Arne Schlegelmilch both came from Germany, Louisa from Hamburg and Arne from Bad Saarow, 30 miles east of Berlin. Zuzana Oravcova came from Okr. Presov, Slovakia.

Their stay in the United States was coordinated by Linda Petkovsek, who lives in Amherst and has been assisting the International Student Exchange for five years. After she received the names of this year's students, Petkovsek worked with the high school's associate principal, Tom Lehman, to get them enrolled for the year. She then matched each student up with a family in the Amherst area that had volunteered to give exchange students a temporary home.

At the end of the school year, several weeks before they would be leaving the United States, Louisa, Zuzana, and Arne met in the school library to talk about their lives and their experiences.

When asked what made her want to come and study in the United States, Louisa said, "To see how other people live—and because of English, to learn to speak the language better. I want to be an air traffic controller, and for that you have to speak English very well. Also, my sister and some friends had already come to the United States for a year, and they all had a good experience."

Arne Schlegelmilch

"I think it's the same thing with me," said Zuzana, "because my brother came five years ago, and he kind of told me how this exchange program works. Pretty much I came here because of the English, to learn to speak it better, but I also wanted to have the experience of a completely different kind of life, a different culture and people."

"I've had this dream for a long time," said Arne. "It developed maybe around the first grade. I had a friend who went to the U. S. as an exchange student, so I got acquainted with that pretty early. But I guess I wanted to come here, also, to have a new start. You come here, you don't know anybody. You have to start all over again. That makes it interesting, very interesting."

LIFE IN THE USA

As for what her life has been like in the United States, Louisa said, "I've been very busy the whole time. I made friends pretty quickly, first because I was playing football and then I was swimming. Other than that, the days have been pretty much the same. You come home, do your homework, eat, and sleep. And then the next day it's the same again."

Zuzana had a different experience at first. "At the beginning, when I came," she said, "I didn't really do anything except go to classes. I didn't play any sports, but then, I got involved in the art club and the chess club and was busy with that. Also, in the winter I was in the ski club. Now that I know more people, I enjoy going with friends to concerts or to movies, but it's not

Louisa Fricke

as easy to do that here as it is at home. In Slovakia, you can take your bicycle or a bus or a train to go anywhere, but here, if I want to go someplace, I have to make sure somebody is going to take me or pick me up, and it gets complicated."

Arne, an articulate, gregarious young man, surprised the group by saying, "Actually, I had some trouble making friends at first. I'm really extroverted, but that seemed to bother a lot of people around here, so I had trouble making friends. I had a lot of people that I talked to and they talked to me, but I didn't have people that I actually hung out with after school. It just takes a while. People are open here, they talk to you, but they won't, like, start hanging out with you immediately. Then, during the winter, I was playing indoor football, and that's when I started making friends. By now, I have a lot of friends. I really do."

Likes and Dislikes

Asked what she liked most about being in the United States, Louisa said, "In the fall, I liked going to American football games, because we just don't have that at home. We don't have this big 'school spirit' thing, and I really enjoy that. And I enjoy the way the teachers are here. They all are fun. Our school is much harder in Germany, I would say. Our teachers are still a little strict."

"For me, life seems simpler here than it is at home," said Zuzana. "People here don't seem to have problems. They don't look like they're really stressed. They really don't. Everyone sees everything so simple, and they're full of optimism. And the teachers do make education more fun. They make you like a class and try to make everything easier for you. It may be better sometimes if you get a stricter teacher, but still, I liked that part."

"I think I feel a little differently here," said Arne, "about the 'fun' classes. All of mine were really hard. My school at home required that I take all these advanced placement classes, so I took advanced English my first semester, and that kept me really busy. I had to work hard in class all the time. What I did like most was doing stuff on the weekends. The whole life here goes on during the weekends. As soon as school is out on Friday, everybody starts to be themselves. Outside of school, you actually get to know the people. Inside of school, there's a lot of 'want to be,' I believe. There's a lot of masking."

Zuzana Oravcova

What Louisa liked least was "the lack of freedom. In Germany, I don't have a curfew. On weekends, I have to be home at 12 o'clock here, but in Germany I'm coming home at 4 o'clock in the morning sometimes. Because we're allowed to. I think our parents trust us more."

"What's bothered me here," said Arne, "is that you can't always rely on people. I'm serious. People say, 'We might pick you up at maybe 5, 5:30,' and you call them at 6, and they say, 'Well, we're still over at this other place, but we are gonna come pick you up.' And they do, eventually. So, I guess what I really liked least was not being able to drive myself. That was a real problem. Everybody here drives, so they go places all the time that we can't go unless we can find a ride."

"What I didn't like," said Zuzana, "was the culture of the fast food. I had a hard time getting used to it when I came."

"I gained 35 pounds [16 kg]!" said Arne.

"I gained pounds, too," said Louisa. "I don't want to think about numbers, but I gained a lot."

"Luckily, I was able to lose most of it, though," said Arne, "finally."

Future Plans

Asked about her plans for the future, Louisa said, "Since I'd like to be an air traffic controller, I think I may want to go to college here in the United States. What I hear from people who are already going to college here is that it's not that hard."

"I'm hoping to be a journalist," said Zuzana, "or maybe on the radio. That's the reason I wanted to come here, to learn to speak English well. But I'll probably go to college in Slovakia. After that, I might go somewhere else to live, but I don't think it would be the U.S. I really like Europe a lot. Like I live close to Poland, and if I go a couple of miles away, I'm in a completely different country, with a different language and a different culture. You have to know other languages over there. That's what makes it more interesting."

"I've been thinking about what I'd like to do," said Arne, "while I've been here, and I've actually narrowed it down a lot. I'd like to either go into diplomacy or do

some kind of international business. I suppose I could go to college here in the U.S., but I also speak French, so I may want to go there for a while, to study and enjoy the French culture. Because that really does open a lot of doors, speaking other languages."

Visits from Friends

Asked if some of her friends in the U.S. might come to visit her in Germany, Louisa said, "I know that one of them will."

"Yeah," said Arne. "Her boyfriend here is going to fly back with her. He already has a ticket. She knows for sure."

"And I know for sure my host family will be coming to Europe," said Zuzana. "They have relatives in Macedonia, and they are going to go visit them. So we are going to try to meet each other in Europe. Also, one friend would like to visit me. She's already in college and has a good job, so she can come spend some time with me, like two weeks. It's not that expensive, my country, at all. Going to Germany, for example, is still very expensive, but going to my country is very cheap for everybody. It is. That could help people who want to come because they won't have to spend that much money."

"I know my host parents are going to come visit me," said Arne. "They've been to Germany before. And my best friend here is planning that, after he graduates, he's coming to Germany. I really hope this is going to work. That would be so good."

The bell for their next class rang, and all three got up to go. ■

LESSONS LEARNED
A Conversation with the Teacher of the Year

Michael J. Bandler

Gerald Hebert, AP/WWP

President Bush recognizes Jason Kamras as Teacher of the Year in a Rose Garden ceremony at the White House, April 20, 2005.

Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year, says he "decided early on" that he wanted to be a teacher. He has spent the past nine years teaching seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C., where he developed a digital photography program to make the students more aware of the world around them and to impart, in a practical way, lessons in mathematics.

"Teaching is very demanding work, very difficult," he tells associate editor Michael Bandler, "but the opportunity to work with my children is one I cherish every day." Bandler is a writer for the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.

He could have been a zoologist. That piqued his curiosity in the seventh grade.

He could have been a businessman, or an attorney, or a specialist in international affairs—other pursuits that he briefly considered at one time or another. But Jason Kamras chose teaching as a profession, and focused his attention, even while a college undergraduate, on the inner city.

"I decided early on," he explains, "that I wanted to be a part of the process of extending educational opportunity to all children, which I believe is their birthright."

And so he joined the faculty of an inner city school—one of the most daunting challenges of all on the American educational landscape—in the nation's capital, Washington, D.C.

In April 2005, Kamras achieved an enviable milestone when President Bush named him the 2005 National Teacher of the Year, the oldest and most prestigious award for elementary and secondary school educators in the United States. He is the 55th winner, and the first from a school in the District of Columbia.

Kamras, who is a mathematics teacher and instructional specialist (mentor to less experienced teachers) at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C., has taught sixth, seventh, and eighth graders during his nine-year tenure at Sousa. Among his innovations has been EXPOSE, a program in which students learn to use digital cameras, edit images, and work with digital video software to fashion autobiographical photo-essays about their lives and their communities.

Kamras was born in New York City but grew up from the age of three in Sacramento, California. He graduated from Rio Americano High School there, then attended Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey, where he received his undergraduate degree. He began teaching at Sousa under the auspices of Teach for America, a national, nonprofit organization that recruits top university graduates and asks them to commit themselves to teaching two years at inner city or rural schools in

National Teacher of the Year

Jason Kamras talks with two students in his classroom at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C.

mostly poor communities, where it often is difficult to fill teaching positions. When his two years ended, Kamras remained at Sousa, leaving only for the 1999-2000 academic year to earn a master's degree in education at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Recently, he discussed his career choice, and his perspectives on the evolution of his students.

Q: What are the opportunities facing adolescents—kids entering their teenage years—today in the United States?

A: They have so many extraordinary opportunities. What is amazing about this country is that when children have the opportunity to have an excellent education, they can go on to do almost anything they would like to do. So I think it's a very exciting time, that age, to know you have that future waiting for you.

Q: You began teaching, actually, when you were at Princeton.

A: Yes, I tutored elementary students in Trenton, New Jersey, and also individuals who were in a New Jersey correctional facility. I also spent a summer as a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer in Sacramento, California, where I grew up.

Q: And your mother taught.

A: Yes. She taught in New York City.

Q: And she was an inspiration for your career choice?

A: She was one of them. I recall her speaking quite fondly of her classes and her students, while I was growing up. But my own experiences teaching while in college, and in the summer as a VISTA volunteer, were very formative, in particular because I was working in underserved areas. The inequities in our public education system became very apparent to me. I actually believe those inequities are the greatest social challenge facing our country today.

Q: What drew you to the particular age group with whom you've been working for most of your career? You signed up first with Teach for America, and they usually place you in an underserved school. Did you have a choice of age group?

A: I was always drawn to secondary school education—[grades] seven to 12. This middle school opening became available to me. I thought about it for a while, whether I wanted to do it, rather than teaching in high school. I decided it's a really interesting age. My students are very much still children, but they're beginning to develop their true self-identity entering adulthood. So it's a very interesting time to work with children, and I really like being at that nexus point while I'm working with them.

Q: The key is growing up.

A: Absolutely.

Q: You know, it hasn't been that long since you were growing up—18 years or so. What's different today from the time of your own development?

A: It's a difficult question. When you look back at your own adolescence, you don't always have an accurate picture of how things actually were.

Q: Well, let's put it this way: Is this a good time for kids to grow up in America?

A: I think it's a challenging time. I don't think that adolescence is ever not challenging, and so I think my students do face a lot of difficulties in their lives, in particular. But they have an incredibly positive outlook on things, and are incredibly resilient. One of the most inspiring things about them is their positive view of the future.

Q: When you first walked into the classroom years back—kids being kids— they must have looked the new

guy over. How did you win their confidence, win them over to your side?

A: One of the things I suggest to new teachers as they enter the classroom is to demonstrate that they're really serious about the business of learning, and about setting a high standard for the students and the classroom. That immediately sets a tone of "we're really going to achieve this year." Children actually want that. They're thirsting for that push, for that order, for that notion that someone is going to lead them in a very systematic way. But then there are also all sorts of other things you can do—spending time with children outside the classroom, going to chess tournaments and basketball games, making home visits, getting to know the families, so that you do develop a sense of rapport and trust that you can then draw upon in the classroom.

Q: What are the challenges facing kids today in their daily lives and daily routines that are important for you, as a teacher, to keep in mind?

A: Like all children, they deal with the challenges of finding out who they are. That is the age when they begin to develop a sense of their own identity. I think that's an extremely turbulent time. That is the primary challenge for any adolescent in this country. If you ask any adult to look back, he or she can recall very difficult experiences while negotiating social changes and physical changes, and deciding which crowd to be part of. You mentioned the digital age. There are advantages and disadvantages to that. I'm still fairly young, but it does seem that the pace of our culture has accelerated a great deal—everything from news to the video games, everything along that spectrum. It's a less reflective culture, and that may be something our children are missing as they grow up.

Q: How do you try to get them to be more reflective?

A: You can textualize mathematics and make it relevant to their lives. It forces reflection [on] its application. It's true in non-academic areas, too—just talking with them, taking the time to listen, and slow down and have a conversation.

Q: Talk for a moment about the role of parents, in terms of school and academics. How do you involve them in the lives of their kids?

A: It starts with phone calls and letters home, home visits, meeting family members, sitting down and spending some time, having parents come into class and participate, making myself available before and after school to discuss anything that's going on with their child, really making every possible effort to establish those lines of communication. It's crucial for parents or guardians to be involved. We actually need to do more to make schools welcoming for them.

Q: Tell me about the program you've initiated, EXPOSE. I know that during your year at Harvard, you conceived educational ideas like that one.

A: EXPOSE is a digital photography program for the seventh- and eighth-grade students in my school. The genesis was, first, that I had always loved photography and wanted to share that with my students. At the same time, when I came to the school, I was struck by two phenomena: one, that most people living in the Washington region did not know very much about my children, other than what they would read in the newspaper; and two, my students, for a variety of reasons, didn't really have the chance to take advantage of all the opportunities in the city. I wanted to create some way to bring these two worlds together. So I thought photography would be a good way to do that. We'd take the students on field trips so they got to see more of the city, and we also had the students—using digital photography—create autobiographical photo essays that they then shared with the larger public. So, through these two mechanisms, there was an exchange across the city.

It also was a great way to teach math. When you talk about angle of view, it's geometry. Shutter speeds are fractional comparisons. Pixels per inch are ratios. We started with black-and-white film, and now we're all digital. There also was a double math initiative. I came to the conclusion that to really push achievement, we needed to double the amount of instructional time for mathematics. So I proposed that to my principal, and we worked out a system whereby every student has two math classes a day. There are two separate courses being taught, but all students take both of those courses—the idea being that each teacher can slow down and focus on a smaller number of objectives and thereby really get much more in depth. And student retention goes up.

Q: Talk for a minute about some of the things you learned at Harvard while pursuing your master's degree.

A: The math program came out of that experience. I also did some work with educational software design, and I was able to integrate that into some of my photography programs, which made them a little richer. I also did some work on differentiation of instruction, and was able to use that in my classroom as well.

Q: Let's go back, for a minute, to what influenced your choice of an inner-city school.

A: I'm still in the school in which I taught during Teach for America. I believe that education is the cornerstone of opportunity in this country, and there are too many children, particularly from low-income communities, who do not have access to an excellent education and are therefore being denied opportunity. So I decided early on that I wanted to be a part of this process of extending that opportunity to all children, which I believe is their birthright.

Q: How do you spot a child in crisis when it isn't immediately or overtly discernible?

A: I think when you spend enough time with children, you develop a sense of what their normal operating equilibrium is. And then you can begin to tell when they're deviating from that—either up or down. It's different for every child; what might be a signal for one is completely benign for somebody else. So after you spend that time and develop that rapport, you begin to develop a keen awareness of when something doesn't seem right.

Q: Can you pinpoint an example?

A: I have a student I'm very close with who was in my first sixth-grade class in 1996. As a fresh teacher that year, I was really challenged by him. He was often, as they say in education, "off-task." And I had great difficulty handling that. But I realized, after talking with him, that I wasn't challenging him enough. So I started working with him after school, to develop a rapport. We played chess, and he actually would routinely defeat me. By no means am I a great chess player—but he was 11 years old! We continued to work together throughout sixth grade. I didn't teach him in seventh or eighth grade, but we continued to work after school, and I developed a good relationship with his mother as well. He ended up as valedictorian of the school, and I continued working with him throughout high school. He just finished his sophomore year at Morehouse College in Atlanta [Georgia]. He's an electrical engineering major, and he's thinking about doing a joint master's [degree] program with the Columbia University School of Engineering [in New York City].

Q: On balance, after working nearly a decade in education, do America's kids still fill you with a sense of wonder regarding possibilities?

A: Absolutely! Absolutely! Unequivocally. Teaching is very demanding work, very difficult, but the opportunity to work with my children is one I cherish every day. They are incredibly bright, incredibly dynamic, and creative, and resilient. There's honestly no group of people I'd rather get up in the morning to see every day. ■

The opinions expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

SCORING YOUNG
As an Athlete and a Student

Michael J. Bandler

Gerald Herbert, AP/WWP

Freddy Adu, in his first professional game with D.C. United on April 3, 2004.

International football phenomenon Freddy Adu says neighborhood friends and classmates helped him adapt to life in the United States when he emigrated from Ghana with his family at the age of eight, and the guidance of his mother kept him focused on the value of education when a professional contract was offered to him prematurely.

Adu took a break from workouts with his D.C. United team in Washington, D.C., to talk about his life and accomplishments with Michael J. Bandler, a writer with the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.

Freddy Adu, it is safe to say, is not your average American teenager. Born in the port city of Tema, Ghana, thousands of trans-Atlantic miles from his current home near Washington, D.C., Freddy has become a national celebrity as the United States' youngest professional football player.

In 1997, when Freddy was eight, his family won a green-card lottery, entitling the Adus to take up residency in the United States. (Under the Diversity Lottery Visa program, the United States awards 50,000 permanent-resident visas annually to individuals applying from countries that historically have low levels of immigration to the United States.) Freddy, his younger brother Fro, and his mother and father moved to the Washington, D.C., suburbs. (His father left the family soon afterward.)

Freddy's mother was determined to make a better life for her sons and to see that they got the best education possible. At school, Freddy's classmates quickly discovered that this newcomer from Africa was a natural athlete. Before long, he joined a local team. His instincts, the coach marveled, were "beyond imagining."

At the age of 10, Freddy traveled to Italy to participate in a football tournament for athletes under the age of 14, playing for a team sponsored by a development program of the U.S. Olympic Committee. The squad won the overall competition, and Freddy was named "most valuable player."

That was the beginning. Soon the clamoring began for Freddy to turn professional. But his mother, who was working two shifts in stores at the time, resisted—despite the prospect of achieving financial security for the family. When Freddy turned 13, she relented, however, and permitted him to join the U.S. Soccer Federation's Under-17 Residency Program in Florida, with the understanding that he would be able to continue his schooling while developing his athletic skills. Freddy was able to train with the top teenage football players in the nation, and to complete high school at an accelerated pace.

Steve Nesius, AP/WWP

Freddy takes a break during practice with the U.S. Under-17 Men's National Team, March 18, 2003.

Then, in January 2004, he joined D.C. United, one of Major League Soccer's professional teams. A few months later, before reaching his 15th birthday, Freddy received his high school diploma. When he took the field with his new team in June 2004 to inaugurate his professional athletic career, he was the youngest athlete to play for a professional U.S. team in any major sport in more than a century.

Today, at 16, Freddy is a stalwart of his team. The precocious teenager recently discussed his experiences coming to a new country and the lessons he has learned.

Q: It isn't easy to adapt to a new country, a new city, a new home, or a new school. How did you adjust?

A: Friends. It was friends. When I started school, my classmates accepted me right away, and helped me through everything. I didn't know the language [English] that well—and the slang—but they helped me. It made everything easier. I looked forward to going to school. I will say that when I first came here, I hated the weather. It was cold! And I was from Africa, where it's always warm! Here, it was snowing. You didn't see any kids in the streets playing, like you would in Ghana. But my friends helped me through it. They came over, picked me up, and took me to their houses, where we had a lot of fun.

Q: You attended a public school, in the Washington suburbs. How did that work out?

A: The kids were very friendly. In fact, it was more than that. They were intrigued by me. Here comes a kid from Africa—they weren't used to that. They were drawn to me, and asked a lot of questions. That definitely helped my relationship with them.

Q: So it was a learning experience on both sides.

A: Actually, they told me that in the third grade they had to do a project on Ghana.

Q: And you came in which grade?

A: Fourth.

Q: What about sports? How did you first become part of the team, so to speak?

A: The same friends who were asking me all the questions about Africa and Ghana were the ones who played football at recess. I just jumped in and started playing. They thought I was really good. One of them went home and told his parents about me. They contacted my parents and asked me to "guest-play" for their team, in a tournament. I wound up scoring every single goal, and we ended up winning the tournament. The guy who was overseeing the tournament was the coach of an "under 11" [years-old] team, the Potomac Cougars [in the suburbs of Washington]. He wanted me to join, and contacted my mom. At that time, you had to pay $250 to join, but he waived the fee. He picked me up each day for training and practice.

Q: How did you come to play in Italy?

A: The best players from the East Coast teams [in the United States] were brought together to form a team. We went to a camp, and from the camp we went to Italy to represent the United States in an international tournament. It was for boys under 14. I was 10 years old.

Q: And that's where someone spotted you as a future talent?

A: My mom didn't want me to go to Italy. She thought I'd be lost. At that time, she was working two jobs—as a

sales clerk in two department stores. I don't know why she didn't jump all over the money I was offered. But that just tells you a lot about my mom. She had a lot of faith in me. [It turns out she made the right decision. Freddy's team won the tournament, and he was named "most valuable player." Afterward, Italian professional football authorities offered him a generous contract to play in their system, but his mother would not permit him to accept.]

Q: I would think sports teaches you how to cope in life, and how to achieve.

A: Yes. You learn a lot just being in sports. First of all, it helps you make friends. Also, besides being a way of getting a scholarship for schooling, it also teaches you how to deal with a lot of people in a lot of different situations at the same time. Things don't come easily when you play sports. There might be certain times when your team is down and you've got to find a way to win, a way to succeed. All these little things you learn also help you find a way to succeed in life. That's the way I see it.

Q: Tell me about one or two of the challenges that came along, things you felt you really had to work on.

A: Obviously, playing sports and going to classes at school at the same time is not easy.

Q: You've accelerated your studies.

A: Exactly. But it's not easy. It gets to a point where you say, "Man, I can't just focus on playing sports all the time." You've also got to focus on doing your schoolwork. It's really hard to balance these, real hard. But you know, when you have to go to training, you go. You do your thing. After training, you don't think about sports. You focus on your schoolwork. In the long run, it takes you a long way.

Q: Talk for a minute about being five or 10 years younger than the people with whom you're dealing—players, coaches, managers. Tell me about the respect you've been shown.

A: You know what? You come in, you're 14 years old, you haven't proved yourself, you haven't done anything, and yet you've got all this media hoopla around you. It was definitely a learning experience. I had to keep my mouth shut and work hard at practice, do all my "rookie duties"—which meant carrying the balls, the water coolers, all that stuff —and work hard for the team. As time went on, I got a lot of respect for what I said in interviews, talking about the team and how I wanted to do whatever it takes to help it. Guys read this stuff, and they're like, "Wow! This kid's really here for business! He's not here to mess around!" Over time, they finally take a liking to you, and they respect you a lot more. Also, when you step out there on the field and you produce, you earn a lot more respect from the guys, too.

Q: With high school completed, and lots of football in the immediate future, what are your goals?

A: Getting my college degree, obviously. It's important to me, and it's very important to my mom. I want to do it for her—and obviously, for myself. I'm 16 now. I'm going to wait until I'm around 18 to begin college, and then figure out everything.

Q: You mean how to balance sports with higher education.

A: Exactly.

Q: Your team here in Washington, D.C. United, is very active in the local community. Are you taking part in that?

A: Oh, yes. People look up to us, and the more successful you are, the more you've got to help the community, because if it weren't for the community, you wouldn't be here in the first place.

Q: What would be an appropriate message to present to teenagers like yourself—around the world—about working toward a goal or a dream?

A: I would say that it's definitely not going to be easy to achieve your goal. There are going to be a lot of distractions. You're going to go through a lot. There'll be days when you'll say, "Man, I can't do this, I don't want to go through this." But you know what? You've got to fight through that. And you've got to listen to the most important people around you. They're always going to help you out and be there for you. Just stick to it, man. Just stick to it—and you'll get there one day. ■

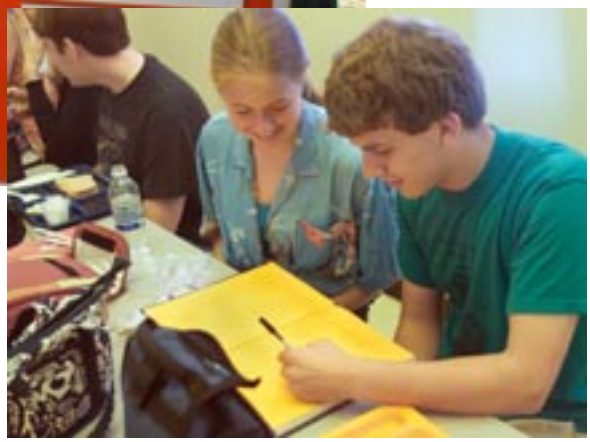
RITE OF PASSAGE

Images from graduation week at a high school in the state of Virginia reflect activities common to high schools throughout the United States.

Photographs by Barry Fitzgerald

More than 100 students graduated on June 17, 2004, from James Monroe High School in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The school is named for James Monroe, the fifth U.S. president (1817-1825), who practiced law in Fredericksburg, a town founded in 1728 in colonial America.

Graduation week brings with it a mix of feelings and emotions for those who are about to depart school. Nervousness over final exam results, elation that the pressure of studies is just about over, sadness at pending separations from close friends, and excitement about what is coming next—whether it be university studies, technical training, a job, military service, or some other pursuit.



Students, walking through a hallway above, typically dress casually during the final days of the school year.

The orange sign in front of the school cites the state championships that the school's athletic teams have won over the past four decades. The pride of 2005, however, was the James Monroe team of scholars that won Virginia's Scholastic Bowl, a competition of knowledge among students from schools throughout the state.

The students at right, seated in the school cafeteria, are engaging in a typical year-end ritual, writing and signing comments—sometimes jocular, sometimes sentimental—in each other's copy of the school yearbook.

As classes come to a close, a flurry of activity …

The students immediately above anxiously peruse a list posted on the administration office window with the names of those who passed auditions to perform next school year with the Monroe Singers, a select school choir.

At top, students in a business class complete final assignments. Inset is a photo of Ghizal Miri, a 12th grade student from Afghanistan, talking with a fellow student at a computer in the school library. Ghizal was recognized as top student in the Virginia and U.S. Government history course.

At right, a student begins removing her books and personal items from her locker; the inside door is festooned with photos of friends and family members.

… marks the final days of the school year.

Above, students paint letters for a sign announcing a year-end talent show. At left and underneath, the school band, directed by Ryan Addair, rehearses music it will play at the graduation ceremony.

Below, on Saturday morning, graduates-to-be gather in Maury Field, the school's athletic grounds, to rehearse graduation exercises that will take place that evening. Student Antoinne Bowen pretends to receive his diploma from school principal Daryl Chesley.

Ceremony and celebration conclude four years of achievement.

Above, two friends share a laugh before lining up to march onto the stadium field as assembled guests at right wait with anticipation for graduation ceremonies to begin.
Below, principal Chesley announces the names of the class's top students, who stand facing the audience of other graduates, friends, and family members.

Graduating James Monroe seniors listen as Class valedictorian and Scholastic Bowl team captain Huyen Nguyen displays the suitcase his parents carried when they emigrated from Vietnam in 1986. On this evening, it held mementos he used in reviewing his experience at James Monroe, ranging from the frivolous - a milk carton and a bottle of ketchup - to the serious - a set of keys ("Remember that you all have the key to releasing the imprisoned minds of … people that lack the freedoms we enjoy.") and a Bible ("I'm not a Christian, but I think this book represents the morality, values, and faith, regardless of religion, in all of us.").

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Selected Readings about Teenage Life in America

Baranek, Tony. "Hunger on Hold." *U.S. Society and Values: Sports in America,* vol. 8, no. 2, December 2003, pp. 29-31. http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1203/ijse/baranek.htm

Bissinger, W.G. (Buzz). *Saturday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004.

Graff, Harvey J. *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1995.

Greenberg, Anna. *OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era.* New York: Reboot, [2005] 51 pp. http://www.rebooters.net/poll.html [Index] http://www.rebooters.net/poll/rebootpoll.pdf [PDF 1.12 MB]

Hurst, Marianne D. "Leading the Way: Student-Run Foundations across the Country Are Empowering a New Generation of Teenagers to Play Larger Roles in their Schools and Communities." *Education Week,* vol. 24, no. 32, 20 April 2005, pp. 24-27.

Johnson, Jean, Duffett, Ann et al. *Life after High School: Young People Talk about Their Hopes and Prospects.* New York: Public Agenda, 2005. http://www.publicagenda.com/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=31

Mortimer, Jeylan T. *Working and Growing Up in America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

National Center for Education Statistics. *1.1 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2003.* Issue Brief NCES 2004-115. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, NCES, July 2004. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004115 (Index) http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004115_se.pdf (PDF 65 KB)

Offenburger, Chuck. "Pride on the Prairie." *U.S. Society and Values: Sports in America,* vol. 8, no. 2, December 2003, pp. 22-25. http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1203/ijse/offenburger.htm

Sanders, Rickie and Mattson, Mark T. *Growing Up in America: An Atlas of Youth in the USA.* New York: Macmillan, 1998.

Smith, Christian with Denton, Melinda Lundquist. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

"The United States in 2005: Who We Are Today." *eJournalUSA: Society and Values,* vol. 9, no. 2, December 2004, entire issue. http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1204/ijse/ijse1204.htm

Wilensky, Rona. "College Is Not for Everyone; Commentary." *Education Week,* vol. 24, no. 32, 20 April 2005, p. 28.

Autobiographies and Memoirs

Alvord, Lori Arviso and Van Pelt, Elizabeth Cohen. *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear.* New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

Asgedom, Mawi. *Of Beetles and Angels: A True Story of the American Dream.* Chicago, IL: Megadee Books, 2001.

Bogues, Tyrone (Muggsy). *In the Land of the Giants: My Life in Basketball.* New York: Little, Brown, 1994.

Bradley, Shawn. "My Own Words: On Being Different." *eJournalUSA: Global Issues — Growing Up Healthy,* vol. 10, no. 1, January 2005, pp. 14-15. http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0105/ijge/bradley.htm

Cary, Lorene. *Black Ice.* New York: Knopf, 1991.

Dumas, Firoozeh. *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America.* New York: Villard, 2003.

Hamm, Mia. "My Own Words: On Self-Esteem and Sports." *eJournalUSA: Global Issues — Growing Up Healthy,* vol. 10, no. 1, January 2005, pp. 7-8. http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0105/ijge/hamm.htm

Lewis, Marvin. "My Own Words: On Finding Your Way." *eJournalUSA: Global Issues — Growing Up Healthy,* vol. 10, no. 1, January 2005, p. 20.
http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0105/ijge/lewis.htm

Paulsen, Gary. *Guts: The True Story Behind Hatchet and the Brian Books.* New York: Delacorte Press, 2001.

Quintanilla, Eliseo. "My Own Words: On Growing Up Fast." *eJournalUSA: Global Issues — Growing Up Healthy,* vol. 10, no. 1, January 2005, p. 24.
http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0105/ijge/quintanilla.htm

Salzman, Mark. *Lost in Place: Growing Up Absurd in Suburbia.* New York: Random House, 1996.

Shreve, Susan Richards. *Dream Me Home Safely: Writers on Growing Up in America.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Wideman, John Edgar. "Reflections: Urban Hoop." *U.S. Society and Values: Sports in America,* vol. 8, no. 2, December 2003, pp. 26-28.
http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1203/ijse/wideman.htm

The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and availability of the resources from other agencies and organizations listed above. All Internet links were active as of July 2005.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Selected Web Sites on Teenage Life in the United States

IAFS-USA: Intercultural Student Exchange Programs
http://usa.afs.org/

America's Promise — The Alliance for Youth
http://www.americaspromise.org/

ASNE: High School Journalism (American Society of Newspaper Editors)
http://www.highschooljournalism.org/

D.C. United (Professional Football Team)
http://dcunited.mlsnet.com/MLS/dcu/index.jsp

Education Commission of the States: Homeschooling
http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issues.asp

Helping America's Youth
http://www.whitehouse.gov/firstlady/helping-youth.html

High School Hub: The Online Learning Center for High School Students
http://www.highschoolhub.org/hub/hub.cfm

InfoPlease Almanac: Sports
http://www.infoplease.com/sports.html

International Student Exchange and Study Abroad Resource Center
http://www.internationalstudent.com/

Job Interview Strategies for Teens
Quintessential Careers
http://www.quintcareers.com/teen_job_strategies.html

Merlyn's Pen: Fiction, Essays and Poems by America's Teens
http://www.merlynspen.org/contentmgr/showdetails.php/id/29624/search/true

National Association of Teachers of Singing, Inc.
http://www.nats.org/

National Home Education Network
http://www.nhen.org/

National Teacher of the Year
Council of Chief State School Officers
http://www.ccsso.org/projects/national_teacher_of_the_year/

Peterson's Summer Opportunities for Kids & Teenagers
www.petersons.com/summerop/ssector.html

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
http://www.fitness.gov/

Private Schools Database
National Center for Education Statistics
http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/privateschoolsearch/

Public Schools Database
National Center for Education Statistics
http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/

Students Against Violence Everywhere
http://www.nationalsave.org/

Teenreads.com
http://www.teenreads.com/index.asp

TeenSpace: Internet Public Library for Teens
http://www.ipl.org/div/teen/
Includes sections on Sports, Entertainment, and Arts; Clubs and Organizations; Money and Work; and Technology.

U.S. Department of Education
Especially for Students
http://www.ed.gov/students/landing.jhtml

U.S. Department of Labor
Youth and Labor: Resources for Young Workers
http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/youthlabor/StudentWorkers.htm#doltopics

U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Youth Programs Division
http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/

U.S. International Football
http://www.ussoccer.com//

USA Roller Sports: Figure Skating
http://www.usarollersports.org/vnews/display.v/SEC/FIGURE+SKATING

Voice of America
America's Global College Forum
Profiles of Foreign Students at U.S. Colleges
http://www.voanews.com/english/AmericanLife/global_college_forum.cfm

Walt Whitman Archive
http://www.whitmanarchive.org/

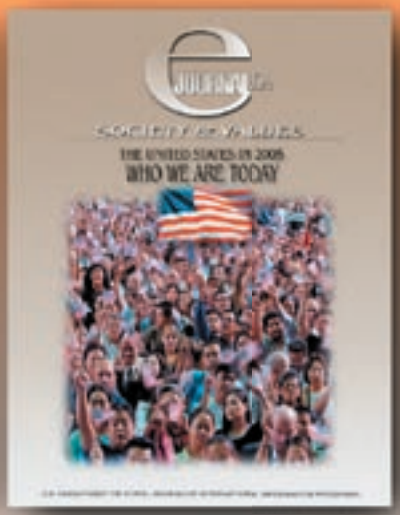
What Kids Can Do: Voices and Work from the Next Generation
http://www.whatkidscando.org/index.asp

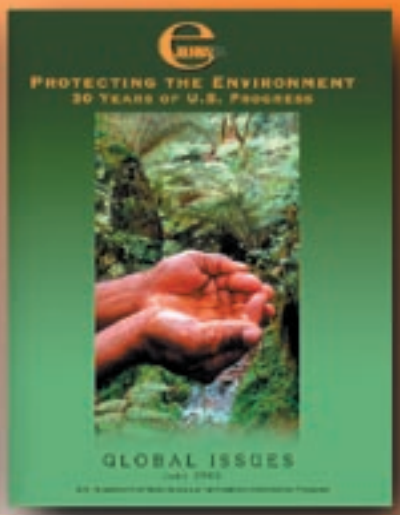
Youth for Understanding USA
http://www.yfu-usa.org/

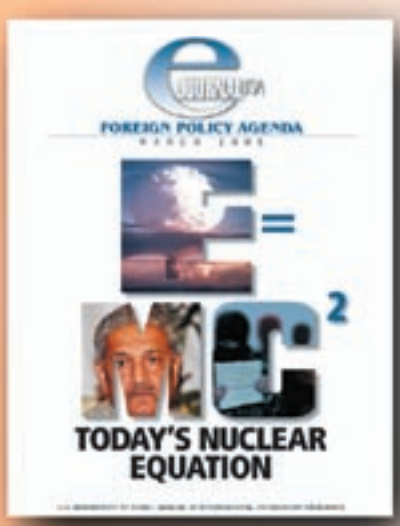
Youth Service America
http://www.ysa.org/

Youth Radio
http://www.youthradio.org/index.shtml

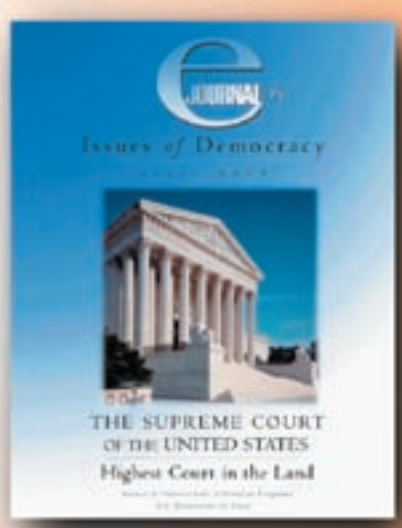
The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and availability of the resources listed above, all of which were active as of July 2005.







A
NEW JOURNAL
APPEARS EACH
MONTH
IN DIFFERENT
LANGUAGE
VERSIONS



REVIEW THE FULL LISTING OF TITLES AT
http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/journals.htm