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FEATURED

Animal health, mental health among Harmony senior passion projects

By Brittani Howell The Herald-Times May 30, 2019



For her senior project for Harmony School, Mary Stewart created a self-published book of interviews and original illustrations about mental health. Stewart plans to attend the Pratt Institute in the fall. (Mary Stewart / Courtesy drawing)

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With the freedom to choose their topics of study for themselves, Harmony School students can go a little wild in their senior projects.

That's especially true for Serenity Pell. Curious about the way people rescue and rehabilitate animals, Pell visited three different animal care centers in two states.

"I basically wanted to get a better idea of how rescue worked for different types of animals," wild and domesticated, Pell said.

As a volunteer at the Exotic Feline Rescue Center, a big cat rescue facility in Center Point, Pell welcomed visitors to the Indiana center and told them what they would be seeing on their tour. Many of the cats have been rescued from homes where people tried to keep them as pets — not a wise decision.

"You have to declaw them so they don't end up tearing things up, and due to them being declawed, now a lot of them have arthritis," he said. If you think getting your dog to take medication is hard, try giving it to a reluctant tiger or lion.

"It's really sad, and I wish it wasn't a thing, but now I'm glad I know about it because I can help spread the word," Pell said.

Volunteers can work their way up to leading tours and eventually becoming keepers who work directly with the cats. Pell was able to lead tours but moved to Arizona midway through the school year — where he finished his senior year remotely — and studied two more centers.

At the Pet Sanctuary Circle L Ranch, Pell worked with previously owned pets and farm animals, including goats, pigs, cats and dogs. Many of them had come from abusive situations and were skittish around people.

"Part of our job is to try to make them comfortable around us," with the goal of making them adoptable, Pell said.

It was the exact opposite goal of the Southwest Wildlife Conservation Center, which rescues wild animals from captivity and tries to release them back into the wild. Volunteers have to be highly trained, and there's a long waitlist, so Pell toured the facility and interviewed the center's manager in lieu of volunteering.

He learned about the limited contact keepers have with the rescued animals, and tactics used — such as mimic hunting and creating "foster parent" situations with animals of the same species — to help them stay wild. The goal is to release the animal back to the wild, but if it comes to the center injured or too accustomed to humans, sometimes that isn't possible. Those animals end up staying at a rescue facility for the rest of their lives.

"The three places I went all have the same goal," Pell said. "They just wanted them to have really good lives, and be taken care of," whether that was through human care or in the wild.

He rounded out his project with a 45-minute presentation to his peers at Harmony School.

Back in Arizona, he plans to continue volunteering at the pet sanctuary. He doesn't quite know what career he wants to pursue yet, but he knows he wants to continue working with animals, perhaps as a trainer for service animals.

Fellow senior Mary Stewart took a decidedly different approach for her senior project. She created, printed and self-published an illustrated book about mental health awareness. The book, "Wider than the Sky," contains 10 interviews with people who have been diagnosed with some kind of mental illness. Stewart conducted the interviews herself, transcribed and edited them, and created original drawings to accompany them.

She was inspired by "101 Artists to Listen to Before You Die," a graphic novel memoir by Ricardo Cavolo.

"I just loved how his book looked, and I just fell in love with the style of it," said Stewart, a great art-lover and longtime illustrator.

She had also been thinking a lot about mental health and the stigma surrounding it, partly because she has friends who deal with mental illness every day. She was curious to learn more about mental health and psychology.

"When I was going into this project, I was like, 'I'm going to combine two things I like,'" she said. "Art was the thing I knew a lot about; psychology was the thing I needed to learn about."

She attended a psychology class once a week at Indiana University to gain basic foundational knowledge of the subject. Through connections in the psych department, she was able to find 25 willing candidates, of various ages and backgrounds, to interview for her book. She talked to them over Skype or Discord and recorded the conversations. Then she went back through and picked her favorites.

The concept of mental health can be a big, vague idea people can't always get their minds around, Stewart said. She wanted to show the real ways mental illness affected real people. Even she was surprised by what she learned, and what people shared with her. In the interviews, people opened up about their bipolar diagnoses, panic attacks, depression and eating disorders.

"When I talked about humanizing psychology, I thought I was going to get some good stories. I never expected to meet all the great people I did," she said.

She created original drawings to accompany the interviews.

"I would have a snippet of text from the book that I thought could pair well with a visual."

When a quote sparked an idea for her, she would doodle ideas into her sketchbook until she latched onto something she liked. She refined ideas and came to final illustrations using apps and drawing tools on her iPad.

Stewart plans to attend the Pratt Institute in New York City to study communications design and thinks the experience of completing the book will carry forward in her studies. She's still curious about the intersection of art and psychology.

"I'm sure it's going to show up in my work again," she said.

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Other Harmony School 2019 Senior Projects

Ysabel Cluver focused on soccer for her senior project: in particular, the reasons for its success as a sport for athletes of all abilities. Her essential question was, "What are the elements in soccer that make it an inclusive sport for everyone?" Ysabel will be attending Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida, in the fall.

Yuyang (Nick) Gao built a computer game that helps students study. His essential questions were: "How do humans remember things and how can that process be made it easier?" and "What skills or programming language is required to build a relatively simple program?" Nick will be attending Indiana University in the fall.

Marcellus "Mars" Jarvis combined the art of videography and cooking to create five episodes of a self-produced cooking show for his project. His success answered his essential question: "Is it possible to create high quality video productions with a limited crew and a shoestring budget?" After high school, Marcellus will attend the School of the Art Institute Chicago to study film media.

Zoë Johnson created three zines for her senior project, exploring the history and nature of sex education. Zoë's essential questions were "Is it possible to create any type of sexual education media that is both comfortable, informational and informative, that young adults and young children would read and enjoy? How do you de-stigmatize sex and make it an open conversation rather than a taboo topic? And what will be the obstacles and limitations as a young person writing about sexual education and all of its complexities? Will it be harder or easier to write about this topic as a relatively inexperienced young adult rather than an adult who is versed on the topic, along with being more or less comfortable with their sexuality?" In the fall, she will be attending Antioch College in Ohio, where her studies may include sexuality and women in film.

Griffin Loyal wrote, recorded, and produced a full length concept album, consisting of 10 songs, all varying in style, instrumentation and emotional feel. His essential question was, "Can someone with a basic knowledge of writing, recording and production, write and record a full-length album of professional quality in a limited amount of time?" After high school, Griffin plans on studying audio engineering at Indiana University.

Lauren May converted an Astro passenger van into a mobile living space, in order to travel cross-country to visit a variety of religious communities in search of answers to her essential questions. Those questions included: "What is the impact of religion on a child's life? How are they taught religion? How do communities keep young people involved in religion? And why have we seen a decline in organized religion?" Lauren will be attending Manchester University in the fall of 2020.

Ian McKean learned the basics of the coding language, C#, and Unity, a video game engine, in order to create a public beta of a new video game. His essential question was, "With only a little prior experience and a love of a very niche genre, is it possible for someone to create a public beta of a video game based in another genre that is not merely playable, but at least a little fun?" Ian will be studying Theoretical Mathematics at Indiana University this fall.

Abel Patch researched, shot, edited and produced a film documentary about the history of the two intentional communities that were established in the Indiana town of New Harmony during the 19th century for his project. His essential questions were: "What lessons do these Utopian societies of old still have to teach us in the modern age?" And "Can a documentary on this topic be of interest to more than a specialist audience?" Abel has been offered a place at Earlham College following high school.

Chonghe (Sam) Zhang explored the benefits and challenges of an intermittent fasting diet for his senior project. His essential questions were: "How does intermittent fasting affect people and how does it relate to general ideas about nutrition, exercise and health? What is the expert opinion and the popular opinion of this diet, particularly among American and Chinese youth?" After high school, Sam will study statistics at the University of Minnesota.

Jie (Alison) Zhan studied the American-Chinese catering industry. Her essential questions were: "What is the history of Chinese food in the United States and why are Chinese restaurants so popular in the United States?" And "What skills go into successfully operating an American Chinese restaurant, including the differences between "authentic" Chinese food and American Chinese food?" Alison intends to study business at college after high school.

Ziyi (Elsa) Ren studied animal enrichment, shelter environment and animal health care for her project. Her essential questions were "To provide animals with a healthier diet and a better living environment, what basic professional knowledge do we need? Can we learn and use the suggestions offered by professionals to create better lives for our pets?" Elsa will be attending Indiana University in the fall.

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