



PROGRAM YEAR 2026

threesixty

JOURNALISM

NEWS AND STORYTELLING FROM MINNESOTA YOUTH

INSIDE

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Additional reporting by Janya Dieringer, Johnson Senior High School; Alala Scroggins, Wayzata High School; and Christopher Rosales, Roosevelt High School

ABOUT THREESIXTY

ThreeSixty Journalism equips young Minnesotans to be sense makers, truth tellers, and bridge builders for an equitable society through multimedia journalism.

We strive for a Minnesota where every young person has access to a journalism education and where young people shape representative news media and civically connected communities.

Founded in 1971 to advance racial equity in journalism, ThreeSixty Journalism's modern history began at the University of St. Thomas in 2001. [Learn more at threesixty.stthomas.edu](https://threesixty.stthomas.edu)

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KENZIE O'KEEFE



ThreeSixty Community,

Every generation inherits the responsibility of sustaining democracy. At ThreeSixty Journalism, our contribution is an enduring commitment to its fourth pillar.

For 25 years, we have propelled a representative next generation of journalists and civic leaders into lives of purpose and public service. A journalism education for all is good for the future of the field, and it's good for the future of our public, preparing media literate citizens committed to seeking, assessing, and acting on trusted information.

This work is urgent. School-based journalism programs are declining as demand for the skillset swells. Corruption, mistrust, and disinvestment test our institutions. Last fall and winter's violent ICE occupation was a crisis that demanded we show up for each other—and the truth—in new ways. The artificial intelligence boom creates existential opportunity and threat in our classrooms and our communities.

Through it all, we keep pushing forward. This year, nearly 150 students and over 120 volunteers participated in more than 300 hours of programming and produced stories that enriched the local news ecosystem across the state. Our hundreds of alumni power newsrooms, nonprofits, law firms, governments and corporate communications teams in Minnesota and beyond.

There are no shortcuts to a strong civic fabric and a healthy democracy. Both require daily investment from every individual in pursuit of our collective well-being. This community does that work, and the pages ahead are evidence of it.

In service and gratitude,

Kenzie O'Keefe

kenzieokeefe@stthomas.edu



Executive Director
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Project Associate
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Editorial and Administrative Assistant
Natulia Momo

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Find us on social media:
[@ThreeSixtyJournalism](https://www.instagram.com/ThreeSixtyJournalism)

Empower our students to find their voices, think critically, and become active participants in a democratic society, through journalism and beyond. Support ThreeSixty today!



THREESIXTY'S YOUTH LEADERSHIP BOARD

Thank you to the high school students—all committed and experienced scholastic journalists—who help guide program strategy and curriculum as part of our youth advisory board. They ensure youth leadership, vision, and insights are centered across our work and in the media industry broadly.

Our youth leadership board is made possible by generous support from Mark Zeug, a 1965 University of St. Thomas journalism graduate, who along with his late wife Helene, has spent his life invested in youth development, intercultural learning, and civic society.

2025-2026 BOARD:

- 1 Lani Ngonethong**
St. Paul Academy
- 2 Wendy Xiong**
Johnson Senior High School
- 3 Anais Froberg-Martinez**
Perpich Center for Arts Education
- 4 Muhammad Memon**
Wayzata High School
- 5 Janya Dieringer**
Johnson Senior High School
- 6 Viv Ogunro**
Breck School
- 7 Daphne Kleinschmit**
Columbia Heights High School
- 8 Margarita Rosales Alarcón**
Venture Academy
- 9 Alexis Aryeequaye**
Rosemount High School



The 2025-26 Youth Leadership Board met with Mark Zeug at Homecoming. Read more about the board on page 8!

THREESIXTY'S LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Dr. Peter Gregg
University of St. Thomas

Chris Havens
Target

Samantha HoangLong
Sahan Journal

Bianca Jones
Family Alternatives

Shane Kitman
Thrivent

Deb Sakry Lande
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Miles Trump
Best Buy

Dr. Wendy Wyatt
University of St. Thomas

Andy Ybarra,
Member Emeritus
University of St. Thomas

Duchesne Drew,
Member Emeritus
Minnesota Public Radio

“I invest in ThreeSixty because it gives young people who have historically had less access to opportunities a chance to engage directly in media. Through that work, they learn to ask good questions, listen carefully, evaluate information, understand different perspectives, and communicate clearly. Those are valuable skills not just for journalism, but also for success in higher education and thoughtful participation in civic life.

Dr. Peter Gregg,
Chair, Department of Emerging
Media, University of St. Thomas

OUR 2025-2026 IMPACT

Supported **143** unique students from over **56** high schools in Minnesota

121 individual volunteers supported with student storytelling and reporting

2 Youth Leadership Board graduates named New York Times Corps members, for a total of four ThreeSixty alums ever

Expanded programming statewide to **Rochester** and the **White Earth Nation**

326 program hours in 2026, expanded from 250 in 2025

62 published student stories in outlets including MPR News, Minnesota Star Tribune, MinnPost, Sahan Journal, Racket, North News, and Eden Prairie Local News

3 reporting awards won by **6** students in Editorial and Government Reporting categories of the Minnesota Better Newspaper Association 2026 Better Newspaper Contest

MARGARITA ROSALES ALARCÓN IS THREESIXTY'S 2026 SCHOLAR

This award grants her a full-tuition, four-year scholarship to study Emerging Media at the University of St. Thomas College of Arts and Sciences, beginning September 2026.

By Kenzie O'Keefe, Staff

ONCE A SHY TEENAGER who kept to herself, Margarita Rosales Alarcón says she found her voice, her “freedom,” and a community through the more than ten ThreeSixty programs she participated in during high school, including the program’s inaugural youth leadership board.

“I love to talk, and I talk a lot—ThreeSixty has helped that. I have so many things to say,” said the 2026 graduate of Venture Academy in Minneapolis.

“Being new to journalism, you can learn and feel like you belong in the space. ThreeSixty makes it accessible. You get paid to learn. That’s what we need—especially people of color who feel like it’s not for them.”

The daughter of Mexican immigrants from Puebla, she carved out a niche in the program producing commentary about immigrant experiences in Minnesota.

“I want to be connected to who I am and who my parents are and where they come from,” she said.

A defining moment followed her participation in the program’s annual opinion workshop during her junior year. She wrote a piece—Rather than ‘stealing’ jobs, immigrants take on the work Americans don’t want to do—published by Sahan Journal. “I received a little bit of

backlash. But I didn’t care. I felt like it was what needed to be said,” she said.

In October 2025, she sounded an alarm about the violent presence of ICE in her community through another piece that ran in Sahan Journal.

“Here in Minnesota, I have watched families being ripped apart. Fathers, mothers and siblings taken in broad daylight,” she wrote. “One of my relatives was pulled out of his work truck alongside his co-workers. His wife heard the commotion from down the street. In an instant, she and their four daughters lost their husband, father and main source of income.”

In the months that followed, her family’s struggle intensified as ICE agents descended on the state in unprecedented numbers. She still feels frustrated by the lack of attention ICE’s violence received until two white people, Renee Good and Alex Pretti, were killed. “There is still so much work to do in our communities and in local news,” she said.

She describes ThreeSixty as a “support system” that helped her discover that journalism is relevant and essential to her and her community.

“Being new to journalism, you can learn and feel like you belong in the space,” she said. “ThreeSixty makes it accessible. You get paid to learn. That’s what we need—especially people of color who feel like it’s not for them.”

Her excitement about her scholarship is mixed with some anxiety. She has two older siblings, but she is the first to go to college. Her family’s sacrifices and support motivate her to embrace the opportunity in front of her despite her fear. “I don’t know what’s in store for me, but I believe in myself that I can do it.”

Now a freshman at St. Thomas, she has not declared a major yet, but she is leaning toward strategic communication and is interested in law school eventually. She is a commuter student, and her whole family is supporting her. They are considering a move to Saint Paul, and her brother is her transportation in the meantime.



Margarita Rosales Alarcón works with volunteer editor Trisha Collopy, Sahan Journal news editor, during ThreeSixty's 2025 opinion workshop. Photo by David Pierini

ALUMNI: WHERE THEY ARE NOW

We love to hear from our alumni. Find us on LinkedIn @ThreeSixtyJournalism and tell us what you're up to.

STACY DAHL

Stacy Dahl currently works as a freelance journalist where she writes for various newspapers and magazines throughout Minnesota including Lake Minnetonka Magazine, Edina Magazine, Stillwater Gazette and more. Additionally, she works as a Substitute Teacher for Orono and Wayzata School Districts. She is currently in the process of finalizing two books: "She Who Strayed: One Woman's Solo Journey Across the Globe" and "Little Book of Trinkets: My Collection of Poems."

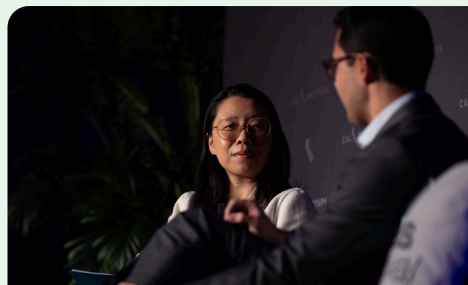
KATELYN VUE

Katelyn Vue is the immigration reporter at Sahan Journal where she has worked for the past three years. She graduated from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in 2022, before interning at the Minnesota Star Tribune for about six months. ThreeSixty Journalism helped open doors for Katelyn as a high school student, meeting reporters and editors across the state, and giving her a safe space to explore her interests, a sense of belonging and learn about herself.



DYMANH CHHOUN

Dymanh Chhoun has been a multimedia journalist for Sahan Journal, covering Minnesota's immigrant communities and communities of color, for three years. He's currently working on "Taken: A Family's Story of Deportation," following a South St. Paul Hmong family navigating life after Metro Surge. In 2005, Dymanh was a high school senior at Roosevelt High School, planning to pursue a career in business after graduation. But two ThreeSixty leaders at the time, Lynda McDonnell and David Nimmer, encouraged him to give journalism a try. He took their advice, and never looked back. Today, his reporting has taken him to some of Minnesota's most significant news events, including the aftermath of George Floyd's killing and the impact of Metro Surge.



SISI WEI

Sisi Wei is celebrating her two year anniversary as the Chief Impact Officer at CalMatters and The Markup, where she pioneers innovative strategies to equip readers, serve communities, and drive meaningful real-world change through journalism. Previously, Sisi was Editor-in-Chief of The Markup. Under her tenure, the organization

challenged technology to serve the public good and its journalism led to transformative impact. Previously, Sisi was assistant managing editor at ProPublica, where she directed interdisciplinary investigations, including one that earned the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2020.

CAROLINE SIEBELS-LINDQUIST

Caroline Siebels-Lindquist is a Hearst-recognized journalist and recent graduate from Drake University. She studied multimedia journalism and politics, is currently searching for professional opportunities, and is on a freelancing journey. You can keep up with her work on her Substack, People Call Her Snarky.

DALLAS DOWNEY

Northwestern (Journalism)

"The skills I learned through ThreeSixty have profoundly shaped my goal of dismantling youth incarceration. I am not sure where I would be if it wasn't for their mentorship and guidance. They are to thank for my strong foundation. Miigwech!"

LOLA ROHL

University of Wisconsin-Madison (Journalism)

"ThreeSixty journalism not only opened doors for me but also demonstrated the invaluable duty of student journalists. We strive to advocate, tell stories and present ignored perspectives. With every journalistic endeavor I pursue, I am reminded of these principles and of the experiences I had with ThreeSixty."

JUSTIN CAJAMARCA

University of Minnesota

(Journalism and Environmental Policy)

"With my experience in writing, justice, and leadership I gained from ThreeSixty, I was able to advocate on behalf of our school to the Minnesota School Board Committee during the ICE surge. ThreeSixty Journalism has helped me break barriers through leadership and has also helped me earn a nomination for Columbia Heights Citizen of the Year."

PRIYA SUABCUA YANG

University of Minnesota (Business)

"ThreeSixty developed my professionalism and self-confidence, which have shined through in several of career opportunities. Since then, I emceed for Hnub Tshab's 2025 annual gala and spoke at a panel for a workshop!"

GLORIA NGWA

Northwestern (Journalism and Psychology)

"I learned through ThreeSixty how valuable my insights are when covering BIPOC communities as a young reporter of color. I'll continue to apply that gift in the newsrooms I work in."

ANGELINE PATRICK PACHECO

University of St. Thomas

(Journalism and Political Science)

"ThreeSixty made it possible for me to learn how to advocate for my own story ideas and work collaboratively with other journalists. I take what I learned with them every day into work and school!"

MADELYN THOR

Smith College

(Women, Gender and Sexuality)

"Through my experience with ThreeSixty, I have gained skills to be able to better express myself, develop my writer's voice, and feel comfortable when approaching my writing."

THUY-SA TRUONG

University of Minnesota

(Finance and Information Systems)

"ThreeSixty has impacted my resume building and presentation skills in my line of business, helping me make genuine connections across my field and strive towards my goals."

DAPHNE KLEINSCHMIT

University of Minnesota (Journalism)

"ThreeSixty inspired my passion for journalism and helped shape the kind of journalist I want to become. The experiences and mentors I've gained through ThreeSixty have shown me how powerful storytelling can be when it centers people, builds trust and creates meaningful change."

KYSELIA VAJ

University of St. Thomas (Financial

Management)

"ThreeSixty has had a meaningful impact on my professional and personal growth by helping me learn to find and use my voice. I have become more confident in thinking critically, expressing my perspectives, and sharing my ideas in professional spaces. It has encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone and recognize that my voice and experiences have value."

FROM THREESIXTY TO TWIN CITIES NEWSROOMS

Three high school program alumni put their training to work in prestigious summer internships.

By Natulia Momo, Staff

AS GLORIA NGWA prepared to photograph a vigil marking the 10th anniversary of Philando Castile's death this past summer, she faced a challenge.

The 20-year-old Sahan Journal intern had to decide how to approach Castile's mother, Valerie.

Ngwa, a rising junior at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, first reported a story about Philando when interning at the Pioneer Press through ThreeSixty Journalism the previous year. At the time, she avoided interviewing Valerie because she feared saying something offensive.

By the time she joined Sahan Journal through another ThreeSixty-supported internship, Ngwa had another year of reporting experience and was ready to approach a sensitive interview with care. It was a success.

"I learned that no matter how much news coverage she gets, she would be happy to talk about her son and her advocacy work," Ngwa said. "There's no such thing as talking too much about these issues of gun violence and police brutality that continue today."

Across town in Eden Prairie, two other young journalists got a taste of professional newsroom life at FOX 9 KMSP-TV.

McCall Vickers, a rising sophomore, also at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, was adapting to an early

morning routine, waking up at 1:30 a.m. to make 3 a.m. TV production staff meetings.

"You might have to stay late or come in early," Vickers said. "It's just crazy because it never stops."

Angeline Patrick Pacheco, a rising sophomore and ThreeSixty scholar at the University of St. Thomas, rotated multiple departments and ended up on the investigative team where she spent several weeks researching elder-abuse cases.

"Even if it's just inputting numbers, it's very exciting to me because I think, 'What does this add to the story? What does this mean in the big picture?'" Pacheco said.

While Pacheco, Vickers, and Ngwa all began their journalism careers in ThreeSixty high school programs, their paths to their summer internships were different.

Pacheco and Vickers joined FOX 9 through the Emma Bowen Foundation's prestigious fellowship program. Ngwa is ThreeSixty's 2026 Saint Paul Jaycees Foundation Intern—an annual program that financially supports a college student with a Saint Paul-focused reporting opportunity.

In addition to the Castile vigil, Ngwa produced a variety of stories for Sahan: a Hmong French bakery opening, a World Cup watch party, and African festivals across Minnesota, including Liberian Independence Day which the outlet had not covered before.

Ngwa, a Black, first-generation American with Cameroonian heritage, said covering African communities resonated with her

personally, and that her time at ThreeSixty taught her that her identity could be an asset in her reporting.

"Being able to step into this role and the people that I know the best means a lot to me," she said.

At FOX 9, Vickers rotated through the morning and nightside reporting teams, production, digital and creative services. She shadowed reporters, wrote scripts for anchors, edited marketing videos, and observed how each department contributed to the station's coverage.

"I didn't realize how many departments go into producing the amount of shows, stories and programs that they have," Vickers said. "It's really amazing."

ThreeSixty taught Vickers to push beyond surface-level answers during interviews and think carefully about how her reporting portrayed a community, skills she brought to her work at FOX 9.

The experience also allowed her to make mistakes and learn from them. Early in the summer, she was behind the scenes of a broadcast, and she scrolled too fast through images displayed on screen.

Because the show was live, there was nothing she could do to correct it. Now she knows to slow down and double-check every production task.

Pacheco found herself drawn to investigative reporting. She helped the investigative team examine elder abuse reports, request data from counties, and search through court records.

FOX 9 executive producer and intern leader Panhia Yang said the station's special projects executive producer began depending on Pacheco's assistance. Pacheco eventually helped show other interns how to navigate parts of the research process.

"She's great at building connections," said Yang.

Now back at their respective colleges for the school year, they have reflected on what they learned from their internships and how their time at ThreeSixty prepared them.

Pacheco has advice for other young journalists. "Be curious about everyone around you," she said. "There are so many stories everywhere."

Vickers urges young journalists to choose opportunities that reflect their values rather than automatically chasing the most recognizable organization.

"Find a place whose goals you align with, that you would want to work at and that you would be proud to work at," she said.

Ngwa says ThreeSixty has been foundational to her success—like the root of a tree. Her college education, internships and newsroom experiences, including Sahan this summer, became the branches that continued growing what she first learned as a high school student.



Gloria Ngwa in the Sahan Journal newsroom.

HOMECOMING2026

Photos by Brandon Woller, St. Thomas

THREESIXTY JOURNALISM marked its 25th anniversary with a sold-out “Homecoming” celebration that raised more than \$100,000 for the first time in the annual event’s history. More than 215 supporters gathered April 16, 2026 at the Minneapolis Club for an evening lifting up ThreeSixty students and alumni alongside leaders in local and national journalism.

Program alumna and professional journalist Aaliyah Demry hosted the program, which honored journalists Georgia Fort and Hannah Allam for their commitment to journalism as a public service. Alumna Emma Carew Grovum and current students Alexis Aryeequaye and Daphne Kleinschmit shared their ThreeSixty experiences, while Dr. Yohuru Williams rallied the room in support of the program’s future.

Together, attendees raised \$104,000 for ThreeSixty’s 2026 programming. The Saint Paul Jaycees Charitable Foundation also announced a \$50,000 endowment gift to permanently support a paid summer internship in local journalism (see page 8).

Thank you again to our sponsors:

Best Buy, the Minnesota Star Tribune, the Saint Paul Jaycees Foundation, the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal, Pioneer Management Consulting, the Minneapolis Club, the Pioneer Press, Sahan Journal, MinnPost, Minnesota Freedom Fund, Social Venture Partners Minnesota, NABJ-MN, Stories with Intention, Minnesota Reformer, Press Forward Minnesota, Red Canary Magazine, MPR News.

Watch
the
video



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

1. Homecoming 2026 drew an intergenerational crowd of professionals, students, and community supporters of the program’s work.

2. The Homecoming program ended with **Dr. Yohuru Williams**, historian and founding director of the University of St. Thomas’ Racial Justice Initiative, making an impassioned and successful call for the crowd to meet and exceed the evening’s fundraising goal.

3. Program alumnus **Marquan Harper** DJ’d Homecoming for the second year in a row. Here he connects with **Mark Zeug**, dedicated supporter of the program’s Youth Leadership Board. Harper is a current University of St. Thomas student studying digital media arts. Zeug graduated from the University in 1965.

4. **Alexis Aryeequaye** and **Daphne Kleinschmit**, ThreeSixty Youth Leadership Board members, presented Georgia Fort with her Widening the Circle award.

5. Independent journalist **Georgia Fort** received the program’s annual Widening the Circle award for her advocacy of the First Amendment and her investments in the next generation of journalists through the Center for Broadcast Journalism. ProPublica’s **Hannah Allam** received the Opening Doors award. Based in Washington D.C. now, she began her career in the Twin Cities and used her time off as a Pioneer Press reporter to volunteer at the program’s then-overnight summer camps.

ENDOWMENT LAUNCHED BY LONGTIME SUPPORTERS

THREE LONGTIME supporters of ThreeSixty Journalism have made investments that will help sustain the organization's mission for generations to come.

David Nimmer and Terry and Susan Wolkerstorfer and the Saint Paul Jaycees Foundation have all contributed to a new endowment fund that will provide permanent financial support for the program.

"For 25 years, ThreeSixty has relied on annual fundraising to power its work. An endowment gives us a predictable foundation for the future and sends a powerful message of enduring commitment to our students and our community," said Executive Director Kenzie O'Keefe.

"I've got a long term history with ThreeSixty," said Dave Nimmer, a retired journalist and former University of St. Thomas professor who was the first to make an endowment gift, inspiring the others. "It's time for me to do this—to put my money where my mouth is."

The Saint Paul Jaycees Foundation's gift will permanently fund an annual internship for a ThreeSixty student. Read more about that gift on page 6.

As of September 2026, the endowment exceeds \$300,000 and is expected to generate annual distributions of 4-5% to support the organization's work. Program leaders aim to grow the fund significantly in the years to come.

Nimmer encourages other ThreeSixty

supporters to join him in long-term investment.

"What I can ask of you is to stretch out a bit. Y'all, don't let this endowment fund get lonesome," he said. "Please."

This endowment marks a significant step toward long term sustainability for the program. To explore involvement in this effort, contact Executive Director Kenzie O'Keefe.



The Saint Paul Jaycees Foundation, represented by board members Spencer Sokoly and Lynn Winkel, presented ThreeSixty Journalism staff and students with a \$50,000 check to endow a local journalism internship opportunity for a ThreeSixty student at the program's 2026 Homecoming celebration. Photo by Brandon Woller

YOUTH BOARD FINDS VOICE IN YEAR TWO

By Denise Huang, Staff

THROUGH A YEAR of political turmoil, the 2025-26 Youth Leadership Board confirmed what ThreeSixty has long held true: youth journalism connects us all.

As ThreeSixty's formal youth leaders, board members are storytellers as much as they are community listeners. Witty and thoughtful, they eagerly share opinions on issues that affect us all. So, when we kicked off in October with nine members, the bigger size emboldened us to dream up possibilities that would carry our vision of civic connection.

Before long, Operation Metro Surge threw Minnesota into disarray, and several board members sprang into action. They took up gimbals and mics, pen and paper to spotlight the unraveling situation at their schools and the teens fighting back. Janya Dieringer instinctively spotted a news gap. Her school "was one of the most affected by students transferring online," she said, "but no one was really telling the story." A truer, more accurate story could only emerge if youth reporters were on the scene.

The tumultuous environment also revealed that when student and professional

journalism converge, our communities become more resilient. Local journalists like the Reformer's Madi McVan and Hubbard's Meg Martin offered support, lending guidance from relational reporting to mental health and riot gear. Youth voices mattered in those moments, and the professionals modeled civic responsibility in their mentorship.

The gravity of those early months prepared our board members to face a year of new opportunities:

- At the first-ever True North Alliance rally, Anais Froberg-Martinez made a fierce call for why local journalism needs student reporters: community-based stories bring young Minnesotans into public, democratic life.
- The board traveled to Chicago by Amtrak! In the city known for community journalism and a press that holds power to account, we toured Chicago Public Media and learned to make FOIA requests at Injustice Watch. Your writer is grateful we avoided deep-dish during the board's food crawls across Chinatown, Andersonville, and Devon Street, itinerated by Wendy Xiong and Margarita Rosales Alarcón.

- We also brought the board closer to governance work. With funding from the American Press Institute and Knight Foundation, the board worked on a project to grow youth-centered impact. Janya Dieringer and Viv Ogunro were the brains behind the endeavor, facilitating workshops about how being a youth reporter impacts community engagement. An immediate insight: ThreeSixty provides "insider perspectives" that help youth trust and navigate a divisive media landscape.

Hard work, grit, and curiosity defined our second youth leadership board, and the five graduating members left us with especially big footprints. Daphne Kleinschmit and Lexi Aryeequaye were accepted into the New York Times Corps, making them the third and fourth ThreeSixty student to be named. Lani Ngonethong and Muhammad Memon won an MNA award for their story on Metro Surge's impact on students. And finally, not to be outdone, Margarita Rosales Alarcón received the 2026 ThreeSixty Scholarship and won an MNA award in editorial for a prescient piece on the ICE raids before Metro Surge. Kudos!

Journalism connects us, and the hope it provides for our young people drives us forward to a new year.

MULTIMEDIA STORYTELLING

'I NOW KNOW WHAT I CAN DO IN THIS WORLD'

Students cover youth mental health at ninth Multimedia Storytelling Institute

By Natulia Momo, Staff

GRACIELLA VICTORIA, 17, thought she knew what eating disorders looked like. Then she began interviewing sources for a story on eating disorders among men.

"I had never really thought about eating disorders that much with males," said Victoria, a rising senior at DeLaSalle High School. "I had so much to say after hearing everything that all the interviewees had to say."

That kind of perspective shift and deeper learning is exactly what ThreeSixty Journalism's 2026 Multimedia Storytelling Institute set out to inspire.

Over three weeks, 21 high school students worked in six reporting teams to research, interview, write, film and edit multimedia stories exploring youth mental health. Sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, supported by Padilla, and powered by more than 50 industry volunteers, the ninth annual institute gave students a professional newsroom experience.

One team examined how art therapy helps teens express emotions they struggle to verbalize. Another reported on how the Ain Dah Yung Center in St. Paul uses culturally grounded approaches to support Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness and prevent suicide.

One group explored how children and families heal after abuse. Another followed

one man's "Recovery Road," a 1776-mile journey around the perimeter of Minnesota to raise awareness for youth mental health. Yet another covered teen use of e-cigarettes.

The institute brought together students with a wide range of journalism experience. Returning students served as team leaders while newcomers learned the fundamentals.

"We recruited younger students with no experience alongside returning students with extensive journalism training," said Denise Huang, ThreeSixty's associate director of operations and systems. "Youth leadership is at the core of all we do, and we truly lived into it for three weeks."

JAngelo Moore, a recent graduate of Jefferson High School and returning camper, was a team leader and said the experience was transformational: "The program gave me the opportunity to put out all my skills and passions into [my team]. ...I now know what I can do in this world."

Pechulano Ngwe Ali, Associate Director of Programs, hopes students left the program understanding that their reporting already has value.

"For three weeks, students learned that young people don't have to wait to contribute positively to society," he said. "Their reporting can inform, build trust and create meaningful conversations in their communities right now."

The institute concluded with a celebratory showcase at the University of St. Thomas

where students premiered their work for over 120 community members including their families, friends, mentors, volunteers and other supporters. The final day was spent on a field trip to MPR News.

Written stories were published in the Minnesota Star Tribune, Pioneer Press, MinnPost, and more in August. Scan the QR code to watch TV stories on ThreeSixty's YouTube channel.

Funding for this project was provided by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, as part of its commitment to investing in community-led solutions, so everyone has the opportunity to achieve their healthiest life.

"This experience reinforced what I already believed about the importance of accurate and unbiased storytelling. Right now, it's extremely easy for misinformation to spread, and so many people in power are doing everything they can to silence others and bury information. It was really cool to see people like volunteers, panelists, and teachers/speakers who were passionate about truth-telling. I still don't know what my future looks like, but MSI has inspired me to consider journalism.

Sadie Fonfara,
Roosevelt High School

**Watch
online**



This workshop was sponsored by:



Muhammad Memon and Jangelo Moore conduct an interview for their story about male eating disorders. Photo by Pechulano Ngwe Ali

BEYOND CRAYONS

Art therapy tackles youth mental health crisis



By **Stella Soegianto**, *Eagle Ridge Academy*
Additional reporting by **Charlie Xiong**, *Johnson Senior High*, **Anais Froberg-Martinez**, *Perpich Center for Arts Education*, and **King Primus**, *Roseville Area High School*

Increasingly popular art therapy programs, including two in the Twin Cities, are helping Minnesota teens prevent and treat mental health problems.

One such program is The Art of Being Me, a joint program of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (BCBS MN). The Art of Being Me has students work with art therapy kits, explore mental wellness during museum tours, and create murals, led by an art therapist.

The program “involves using creative prompts to either guide someone through a process of reflection [or] exploration ...really allowing individuals to learn from themselves and what comes up in the art and the process,” said Breanna Bisek, an art therapist with BCBS MN and co-creator of the project.

Program leaders report seeing students develop a sense of belonging, confidence, and resilience. Beyond the positive anecdotal evidence, there’s a scientific foundation for art therapy as a promising response to the growing youth mental health crisis.

A 2025 study published by the Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry reported that multiple controlled trials found that art therapy reduced the severity of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression and suicidal ideation. Other studies showed “...reductions in anxiety symptoms and improvements in emotion regulation, self-awareness, distress tolerance, confidence, communication and self-expression.”

The authors conclude that “art therapy is an effective and acceptable treatment for young

people experiencing acute or severe mental health conditions” and notes its versatility in adapting to young people’s needs.

“We use all different methods of creativity,” said Nikki McComb, leader of Art is My Weapon, another organization that uses art as a tool for healing specifically to support those affected by gun violence. They currently have a gallery show, *Fragments Reimagined*, at MCAD through August 8.

“From my perspective, art is anything that includes something creative...storytelling, writing, video, audio, dance, theater, visual...” said McComb. “We use [all] those different mediums to help young people and families through things that are disproportionately affecting them.”

“The creative process really mimics therapy and life in many ways. There are coping skills that are built into it.”

Breanna Bisek, Art Therapist

Art therapy and healing work is one effective tool in dealing with a worldwide youth mental health crisis, which has been well documented both nationally and in Minnesota.

In 2023, the Minnesota Department of Health reported that one in three high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an increase of 40% since 2009. One in four adolescents reported long-term mental health problems. And 20% of students had felt nervous, anxious, depressed or worried for more than seven days in the

past two weeks. More than 20% of students have experienced suicidal ideation, with 12.2% considering suicide in the last year.

The Art of Being Me program, according to its creators, explores what happens when teens are given a low-pressure, creative way to name feelings they may not know how to say out loud. And for many teens, talking directly about mental health topics can feel awkward or embarrassing. A blank page, markers, colors and creative prompts can offer another way in.

The program gives each participant a workbook and an art kit. The workbook leads teens through activities such as painting hands cradling what they hold onto emotionally, coloring pages full of affirmations, and turning scribbles into personalized artworks. Modelling clay allows teens to sculpt whatever they like.

The object is not to create masterpieces of finished art, but to focus “more on the process and not on the finished outcome,” Bisek said. “Sometimes, you know, a really cool outcome happens, and that’s great, a great surprise. But that’s not what the focus is about. It’s more about the process and learning from that. The creative process really mimics therapy and life in many ways. There are coping skills that are built into it.”

McComb said human connection is necessary for art to have a therapeutic impact. “By meeting people where they are and having a conversation with them, then we can understand how to guide them through a healing process using art as a catalyst to change,” she said. “I could give you a kit and say, ‘Here, put all your feelings in there and do whatever’ and leave. And what are you going to get out of that? You know, you might, but if there’s no guidance or conversation or ability for you to unload whatever you’re feeling outside of on the canvas, then what?”

BCBS MN, one of the nation’s largest health management organizations and the sponsor of the workshop where this story was produced, sees enough results to continue investing in art therapy.

Along with providing the Art of Being Me kits, BCBS MN is partnering with the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia). Each club takes part in a one-day trip to Mia for a guided tour of the museum and an art therapy workshop, giving students more tools to manage their mental health challenges.

“Helping young people build healthy coping strategies early is critical,” said Bukata Hayes, chief community health officer at BCBS MN, in a statement. “Youth are facing big challenges, and now more than ever we must invest in their mental health and healing.”



Youth from the Twin Cities Boys and Girls clubs participated in an Art of Being Me workshop at Mia last winter led by art therapist Breanna Bisek. **Photo by Jason Daum**

CHILD ABUSE IS COMMON

CornerHouse helps families heal



By Grace Wei, Wayzata High School
Additional reporting by Vivian Ogunro, Breck School,
Amelia Mohamud, Delano High School, Vision Moore,
Jefferson High School

On the corner of a block in south Minneapolis, in the shadow of Children's Hospital, sits a humble yellow house that looks like any other in the residential neighborhood. This is CornerHouse, a place where trauma from child abuse is treated and transformed.

Christy Shannon, executive director and CEO of CornerHouse, knows firsthand how important it is to treat child abuse by prioritizing their comfort level. She herself has experienced abuse and has spent her career supporting victims of it.

"It's a critical, essential service," she said.

Child abuse is more common than people may realize. At least one in seven American children experience abuse, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2024, MN Compass reported that 1.3 million children ages 17 or younger lived in Minnesota. If Minnesota mirrors the national estimate, almost 186,000 children have potentially experienced abuse.

"It creates such trauma that can ripple through generations and really affect families," Shannon said.

But healing is possible. Children's Advocacy Centers such as CornerHouse offer forensic interviews after abuse and ongoing mental health support for children and their families, including therapy. According to its mission, CornerHouse "helps children find their voice, families find support, and communities build safer futures."

Upon entering CornerHouse, children and their families will find a labyrinth of rooms for therapy and service providers who focus on making them feel comfortable. Calming colors paint the walls and toys for the children to play with are scattered around. Stuffy, the fluffy golden retriever, is always waiting to calm a child down with his expert manners and training.

But not everyone in Minnesota has access to these resources. There aren't currently enough child advocacy centers to serve all the people who need them in Minnesota. The state has 87 counties but just 14 centers, Shannon said. Federal funding cuts, she said, have caused some to reduce services and others to close entirely. Ideally, Shannon said, "a child and family could get to a Children's Advocacy Center within an hour."

The federal government regarded 74 out of 87 counties in Minnesota as mental health shortage areas.

"We have more work to do in Minnesota," Shannon said.

Last year, CornerHouse served over 1,700 clients, including the children's family members and close peers affected by abuse. Despite media portrayals of stranger danger, Shannon said "90% of abuse happens by somebody the child or family knows."

The shock is universal: "100% of the caregivers who come to us did not think that would happen in their family," she said.

Shannon said the norm used to be for police or therapists to interview children who had been abused. Many of them were not trained on how to communicate with kids and the experience was often scary.

CornerHouse, and other Children's Advocacy Centers, were born out of a desire to do interviews in a way that was more comfortable for young people and gather valuable evidence.

"That's our entire model and mission: We are child focused, and that's how we build the trust," Shannon said.

Child abuse is widespread and often not preventable. But there are some things adults can do to minimize the likelihood of abuse and reduce harm when it does.

Adults should create open lines of communication between them and their children, creating environments where everyone can speak up when they are uncomfortable or if something has happened.

"It's like it lives in the shadows. It lives in places where no one's questioning that person that gives them a bad feeling," Shannon said. "Or kids have maybe a little too much freedom of what they are doing online."

One of the biggest ways to support a child? "Just making sure your child feels comfortable talking to you about anything that makes them uncomfortable," Shannon said.

If it does happen, Shannon is clear that child abuse is not the end of the world. "[If] you get the tools and support you need, you can go on and be resilient," she said.

Shannon said success looks like reduction of trauma symptoms in clients and their ability to manage those symptoms as they come up in their lives moving forward:

"So what we feel like success is is children have the tools that they need as they grow into adults to understand what healthy relationships are, to feel empowered to say something if they are uncomfortable, to navigate trauma symptoms as they come up."

Success also looks like recent feedback from a caregiver whose child received support from CornerHouse: "I get home and my child is able to express themselves, and they're able to be a kid again and come out of their shell,



A mural inside CornerHouse. Photo by Yasmin Yassin

**"Resilience, I've come to learn,
is not something you're born with.
It's something you build
piece by piece."**

Aly Gray, CornerHouse client

and like it was before the abuse happened," Shannon said, recalling the feedback.

Aly Gray is a CornerHouse client who started a bracelet company to raise money for the advocacy center that helped her. She experienced childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by an extended family member. Today, Bracelets for Bravery, continues to carry the CornerHouse mission forward.

"Resilience, I've come to learn, is not something you're born with—it's something you build piece by piece," Gray wrote on her Bracelets for Bravery website. "When I first opened up about the man [who abused me], I thought my dad would hate me. The guilt and shame washed over me every day, as if I had shattered something irreparable inside him."

She founded the business with her brother, Avery. For each purchase of a bracelet, 75% of proceeds goes toward CornerHouse.

"But instead of letting that brokenness define me, I found strength in the people who supported me, in my father's unwavering love," she wrote.

Gray writes that she refuses "to be defined by a past I didn't choose. It is my commitment to strength, resilience, and telling my story until it is heard loud and clear."

MEN SUFFER FROM EATING DISORDERS TOO

Help is available in the Twin Cities



By **Graciella Victoria**, *DeLaSalle High School*
Additional reporting by **Muhammad Memon**,
Normandale Community College, and **Jangelmo Moore**,
Jefferson High School

"Eric, you look good. Have you lost weight?" A single compliment. Unassuming. And perhaps, with no idea of where it would lead.

In his 20s, this comment fueled Eric Pothén to work out at the gym constantly. Eventually, he got to a point where he was overexercising, undereating and in the depths of an eating disorder.

Pothén, now in his 30s and a resident of Albertville, struggled for nine years before he got better and became an eating disorder recovery coach himself. Pothén exudes a warm, smiling energy as he describes his road back to health and finding his mission.

As eating disorders continue to affect men of all ages, Pothén works to provide support, validation and treatment to males who are struggling to recover. His story raises a larger question: What's pushing men today into unhealthy expectations?

"There is a different language that we almost have to speak when we talk about eating disorders and body image and food and exercise with men," Pothén said. "That's because a lot of the language that we use right now relates to women."

Media portrayals of eating disorders often focus on girls and women. However, eating disorders among boys and men have become more prevalent, and experts say they deserve just as much attention and care. Males with eating disorders may engage in harmful behaviors such as prioritizing protein while drastically limiting fats and carbs, using muscle-building drugs and dietary supplements, and excessively exercising.

Males represent about 33 percent of all

individuals with an eating disorder, but they are only 5 to 11 percent of patients in clinical eating disorder treatment settings, according to the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America. This means that the vast majority of males struggling with symptoms never receive an official clinical diagnosis or specialized care.

Dietitian Jillian Lampert, vice president of strategy and public affairs at The Emily Program, a Minnesota-based eating disorder treatment center, explains why men often don't receive proper treatment.

"When males come in for care, a lot of the pieces that they say sort of prevent them from accessing care earlier relate to stigma or lack of awareness," she said.

"The more that we can honor and embrace our story and our struggles, the less shame and guilt there will be on that road to recovery."

Eric Pothén, Men's Eating Disorder Recovery Coach

"They're like 'I thought this was sort of like a woman's thing. I didn't know that men could get eating disorders. I didn't know if I could get help.'"

Lampert says that social media plays a significant role in encouraging unhealthy behaviors in male eating disorders.

Mark Rennings, a homeschooled 18-year-old from the Twin Cities in recovery from an eating disorder, knows this firsthand.

"A lot of popular influencers sort of influenced me to buy certain products and do

certain workout routines, just certain lifestyle choices that I wouldn't have made without social media," Rennings said.

He used to take ordinary vitamins and creatine and eventually went on to take peptides. At the height of his eating disorder, Rennings also started taking Adderall for weight loss.

"It kind of drove me to keep starving myself. ...I just wanted to lose a bunch of weight because I felt really insecure," he said.

He went from 250 to 160 pounds, which was "pretty frail" for him.

Health professionals note that eating disorders can affect people of any body size, and victims do not need to appear underweight to be seriously ill.

For Pothén, the issue of his eating disorder became real when one day his parents decided to confront him about his weight loss and behaviors. They told him that he either needed to start gaining weight or they would schedule a doctor's appointment for him.

"That was the first time [they realized the disorder] in the years that I was struggling. I lived with this for multiple years, and I realized what I'm living with is actually something much larger than I'm picturing it to be," he said.

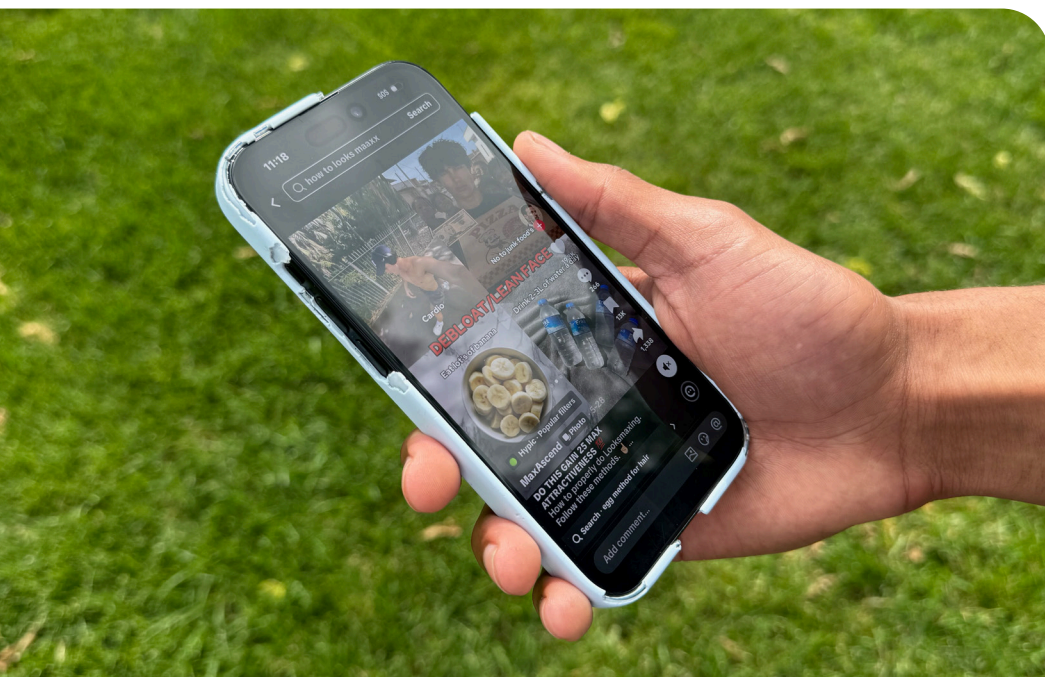
Pothén chose to recover on his own, but it was difficult. "There was always that part of me that was like, 'What if I actually had the courage to seek help?' I want men to know that it's okay to seek help if you are struggling with an eating disorder, because it's real, it's valid, and it's something that you are living with."

For males seeking recovery, support can look like opening up to a family member, finding a recovery coach or scheduling an intake at a treatment center, experts agree. Programs in the Twin Cities area include Melrose Center and The Emily Program.

For Pothén, finding support meant opening up to his parents and leaning on them for help in his journey. Pothén believes that the biggest challenge is helping males with eating disorders recognize that they have them and that they need help.

"With men, in particular, there's a large hurdle that they have to jump over first before we can even begin to talk about the eating disorder in and of itself," he said. "Once you kind of jump that initial hurdle with men, you're going to be able to talk about some of those other important topics, like self-compassion and self-love."

Pothén has the word "EMBRACE" tattooed on the inside of his upper arm. "The more that we can honor and embrace our story and our struggles, the less shame and guilt there will be on that road to recovery," he said.



Eric Pothén recovered from his own eating disorder and now works as a recovery coach supporting other men to get comfortable with their bodies. **Photo by Muhammad Memon**

INDIGENOUS YOUTH NEED COMMUNITY AND CULTURE TO HEAL FROM TRAUMA



By Sadie Fonfara, Roosevelt High School

Additional reporting by Janya Dieringer, Johnson Senior High School, Alaia Scroggins, Wayzata High School, and Christopher Rosales, Roosevelt High School

Several years ago, when Bryce Premo was going through treatment for alcohol abuse and suicidal ideation, he was introduced to a world of inspiring people.

"I saw the amazing work people were doing in suicide prevention, and I wanted to be a part of it," Premo said.

Today, Premo, a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, is the suicide prevention coordinator at the Ain Dah Yung Center in Saint Paul's Summit Hill neighborhood, providing free and permanent housing for Native American youth facing housing insecurity. He also takes part in leading the American Indian Metro Suicide Coalition, which he helped establish two years ago.

While Native people make up only 2% of Minnesota's population, they make up a staggering 30% of Minnesota's homeless population, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. Nationally, Native youth die by suicide at rates much higher than any other ethnic group, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The high rates of homelessness play a significant role in their mental health struggles, Premo said.

"Suicide prevention is not just a crisis-oriented thing. It's when we're out there building community relationships, positive identity or empowering youth. That's what suicide prevention is all about."

Bryce Premo,
Suicide Prevention Coordinator,
Ain Dah Yung Center

Faced with these disproportionate challenges, the Ain Dah Yung Center, meaning "our home" in the Ojibwe language, provides support for Native youth grounded in Native traditions, like talking circles and smudging. And it seems to be working: In 2024, 100% of the 43 young people who stayed at the center's emergency shelter stayed enrolled in school. The center's work raises the question: are community and cultural connections key to healing Native youth?

The Ain Dah Yung Center provides housing for more than 40 people at any given time, but their support doesn't end there. Annually, Ain Dah Yung serves about 3,000 youth, through various programs including emergency housing, afterschool programs and cultural events.

At the center, there is a traditional healing garden, a free food pantry and a kitchen where community cooking events take place. There is also a free clothing store for residents with clothing for any occasion. And at the heart of each floor there is a community room, each with a different mural, as well as multiple other community spaces throughout the



Youth involved in Ain Dah Yung Center programming helped create artwork for the program's American Indian resource handbook last fall. The handbook includes suicide prevention resources. Photo provided by Bryce Premo

building.

They offer frequent events, including powwows, ceremonies, art, music, and more. Ain Dah Yung values the healing strengths of community for both suicide prevention and healing during crisis and incorporates them into every aspect of their care.

"Suicide prevention is not just a crisis-oriented thing. It's when we're out there building community relationships, positive identity or empowering youth. That's what suicide prevention is all about," Premo said.

"Every time I do a community event it's amazing to see the progress that can come in such a short time of just talking with somebody, and being there for them," Premo said, "It fills me with joy to see other passionate members in the community."

Tascha Just is the president of the Minnesota School Psychologists Association and a member of the Native community. Like Premo, she identifies community as a healing force in young people's lives. "That's where you get oxytocin, within the community," Just said, referring to the hormone humans produce when they feel joy and love.

"Being able to have those traditional ceremonies was life-changing for me," she said.

Research backs her up. According to an article in the journal Behaviour Research and Therapy, community and culturally-responsive care is a very effective method of treatment and prevention for mental health struggles within Native communities. After centuries of historical trauma within Indigenous communities, the importance of cultural connection is proving vital to healing.

Premo says, "There's been study after study showing that when we introduce more cultural

prevention methods into the community, the stronger it can get."

A strong community often helps young people overcome the stigma of mental illness – one of the main barriers to asking for and receiving help. Too often, young people are left to struggle with their mental health alone, and for many, asking for help can be half the battle. Community and cultural connection act as medicine. Practicing traditions helps to rebuild broken connections caused by generational trauma and fosters joy and connection.

Premo says, "There's a lot of historical trauma, but focusing on the protective factors instead of the trauma can be more sustainable for the community. We have a lot of strengths in the American Indian community, and when we build upon them it really shows."

Shinaana Secody is an actor and intern at the Indigenous Peoples Task Force who grew up struggling with shyness. The Native theater community, she said, helped her to overcome her challenges and helped her embrace creativity. "Thankfully, I grew up learning my traditions," Secody said. "I carry them with me and practice them every day. It helps my mental health".

For Premo, life is now filled with hope. He spends his time working to provide that same hope for young people by welcoming them into a loving community where they can heal. He wants Native youth to know they are not alone in their struggles.

"There is a community that loves and cares about you, and we are here for you day and night. I want to say that I'll remember your name, and we have so many caring people out here, so Miigwech for coming," he said, using the Ojibwe words for thank you.

"Miigwech for showing up."

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Jason Lennox walks 1,776 miles around Minnesota for youth mental health



By Kaya Williams, *Xavier University*
Additional reporting by Yunus Ahmed, *Rosemount High School*, and Legend Primus, *Roseville High School*

Jason Lennox has spent weeks walking nearly every day with one goal in mind: to complete the entire Minnesota border, a journey of almost 1,800 miles.

He walks around 20 to 25 miles a day, hoping to finish in October. He sleeps and eats in a van along the way. The walk is an endurance challenge and an effort to raise money and awareness for children's mental health while honoring those whose lives have been affected by addiction, mental illness and suicide.

Lennox understands those struggles personally.

From age 12 to 24, he battled addiction while struggling with severe mental health challenges. Substances became an escape from thoughts he could not manage on his own. During those years, he damaged relationships, accumulated a felony record, and lived under the stigma that surrounds both addiction and mental illness.

"I went through my own struggles as a young child with mental health [problems] and not wanting to live and not wanting to be here," he said. "When I was 12 and I started getting into drugs and alcohol, I realized pretty quickly that [substance use] was my relief."

That relief eventually led him down what he described as "a really bad path." His addiction culminated in an overdose, another trip to jail with the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence. Instead, he was transferred to a treatment program.

"When I got into treatment, I wasn't really planning on a different life," he said. "I didn't think that was possible. Fast forward, here we are 15 and a half years later. It is possible."

Today, Lennox has transformed his experience into a career of helping others. He is speaker, author, consultant and recovery advocate. He serves as CEO of One Arrow Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports behavioral health programs across the country, and he is the author of the memoir "A Perfect Tragedy." Through initiatives like The Recovery Road—his current effort to walk the perimeter of Minnesota—he works to raise awareness about addiction, mental health and the challenges people continue to face long after deciding they want to recover. His message is simple: recovery is possible.

But no one should have to do it alone. That belief is shared by Melissa Mikkonen, a licensed professional clinical counselor who works for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, which is sponsoring Lennox's walk and the camp where this story was produced. She said community is one of the most important parts of healing.

"Nobody gets well alone," Mikkonen said. "We all need community, and we all need help."

Although recovery is often viewed as a personal choice, both Mikkonen and Lennox say the reality is far more complicated. Access to treatment, financial barriers, family support and community resources all influence whether someone begins or maintains recovery. Stigma surrounding addiction and mental health can prevent people from seeking help because they fear judgement or misunderstanding.

Mikkonen believes many young people today are struggling with what she calls the idea of "enoughness."

"Am I smart enough? Am I man enough? Am I this enough?" Mikkonen said. "I think by talking about it more, by removing the stigma, and if young people can talk to other young people, that might be really helpful. Just not carrying those burdens alone."

Those conversations have become central to Lennox's mission.

"We all have demons," he said. "We all have the things that we have to battle day in and day out. Having these conversations allows me to share a little bit, and then all of a sudden somebody goes, 'Wow, that's how I felt.' Then they're sharing with their people, and everybody realizes we're not too unlike each other."

Lennox said his walk was inspired by the hundreds of thousands of Americans whose lives are lost to mental health and substance use in the United States each year.

One of them is Kenzie Mae Leonardo, an 11-year-old from New Richland, Minnesota whose death by suicide in 2025 reminds him why conversation surrounding youth mental

health cannot wait. He says every mile he walks serves as a tribute to her life and to countless other families who have experienced similar loss.

While awareness surrounding addiction and mental health has grown through social media, advocacy campaigns and public conversations, significant barriers remain. Many people continue to face long waitlists for treatment, high costs and limited access to care, as well as the lingering stigma attached to asking for help.

"Nobody gets well alone. We all need community, and we all need help."

Melissa Mikkonen, Clinical Counselor

Organizations like Lennox's One Arrow Group and counselors like Mikkonen hope to bridge those gaps by supporting behavioral health programs, promoting recovery resources and creating spaces where people can speak openly without fear of judgement.

For Lennox, recovery is about staying sober and helping others believe that change is possible and underscoring that healing continues long after treatment ends. His 1,776-mile walk around Minnesota is ultimately a reminder that recovery is not a straight path and that no one should ever have to walk it alone.

If you or someone you know is in crisis or if you're thinking about hurting yourself, you can call or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, 988, or find more resources here.



Jason Lennox is midway through a 1,776 mile walk around the perimeter of Minnesota to advocate for youth mental health. **Photo by Yasmin Yassin**

THREESIXTY REPORTERS BRING THE STORIES OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS USA GAMES TO MPR NEWS AUDIENCE

By Natulia Momo, Staff

TEN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS turned one week of summer reporting into stories heard by thousands of Minnesotans.

During MPR News Radio Camp, a partnership between MPR News and ThreeSixty Journalism, high school students reported, wrote and produced original radio stories about the Special Olympics USA Games, held in Minneapolis in late June. All stories aired on All Things Considered with Clay Masters.

This year, the games took place during the same week as the annual camp. Campers learned the basics of audio reporting and reporting on people with intellectual disabilities, conducted one-on-one interviews in the field, attended a press conference, and captured meaningful audio from the center of the action, bringing their stories to life.

Before stepping onto the field at Huntington Bank Stadium, students trained alongside mentors from MPR News and ThreeSixty.

They learned about what makes a strong story, brainstormed interview questions, got hands-on Tascam recorder training and practiced capturing clear, high-quality sounds and voices.

“[Radio camp] was my first journalism experience,” said Lundy’N Jasper, an incoming high school sophomore. “I truly enjoyed it. Not only did I learn a lot about editing audio or rules of interviewing, but I also watched myself grow as an individual and made strong connections.”

Camp took place at MPR News, giving students a behind the scenes window into how public radio operates. They met radio host Angela Davis, who shared her experience behind the microphone and offered insight into the work of a talk show host.

Mentors from MPR News and ThreeSixty powered the workshop, helping students complete professional pieces and discover themselves and their voices as journalists in the process.

“I was confident they could do it,” said Lisa

Ryan, an MPR News editor who helped lead the experience. “And it was so rewarding to see their confidence build as the days went on.”

Camp leaders included Ryan, Denzel Belin, Kyra Miles, and Andrea Pierre from MPR News, freelance audio producer Brendan Kelly, and the entire ThreeSixty staff.

By the end of the week, students had honed their skills, produced a professionally published radio story from start to finish, and deepened their understanding of the responsibility of sharing another person’s story.

This unique, intensive journalism learning opportunity was funded in part by Minnesota’s Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment through MPR News.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

1: Radio Camp students, staff and volunteers walk to Huntington Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

2: **Cindy Mori**, vice president of events for the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games, speaks with Radio Camp students at Huntington Bank Stadium.

3: Minnesota Vikings offensive tackle, **Walter Rouse**, speaks with Radio Camp students, staff and volunteers. Rouse volunteered with the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games.

4: Musician, **Paul Peterson** speaks with Radio Camp participants. Peterson performed at the 2026 Special Olympics USA Games.

Photos by Steven Garcia, MPR News



THREESIXTY TAKES PROGRAMMING STATEWIDE WITH MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO

THREESIXTY JOURNALISM expanded beyond the Twin Cities in 2025-26, building new partnerships to give more Minnesota students the tools and platforms to connect with their communities and tell their stories through journalism.

In April, ThreeSixty partnered with Minnesota Public Radio News and Rochester Public Schools to pilot a pop-up podcast workshop. Ten Rochester high school students spent a day at MPR's Rochester bureau learning audio journalism from ThreeSixty staff and other professional instructors, then researched, reported and produced an original podcast episode, *Speak Up Minnesota: Rochester Edition*, about what young people want adults to understand about their lives.

"We're here. We matter. And we want to be taken seriously by adults," one participant reflected. "We need to be heard about our struggles, mental health, school pressure, and not always feeling supported. A lot of us are dealing with things people don't see,"



Denise Huang, ThreeSixty's director of systems and operations, works with Rochester high school students in a one-day podcast workshop in April. **Photo by Pechulano Ngwe Ali**

said another.

In northern Minnesota, a new two-year partnership is taking ThreeSixty's journalism education to students at Circle of Life Academy on the White Earth Reservation. Funded by Press Forward Minnesota, the project brings together ThreeSixty, MPR, Nijii Radio and the White Earth Land Recovery Project to support civic information-building grounded in community priorities and cultural knowledge.

"This work uplifts local priorities and cultural knowledge while supporting the next generation of storytellers," said Andrea Pierre, ThreeSixty Leadership Council member and director of community engagement at MPR.

**"We're here. We matter.
And we want to be taken
seriously by adults."**

ThreeSixty and MPR staff first visited White Earth in May and will return in November for a weeklong workshop. Additional visits are planned for 2027.

Together, the projects are helping ThreeSixty explore how its model of youth journalism education can reach young people and communities across Minnesota at a time when journalism education is declining, particularly for rural students, students of color, and students who attend small schools.



Staff from ThreeSixty Journalism, White Earth Land Recovery Project, Nijii Radio, and Circle of Life Academy high school met on the White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota in May to kickoff a two year programming project together. **Photo by Kenzie O'Keefe**



Students practice using audio recording equipment at ThreeSixty and MPR's Rochester podcast workshop. **Photo by Pechulano Ngwe Ali**

**Listen
to the
podcast**



AMID FEDERAL STRESS, THREESIXTY STUDENTS RETURN FOR YEAR THREE ON CAPITOL BEAT

By Alexis Aryeequaye,
Rosemount High School

GOVERNMENT OFTEN FEELS inaccessible to young people—physically and conceptually.

“It’s easy to feel like nothing’s really happening,” said Naomi Miller, senior at Richfield High School and participant in ThreeSixty Journalism’s winter 2026 Capitol Reporting Workshop. She says the experience combatted that apathy, exposing her to a whole world of advocacy and action.

Miller was one of 26 students from 18 metro schools who participated in ThreeSixty’s third annual Capitol Reporting Workshop in February and March sponsored by the Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation.

Amidst federal funding cuts and ICE presence and violence in Minnesota, the workshop gave students an inside perspective on state business and exclusive opportunities to talk to politicians, including Senate Majority Leader Erin Murphy and average people about pressing issues in Minnesota.

“People don’t realize how available and accessible [the Capitol] is. It’s free to enter. If you want to learn something about government, go sit in on a senate hearing. ... you can go,” Miller said.

Students broke off into seven teams to write articles and report social media stories about important issues in their communities. From gun violence to SNAP benefits, to barriers

to youth employment, students reported on some of the most divisive, pressing issues in the state and also had the opportunity to visit the capitol to interview representatives in Minnesota and learn more about government on the state level.

Over the course of three weeks of programming and months of preparation, students were supported to develop timely topics and rigorous reporting plans—and then launched into real-world, independent practice.

Pechulano Ngwe Ali, ThreeSixty’s Associate Director of Programs, says the program has been life changing for all involved. “It’s a space where young people converge and learn about journalism, learn about how they can be active participants and issues in their community through journalistic storytelling and leadership, which in my mind, is a very powerful way to get young people involved in their communities,” he said.

Madi McVan, a reporter at the Minnesota

Reformer and veteran ThreeSixty volunteer, served the program as a reporting coach.

“I love hearing what young people think about things and the way they’re learning to wrap their minds around these complex issues... teenagers are smart and they don’t get enough credit for that.” McVan said.

McVan was one of thirteen professionals who powered the workshop. Others included: retired MPR journalists Nancy Lebens and Bill Wareham, Deanna Pistono formerly of MinnPost, Ngoc Bui of MPR, Samantha HoangLong and Shubhanjana Das of Sahan Journal, David Pierini of North News, Minnpost’s Matt Blake and Jackie Renzetti, retired Star Tribune and Pioneer Press reporter Dane Smith, the Star Tribune’s Nate Minor, and Momentum Advocacy lobbyist Kayla Drake.

Stories produced in this workshop were published on ThreeSixty platforms and in MinnPost, Sahan Journal, and the Minnesota Star Tribune.



Richfield High School senior Naomi Miller (above) asks a question to Sen. Majority Leader Erin Murphy (left). **Photos by Pechulano Ngwe Ali**

This workshop was sponsored by:

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AS STUDENTS PURSUE ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAMS, MINNESOTA LEGISLATORS CONSIDER INCREASING FUNDING

By **Janya Dieringer**, *Johnson High School*, **Ben Aviles**, *The Blake School*, and **Trudy Neequaye**, *Wayzata High School*

Every day, at 11:30 a.m., Dah Htoo leaves school.

He drives six miles north to the Finishing Trades Institute of the Upper Midwest. When he arrives, he is eager to get to work.

A senior at Johnson Senior High School on the east side of Saint Paul, Htoo participates in the Finishing Trades program, which allows students to gain experience in the finishing trades while earning high school credit.

“Right now, we’re doing drywalling,” Htoo said. “We do the process how somebody would do it if they were [working in the trades].”

Htoo is not considering a college education at the moment. He said he has never been interested in an academic career path. At one point in high school, he thought about learning a trade but was unaware of the opportunities available to him.

Then one day, Mary Voigt, Career Pathway Coordinator at Johnson Senior High School, who was preparing to lead students on a field trip to the Finishing Trades Institute, caught Htoo in the hallway skipping a class. She invited him along.

Voigt said right before the pandemic, she began to realize the importance of accessing alternative [to college] career pathways.

“It was really clear that families [whose kids] were attending Johnson didn’t see any value in school,” she said. “I started to think: Why would they care about school? What are we offering?”

Students in Johnson High’s program may take courses in health, engineering, education, and business. The program is part of the

nationwide Career and Technical Education system, commonly known as CTE.

Voigt said CTE “incorporates ways for students to get credentials or potentially work experience into their school day.” She said the program shows school can move students toward career goals “as opposed to just being a series of hoops that [they] have to jump through.”

Some Minnesota lawmakers believe CTE programs, like the one Htoo attends, need more funding. An active bill currently in committee, HF 1001, would increase the amount of state funding school districts receive to support CTE programs. The bill has bipartisan support.

Rep. Bianca Virnig (DFL - 52B), a Democrat from the Twin Cities suburbs, authored the bill. She said the goal is “to get those young people to make it through the week, the month, the year, to get life skills to live into adulthood.”

Virnig’s proposal increases the reimbursement rate for districts from 35% to 50%. It requires the Commissioner of Education to “raise \$46.5 million in each fiscal year” through taxes, according to the bill’s text. The bill would also increase transparency by requiring districts to submit an annual report with the Minnesota Department of Education. Senate Majority Leader, Erin Murphy (DFL - 64), said she supports the bill in concept, “but the devil is in the details.”

Troy Haugen, Director of Career and College Readiness at Minnesota CTE, like Voigt, believes CTE programs focus on getting students into “high wage and high demand” fields. State statistics suggest the picture may be more complicated.

Data from a 2024 Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development study indicate that, on average, no career paths

offered by CTE programs reach a living wage within five years of graduation.

According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, the living wage in the Twin Cities metro is \$48,500 per year. Only participants in the international business program exceed that wage on average.

Still, there may be other benefits from CTE programs. A 2025 Minnesota Department of Education study found that 92% of students enrolled in two or more CTE programs graduate from high school – eight percent higher than the statewide average.

Although many schools in Minnesota offer CTE options, students are often unaware of them.

“I know that there are a lot of opportunities you can get with the school,” said Anna Warren, a student at Highland Park Senior High School. “But oftentimes, they’re not very well publicized.”

Back at Johnson Senior High, Mary Voigt works to make students more aware of CTE opportunities.

“I try to do an ad once a week,” Voigt said. “I just want to draw attention to something about career pathways... I think kids know who I am, and they know what Career Pathways is. It’s been pretty successful.”

Voigt’s ads inform youth like Htoo about programs such as the Finishing Trades Institute.

Htoo has always been interested in interactive work or work in the trades.

“I didn’t want to just sit in an office and type all day,” he said, “I just want to do something productive and hands-on.”

Htoo hopes to pursue construction or welding after he graduates.

EDINA STUDENTS PUSH GUN SAFETY BILL AS MINNESOTA LAWMAKERS REMAIN DIVIDED

By **Margarita Rosales Alarcón**, *Venture Academy*, **Shrunali Dhotre**, *Wayzata High School*, **Max Freeman**, *Rosemount High School* and **Amal Bedru**, *Math and Science Academy*

Anushka Narielwala, Alvi Buzar Barua and Aditi Jha believe they have an idea that could help prevent the next school shooting.

As members of the Legislative Action Committee, LAC, for the Edina School Board, high school students are urging the Minnesota Legislature to make it a crime to knowingly possess a gun, or even a replica of a gun on school premises without proper storage.

Their proposal would require guns brought onto school grounds to be secured in a safe storage container.

Currently, firearms are largely prohibited on school grounds in Minnesota. However, the

law allows certain exceptions for people with permits who store firearms in their vehicles. Jha, a student at Edina High School, said gun owners should have the responsibility to store firearms safely.

“You should be cognizant of the fact that you essentially have a murder weapon, whether you like it or not,” she said.

State Rep. Julie Greene, a Democrat, whose district includes Edina High School, has worked with the LAC to propose a bill that would make failure to properly store a gun on school grounds considered as a felony, punishable by up to five years in prison and/or a \$10,000 fine.

Michigan, Connecticut and Colorado are among states that have enacted safe storage laws for firearms left unattended on school grounds.

But the Minnesota Legislature remains

divided on gun safety proposals, with Republicans generally opposing new restrictions.

While presenting their proposal, students said they felt lawmakers were not paying attention to them.

“I saw several of them on their phones during testimony, so I don’t think they’re really taking it seriously,” Jha said after the group presented its proposal to the House Education Policy Committee.

“These lawmakers love to say we value our youth,” she said. “But they don’t listen.”

Events at the Capitol have highlighted the impact of gun violence on students.

Empty desks were placed on the Capitol lawn to represent more than 200 Minnesota school children killed by gun violence since 2021. Inside the Capitol building, two desks honor 8-year-old Fletcher Merkel and 10-year-

old Harper Moyski, who were killed in the Annunciation school shooting in Minneapolis last year.

“Gun violence in school, especially for us and our generation, feels almost like normalized because of how common it is,” Buzar Barua said.

“A multitude of states have safe storage gun laws, and we’ve seen gun theft and violence go down,” Jha said. “Why doesn’t Minnesota have a safe storage law?”

Part of the reason is strong opposition from gun rights advocates, including members of the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus. The Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus, a prominent gun rights group in the state, opposes new gun restrictions, “Defending the second amendment in the legislature and in the courts.” Multiple messages left with the organization were not returned.

Messages left with Rep. Paul Novotny, a Republican from Elk River and chair of the House Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, were also not returned. Novotny stands on many issues regarding Minnesotans, one of them being, “Pro 2nd amendment and against RED FLAG laws. Red flags are unconstitutional” Any gun-related legislation must pass through that committee before advancing to the full

House.

Rep. Tabke, a Democrat from Shakopee, has introduced separate gun reform legislation that would ban high-capacity magazines. Tabke authored a bill that would ban high-capacity magazines, which are defined as magazines that hold more than 10 rounds.

According to a Lumaris Research poll, 69% of Minnesotans surveyed support an assault weapons ban. High-capacity magazines are commonly used in tandem with assault-style rifles.

However, the Minnesota House is evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, making it difficult for gun legislation to advance.

“Nothing’s going to pass,” Tabke said, citing Republican opposition.

“They don’t think it’s unreasonable,” he said. “They just refuse to vote for it out of political expediency.”

At the same time, many other Minnesotans remain strongly opposed to new gun restrictions.

“[A] portion of Minnesotans do care about this, and I care that they care. And so that’s been really good for me to hear from them,” Tabke said.

He said he has received more than “11,000

emails from folks who don’t want gun control.” Because of his strong stance on gun policy, Tabke said he has also received threats. “I’ve gotten just so many death threats and so many people who specifically want to say how they want to take care of me,” he said.

Tabke wants to make it clear that he supports gun ownership.

“Owning guns, I am just absolutely not in opposition to that [because] of the Constitution,” Tabke said.

He believes it doesn’t give anyone the right to do whatever they want or kill whoever they want. “I just don’t think that that’s what the Constitution intended,” he said.

Without bipartisan support, gun reform proposals are unlikely to move forward.

Tabke said passing meaningful gun legislation will require “someone who has an immense amount of political courage” to bring lawmakers together.

The disagreement among lawmakers reflects the deeply polarized political climate surrounding gun policy.

But while finding common ground is difficult, it isn’t impossible. Students like Anushka and her friends said they are taking small steps and will continue to push for change.

TWIN CITIES STUDENTS FEEL IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION CRACKDOWN

By Lani Ngonethong, St. Paul Academy and Summit School, Muhammad Memon, Wayzata High School, Maheideri Belay, Woodbury High School and Ola Osibodu, Champlin Park High School

Lexi Mongeri woke up Jan. 25 to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents outside her Champlin, Minnesota apartment.

She watched from her window as they handcuffed her uncle and took him away. Her mother decided no one in the family would leave their home that day. Mongeri’s life changed overnight.

“I stepped up as a big cousin to watch my little cousin, who had to see her father be taken,” Monegri said. “It was just really hard to keep her positive and motivated to go to school.”

After the arrest, Mongeri said her grades dropped.

“I just felt lost,” she said. “I felt like I had to do this on my own, even when I had people beside me.”

She now carries her passport or birth certificate wherever she goes.

Mongeri’s experience is part of a sweeping federal immigration operation that has reshaped daily life across the Twin Cities. Beginning in December 2025, the Trump administration deployed more than 3,000 federal immigration agents to Minnesota in what officials call “Operation Metro Surge.”

The campaign drew intense opposition and protests after violent confrontations between

civilians and federal agents. Several people were shot during incidents connected to the operation. Two of the shootings were fatal, killing Renee Nicole Good and Alex Pretti.

At the height of Operation Metro Surge in January, Minneapolis Public Schools closed for two days and St. Paul Public Schools closed three to prepare for virtual learning options. Some schools saw attendance rates drop as much as 60% as families chose to stay home.

One of those families was N.’s, a Saint Paul Public Schools student, whose parents came to the United States as Karen refugees. N. asked to remain anonymous because she fears drawing attention to her family amid increased ICE violence.

“Education is number one for my mom,” N. said. “So, for her to tell us that we have to stop going to school, there has to be a really big problem.”

N., who participates in several school activities, said she had to pause schoolwork and group projects, leaving them to classmates who were able to attend class in person. She said many other students stayed home as well.

The fear spread into other parts of her life. N. said her church sent notices to families about how to stay safe.

Her concerns grew after the Department of Homeland Security, DHS, terminated temporary protected status for Karen refugees at the end of January.

“It was straining to see that everybody around me was scared and tired, to a point

where we had to check in with other members of the Karen community,” she said. “We came as refugees. This was supposed to be a safe place for us.”

The Trump administration also revoked federal protections that previously designated certain places as “sensitive locations” where immigration enforcement was limited. These included hospitals, places of worship, and schools.

The change was felt at Roosevelt High School on Jan. 7, when armed U.S. Border Patrol officers entered school property, tackled students and arrested two staff members.

In response to the end of protections for “sensitive locations,” state Rep. Sydney Jordan, DFL- Minneapolis, who chairs the Education Policy Committee, introduced HF 3435. The bill would prohibit public and charter schools from consenting to immigration enforcement on school property without a valid judicial warrant.

“It was clear that schools across the state of Minnesota needed this,” Jordan said. “Even in greater Minnesota and the Willmar School District, they had thousands of students miss school one day because they were worried about ICE enforcement.”

The bill did not advance from committee, where committee members split 7-7, along party lines.

“I am going to keep working on this bill

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MINNESOTA LAWMAKERS CONSIDER CIVIC SEAL TO PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY

By **Anais Froberg-Martinez**, *Perpich Center for Arts Education*, **Asher Denkmann**, *Wayzata High School* and **Justin Parnjan**, *Brooklyn Center High School*

If it weren't for an Instagram post, high school senior Mary Jensen would never have found herself testifying before the Minnesota Senate Education Policy Committee.

She had been scrolling on Instagram and came across a post by the YMCA Center for Youth Voice, inviting young people to be involved in a legislative initiative called the "Civic Seal."

Curious about what the opportunity entailed, Jensen signed up, and her advocacy journey began.

On March 2, Jensen spoke to lawmakers in support of a proposal to create a "Minnesota Civic Seal," a graduation credential for students who receive civics instruction in five areas, including media literacy. Students will be expected to complete a community-centered project and reflect on its "measurable civic impact."

Before she was familiarized with the seal, Jensen experienced the intersection of technology and civics firsthand.

For Jensen, using her voice to advocate had "always been a part of her personality," but she said there were limited opportunities for civic engagement at her private school, Cretin-Derham Hall High School in St. Paul.

She captained the debate team and participated in the YMCA's Youth in Government; a program she said many students at her school had never heard of.

While social media connected Jensen with civic engagement opportunities, her peers were preoccupied with misinformation and cyberbullying.

"A lot of the time people are like, 'I read this source that said this,' but that source is just a short Tiktok video clip that they saw," Jensen said. "And it's like, you didn't proofread this. You did not evaluate if the source was correct."

She added that problems occur when students don't apply traditional fact-checking strategies to social media contexts: "if you do [get your news from social media], you should vet that source too."

National polling data supports Jensen's concerns around digital media literacy. 94% of teens believe their schools should be required to teach media literacy, according to a 2024 News Literacy Project study. The study also found that only about 40% of teens reported any media literacy instruction.

Media literacy is generally defined as the ability to critically analyze mass media content and evaluate the credibility of information and sources. Misinformation and intentional disinformation, especially on social media, are widely considered global challenges.

Conversations about these issues continued among students involved in developing the civic

seal proposal. For many of them, including Jensen, adding a media literacy component was essential.

Senate Education Policy Chair and co-author of the Civic Seal proposal, Steve Cwodziński, DFL-Eden Prairie, told committee members that federal spending priorities often favor STEM education over civics.

"For every \$50 dollars we spend on STEM education, we spend five cents on civics education," Cwodziński said.

Advocates say media literacy programs face similar funding challenges.

Emma Larson, a senior at Wayzata High School, said schools and governments must improve media literacy education.

"I feel like they should play a bigger role compared to what they play right now," Larson said. "Because they don't really do anything."

Lawmakers and advocates say competing demands for education funding make it difficult to expand media literacy instruction.

Sen. Mary Kunesch, DFL-New Brighton, said several media literacy bills in previous years have stalled because of funding concerns. The Civic Seal proposal attempts to address that issue by having the program administered through the YMCA Center for Youth Voice.

The Center will lead the Civic Seal Task Force that the bill proposes, which is composed of students and professionals who

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SNAP CUTS LEAVE MINNESOTA FAMILIES WITH LESS FOOD AS LAWMAKERS WEIGH RESPONSE

By **Ella Barbosa**, *Central High School*, **Manal Bare**, *Cooper High School*, **Violet Ditlevson**, *St. Michael-Albertville High School*, and **Mya Bell-Jones**, *Columbia Heights High School*

Seventeen-year-old Central High School student M.O. remembers grocery shopping trips when her family would routinely fill the cart with food.

But since the federal government drastically cut funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called SNAP, M.O.'s family now relies more on local food shelves. M.O. asked to only be referred by her initials because of sensitivity around receiving SNAP benefits in the current political climate.

"With the full SNAP back then, I would get all the vegetables I need, all frozen food, all snacks, the fridge would be full, and we would put a lot of snacks in the cabinets," she said. "But now, we don't even go grocery shopping a lot anymore."

Last July, President Trump signed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act into law which includes changes to SNAP such as significant cuts and stricter eligibility requirements. An estimated \$186 billion will be cut over the next decade, affecting about 440,000 Minnesotans who

rely on SNAP, according to the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

State lawmakers say the changes push massive costs onto the state, counties, and tribal nations.

DFL Senate Majority Leader, Erin Murphy said that although Minnesota currently has a balanced budget with a surplus, lawmakers must be careful not to turn the surplus into a deficit.

She said Minnesota doesn't have enough money to match the dollar-for-dollar cuts to the SNAP program.

"We're going to have to make sure our budget meets our values, especially when we think about things like food support and childcare," Murphy said.

The federal changes include new eligibility requirements for recipients. Work requirements now apply to adults of ages 18-64, up from the previous limit of 54. Recipients must complete 80 hours of work or qualifying activities each month or risk losing their benefits after three months. The law also reduces certain exemptions, restricts eligibility to only lawful permanent residents for immigrants and introduces new income requirements.

Community members say changes have not

been clearly communicated, particularly in immigrant families in their language.

Tonny Pham, a Saint Paul resident, said he has struggled translating the new requirements for his grandmother because of his limited Vietnamese vocabulary. Each week, he helps her shop for groceries, often translates the receipts and tracks her SNAP benefits.

"It's like a long game of telephone at this point," Pham said. "There's no direct translation of these government materials in Vietnamese, so people don't really know the exact changes to that, and I often hear things that contradict what the actual news says."

Pham said language accessibility has been a long-standing issue of SNAP and EBT recipients, particularly in the Vietnamese community, who rely on translated materials.

State agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, DCYF and The Food Group say they have heard similar concerns from SNAP recipients. Many worry about meeting the new work requirements and being pushed to ration food.

Minnesota previously offered waivers to those who struggled to meet the work requirements in areas with high unemployment rates. But with reduced SNAP exemptions,

only four tribal nations and one county in Minnesota now qualify for those waivers.

"That is going to have a huge impact on the folks that we serve," said Dr. Shaneen Moore, Assistant Commissioner for the Family Well-Being Administration at the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

With reduced benefits, food shelves are already seeing increased demand. Minnesota food shelves have recorded about 9 million visits as of early March.

Sophia Lenarz-Coy, executive director of The Food Group, said they are struggling to keep up, citing the rise in food prices, even for these food shelves, and their high demand has affected inventory.

"It's really a system that already is at

capacity," Lenarz-Coy said.

Food shelves are also facing additional challenges related to the federal immigration crackdown. Lenarz-Coy said some immigrant families and people of color are afraid to leave their homes or visit food pantries to get the food they need, because of ICE activities in Minnesota.

She said ICE vehicles have waited in food shelf parking lots, intimidating residents and have followed volunteers delivering food. As a result, some food shelves have developed alternative ways to ensure immigrant families and people who face SNAP benefits cuts are getting the food that they need. They have to balance the effects of reduced benefits as well as their safety.

Senate President Bobby Joe Champion said Minnesotans have been burdened by Trump policies, including the recent Operation Metro Surge. He said that these policies stem from conflicts between the current federal administration and the states.

"It's almost predictable," Champion said, "that they would treat us badly and cut off SNAP benefits and Medicaid and not care about whether you're going to have any food."

Lawmakers remain doubtful that there is enough political support to replace federal SNAP cuts with state funding.

That leaves families, like M.O.'s, struggling to afford the cost of feeding their household.

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FEDERAL POLICY CHANGES PUT GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE FOR YOUTH AT RISK

By Wendy Xiong, *Johnson Senior High School*, Juan Miguel Adams, *St. Paul Academy and Summit School* and Laney Burns, *Breck School*

Leah Burns has begun to carefully monitor her supply of estrogen patches.

Burns, a transgender teenager who receives gender-affirming care at Children's Hospital in Minnesota, says she is worried about the future of teens in her community.

Gender-affirming care includes a range of services for transgender and gender diverse individuals. These services can be social, medical, surgical, and psychological support that aligns with a person's gender identity.

Recent federal legislation has brought new attention to the issue.

President Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," signed last year includes provisions that reduce federal spending on programs such as Medicaid over an estimated 10-year period. Section 44125 of the law prohibits federal funding for "specified gender transition procedures" for minors. Individuals under the age of 19 are the targets.

Minnesota officials have responded to these federal actions through legal challenges.

On Dec. 23, 2025 Attorney General Keith Ellison joined a coalition of 20 states in filing a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, arguing the agency is "unlawfully" limiting access to gender-affirming care for youth.

Then, on Jan. 16, Ellison joined another coalition of 12 attorneys general in a separate lawsuit challenging federal policies that they say discriminate against transgender individuals by restricting funding.

Hospitals have also begun responding to the new pressures from the federal government.

As of Feb. 27, Children's Minnesota has temporarily paused certain gender-affirming services for minors including prescribing puberty blockers and hormones. The restriction is in response to legal pressure from the Trump administration, which has threatened to revoke funding from hospitals

that provide gender-affirming care for minors. *[Editor's note: Children's Minnesota resumed all gender health program services in April, after this story was originally reported.]*

Nationally an estimated 270,000 transgender youth rely on Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, also known as CHIP.

"I believe without gender affirming care, there's going to be an increased suicide rate among people who are younger than me," Burns said. "I believe trans healthcare should be a human right, and the Trump administration is violating that [right]."

Medical professionals have also expressed concern about the potential effects of these changes.

Dr. Kade Goepferd, a pediatrician at Children's Minnesota, expressed concern about the policy changes.

"My biggest concern is that the cuts are getting in the way of kids being able to access their health care," Goepferd said.

Goepferd said young people who receive gender-affirming care often show improvements in mental health and well-being.

Some Minnesota DFL lawmakers and the legislature's Queer Caucus are advocating for maintaining access to gender-affirming health care.

Rep. Brion Curran, a DFL lawmaker and vice chair of the Queer Caucus said restricting care would have long term consequences.

"If trans kids aren't provided with the sort of gender-affirming care that they need, we will see a reduction in trans adults," Curran said.

Some advocates warn that restrictions on gender-affirming could lead to a 72% increase in suicide attempts for transgender youth in states with such restrictions.

For some lawmakers, the issue is also personal.

Rep. Leigh Finke, a DFL lawmaker and member of the Queer Caucus who is transgender, said the issue affects many people in Minnesota's LGBTQ+ community.

"It affects me. It affects everyone I know in

the community very deeply," Finke said.

Beyond politics, these restrictions also affect families differently depending on financial circumstances. Low-income families may struggle to access services they cannot afford.

Burns said she feels fortunate that her family can still afford her medication.

"However, for people who might not be as well financially, and who are younger than me, this can be very detrimental," Burns said.

As access becomes more uncertain, many LGBTQ+ youth turn to support organizations.

One resource many young people rely on is The Trevor Project, a nonprofit that provides mental health support and suicide prevention services for LGBTQ+ youth.

According to the organization, a nationwide survey found that more than 90% of LGBTQ+ youth believe political bans on gender-affirming care negatively affect their mental and physical health.

"Personal medical decisions ought to be made between patients, their doctors and their families not through a one-size-fits-all mandate from the federal government," said Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, senior vice president of public engagement at The Trevor Project.

The Trevor Project remains a major resource for transgender youth, but other support services have faced changes in recent times.

In July 2025, the Trump administration announced the termination of several specialized suicide prevention lines for LGBTQ+ youth.

Advocates say the future of gender-affirming care remains uncertain under the current administration as federal funding continues to be used as leverage. Many people in the LGBTQ+ community are unsure what their future coverage will look like.

"Everyone who is trans has their own mental health struggles, and people should not demonize those struggles," Burns said.

SAHAN, MINNPOST SUPPORT THREESIXTY STUDENTS TO AMPLIFY EXPERTISE ON 'LITTLE LOCAL' OPINION TOPICS

By Pechulano Ngwe Ali, Staff

THROUGH THREESIXTY Journalism's 2025 Opinion and Commentary Workshop, 16 young writers from 13 Twin Cities schools explored how their lived experiences and local observations can shape Minnesota's public conversations.

They tackled ICE raids, artificial intelligence, mental health and social media, the importance of free school meals, ethical alternatives to fast fashion, why Minneapolis should support the Roof Depot urban farm project, political division, and education policies that fail to teach critical thinking. Others wrote about drug use policies in

schools, funding rural schools, and youth political engagement ahead of the 2025 St. Paul mayoral election.

Organized in partnership with Sahan Journal and MinnPost, two leading Minnesota media outlets known for amplifying local and diverse perspectives, the workshop showed students that their perspectives matter, and that even "little, local" topics as MinnPost's Scott Gillespie called them, can create profound change.

Each student's story started with a simple but challenging question: what do you care about most in your community, and why should others care too? Each topic reflected something personal: an injustice felt, a policy

questioned, or a community they wanted others to understand better.

Spaces that build critical thinking and encourage youth to consider and call for the change needed in their communities are crucial in today's political and social climate, where misinformation, polarization and attacks on the press have made it harder for youth to trust their voices or believe they can shape public dialogue.

Seventeen volunteer instructors and mentors worked side-by-side with students, coaching them to bring their ideas to local news with clear structure, persuasive evidence, and clarity.

TO REBUILD LOCAL NEWS, WE MUST START WITH STUDENTS

New York City is reinvesting in high school journalism programs. It's time for Minnesota to do the same



By Anais Froberg-Martinez,
Perpich Center for Arts
Education

My former school, Minnetonka High School, is one of the largest public schools in Minnesota. Once a month, I would walk the halls with my co-editors to hand out newspapers, brushing past nearly 3,500 students as a stream of apologies trailed behind us. I dreaded the chaos of those early mornings, but nothing beat the satisfaction of finally seeing our articles in print. This was a newspaper with local stories, produced by students like me.

I joined the newspaper as an editor in my sophomore year, with no prior experience. Journalism drew me in because it connects people to history in ways that serve the community. Unsure of my skills, I searched for a summer program that could give me a start and eventually ground me in journalism.

At the time, I thought journalism lived in national headlines and not local stories. I believed I had to go out of Minnesota to learn. Instead with some convincing, my parents drove me to ThreeSixty Journalism, a youth journalism program at the University

of St. Thomas. After three weeks with them, my doubts turned into excitement.

After my sophomore year, I transferred schools. At Minnetonka, I spent mornings on less busy staircases to avoid the crowds. My few friends were not in my classes. In the afternoons, I would stay for the newspaper meetings but felt detached. So, I applied to the Perpich Center for Arts Education, a small arts high school with about 145 students. Perpich once had something that resembled a bi-weekly student newspaper; more like a pamphlet. But all its staff had graduated.

I missed those days of crowding around a computer with my co-editors, so I decided to revive Perpich's newspaper. It was no easy task. To my surprise, many students had never seen a school newspaper. One student joked that she only saw newspapers in TV shows. I laughed, but it made me realize how far-removed teenagers are from journalism. Like me before, they viewed news through national outlets like The New York Times or foreign conflict coverage. To them, joining the paper suddenly made journalism real, and closer to them.

That realization was the same spark that ThreeSixty Journalism gave me. By the time I started at Perpich, I had served a year on ThreeSixty's Youth Leadership Board. That year, we visited New York City. I still remember staring up at the giant New York Times building, but what stuck with me most was our meeting with the New York City Youth Journalism Coalition.

They advocate for journalism access for all NYC high schoolers. At the time, I never connected their efforts to my own

state, Minnesota. I learned about a study by Professor Jeanne Belton at Baruch College that showed how few NYC high school students had access to a newspaper. I began to wonder about Minnesota.

An internet search for the number of high school newspapers in Minnesota yielded no clear data. Larger student journalism programs in Minnesota are getting pushed out to parents, who either move to offer their children better opportunities or neglect to take action in their small town. It's not hard to see how this crucial gap extends to a consolidation of community journalism in Minnesota: high school journalism concentrates into the metro area alongside community newspapers, which accelerates a cyclical pattern at the national level. The NYC Youth Journalism Coalition has already caught up to this pattern, and they are making significant progress. But in Minnesota, there is no such solution.

Following their example, I thought gathering statistics was the first step. I reached out to State Representative Cheryl Youakim, co-chair of the education finance committee, to ask about data collection on students' access to journalism education. She questioned the funding needed to gather statewide information. "What matters is what we do with those statistics," she said. Youakim has supported student press freedom since 2005 and championed the Minnesota New Voices law before it passed in 2024. Her point was clear: the real gap isn't just data. It's enthusiasm, resources, and local commitment.

Rep. Youakim's words convinced

me that to promote local journalism in Minnesota schools, we need local solutions. Minnesota's existing community journalism organizations, already familiar with the media climate, can guide efforts inspired by the coalition.

Outlets like North News, in North Minneapolis immerses high school interns into reporting, considering a hyperlocal lens to both reporting and getting students interested in it. Another news outlet that works closely with ThreeSixty, Sahan Journal, covers immigrant and communities

of color and plays a key role in telling nuanced stories, especially as immigrants become political talking points.

Hyperlocal news builds a more humane community. It reaches places government reports can't. It shows students that journalism isn't a distant, elite profession but a tool for civic life. We may not yet have the resources for a statewide Journalism For All, but we can support programs already doing the work. Parents can advocate for their schools to have newspapers. Programs like North News and ThreeSixty need sustained

funding to prepare the next generation of journalists.

A healthy journalism ecosystem is built on the foundation of community, and that starts in educational settings. Local change has more bumps and roadblocks than a legal initiative carried out in one smooth omnibus bill, but with that journey comes strength. That strength gathers in Minnesota schools, and through every newspaper, rekindles a fire that softens the cold world of news.

WHY OUTSOURCING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO TIKTOK AND AI WON'T HEAL US



By Jason Ton,
Osseo Senior High School

Feeling anxious? Depressed? Think you have ADHD? Don't worry, TikTok has the answer. So do the mental health blogs that promise healing in 30 seconds. And of course, there's ChatGPT, ready with a validating response.

The average American spends seven hours a day on screens, but doctors recommend no more than two. If screen time were a prescription, we'd be overdosing nearly four times the daily limit.

In July 2024, Minnesota schools adopted its state-required no cell-phone policy. That should mean young people will finally spend less time "rotting" on their devices, right?

Banning cell phones at school is like slapping Scotch tape on a burst pipe. Despite well-intentioned policies or its easing of academic stress, it often overlooks emotional habits built at home. These habits include scrolling TikTok or confiding in AI chatbots. This shift in behavior reveals a deeper issue: young people are outsourcing emotional support to digital platforms.

Our emotional overdependence on online content is reshaping how youth seek connection. To address this, educators could integrate emotional literacy into health curricula or introduce mental health classes that teach students to express feelings both on and offline.

Families may model healthy tech boundaries at home, while tech companies could prioritize users' well-being and safety—improving moderation systems and flagging emotionally manipulative content.

During the pandemic, school-issued tablets became emotional crutches for many students. A 2021 CDC report found that

screen time among children doubled, with one in four teenagers reporting anxiety or depression if they exceeded four hours.

Social media usage remains higher than pre-pandemic levels, with mental health content becoming prominent on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. While some creators are licensed professionals, most aren't. Without proper context, these posts can cause confusion or self-diagnosis.

A 2025 The Guardian report states that over half of TikTok's top 100 mental health videos labeled with #mentalhealth contained misinformation, teaching young people to self-diagnose through surface-level advice. Collectively, those videos studied received 1.3 billion views. That's 267 million likes and 2.5 million comments—revealing how deeply misinformation spreads.

Beyond misinformation and self-diagnosing without expertise, the deeper issue is a lack of follow-up, accountability, or depth from influencers. Algorithms reward engagement over accuracy, pushing emotionally charged content regardless of its validity.

And while social media's influence on mental health has been well-established over the years, AI tools have become the new Google—not just for simple searches, but for emotional support, self-diagnosis, and even companionship.

Introduced publicly in late 2022, Generative AI such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion has been used for homework, creative projects, and connection. When they're available 24/7, never judge, and respond instantly, who wouldn't want to rely on them like they were a person?

However, digital interactions aren't the same as human interactions. Research suggests that in-person connections trigger stronger physiological responses than digital interactions, including higher oxytocin release and better heart rate regulation.

Still, more and more teens are treating AI bots like friends—sharing personal thoughts, seeking reassurance, and forming deep attachments. According to a 2025 survey by Common Sense Media, more than 70% of American teens aged 13–17 have used generative AI like ChatGPT, and more than

half of those users rely on it for emotional support and relationships.

Chatbots like Character.ai, Chai.ai, and Replika.ai let users talk to fictional characters but have raised concerns about emotional dependency and artificial connection.

In 2023, BBC reported a case involving 16-year-old Adam Raine's death by suicide reportedly linked to conversations with ChatGPT. Though the full context remains debated, the case sparked global concern about the emotional risks of relying on AI. While reliance on digital applications may provide comfort for some, there are risks to weakening of human interaction, algorithmic influence, and digital footprint exposure.

However, for some, digital spaces seem like the only option. This includes those who lack access to affordable healthcare, live in underserved areas, have online communities for support they may not always find in real life, or find safety in the anonymity that the internet provides.

While it may appear effective, it's often just the illusion of a healthy solution. According to Prairie Care, reinforcement of negative beliefs, a false sense of "human-like" support, and a lack of in-depth support can develop unhealthy habits.

Platforms like Sora AI have generated hyper-realistic videos, affecting users' perceptions of what's real online. Most users have no idea where their data goes or how it's stored—whether textual, visual, or auditory—or how it's being used to train future models.

As Millennials and Gen Z become parents, and screens become the new toys of future generations, the need for digital and emotional literacy grows more urgent. It can mean setting tech boundaries at home, pushing for mental health education in schools, improving platform moderation, and remembering that authentic connection doesn't have to be found online.

We don't need to erase our digital selves—but we shouldn't define ourselves through an illusion of peace.

So yeah, I'll be picking up some duct tape from Home Depot, but no amount of duct tape is going to fix a burst pipe effectively. It'll be a long, arduous journey—with real tools, of course.

ICE RAIDS ARE TEARING FAMILIES APART. WE CAN'T STAY SILENT



By Margarita Rosales Alarcón,
Venture Academy

On one Thursday night in early October 2025, my mother's phone rang. It was an automated message alerting her that ICE would be targeting my school along with other schools in the Twin Cities the next day. That Friday, I skipped school. As a young Latina, I was afraid of being racially profiled.

When I returned to my charter school in southeast Minneapolis the following Monday, everything seemed normal. I expected classmates or even teachers to talk about what had happened. No one did. Not a single word. It felt like we had silently agreed to ignore it, as if it did not matter.

But it does. This is the daily reality of many communities of color. Parents are detained and treated like animals. Children are left to figure out how to care for themselves, their siblings, and their futures.

"Si me llevan..." [if they take me] is something I have heard parents tell their children as they prepare for the worst. It's a conversation that should never have to happen.

Children are losing their support systems. Since Trump took office, immigration crackdowns have intensified. Twenty-two people have died in ICE custody this fiscal year. Detention centers are overcrowded, dehumanizing spaces. Many in my community call them concentration camps. Trump's administration is pushing for more than 3000 arrests a day.

Here in Minnesota, I have watched families being ripped apart. Fathers, mothers, and siblings taken in broad daylight. One of my relatives was pulled out of his work truck alongside his co-workers. His wife heard the commotion from down the street. In an instant, she and their four daughters lost their husband, father, and main source of income.

Their family had to sell some of their belongings just to pay rent, food and legal fees. I saw their things laid out in their yard: clothes, decor, jewelry, scattered all over for strangers to buy. As I stood there watching people buy their belongings, I realized how real it was. I saw grief on their faces.

Up until that moment I had only seen these stories on the news. A stranger crying on camera and begging God for their safety, to bring them back, for this nightmare to be over. But this time, it was my family.

"¿Dónde está papi [where is daddy]?" is the question I have heard from children in my community. Often, no one has answers as some detainees are never properly registered, and families don't even know they have been taken. No one explains what to do after your

family member is detained.

"Pronto estaremos juntos," they promise as they're loaded into vans. We'll be together soon. But often, they don't come back.

Have we forgotten what this country claims to stand for? Have we forgotten who built the U.S.? Many immigrants take any job they can, just to have a roof over their heads. And yet, they live in constant fear, even at school.

For young people like me, this is overwhelming. I am a senior and sometimes wonder: Is it worth going to college knowing that there is a possibility that at any moment you could lose all you know? Who would be there during the accomplishments, graduation, college move in, their birthdays? It's like we are forced to choose between our family and our future.

"Yo me voy con ustedes," a classmate once told me. If my family gets deported, I'll leave too.

We are witnessing history, and we need to start telling the stories the way they are and not the way the government wants us to believe. These are the consequences of voting against democracy. Instead of moving forward as a country, America seems to be moving backwards, voting for politicians that strip away our rights. Voting for politicians that are actively working against our rights.

The question now is: Are we going to give up, or are we going to keep fighting for our communities, our families, and our future? If we don't fight, who will?

MINNEAPOLIS SHOULD SUPPORT ROOF DEPOT PROJECT



By Janya Dieringer,
Johnson Senior High School

Minneapolis has the opportunity to rebuild a community it helped destroy.

If the city doesn't support the Roof Depot project in the East Phillips neighborhood, it will once again show that the pain of this community does not matter to them. Supporting the project could spark real change in East Phillips and set an example for other community-led urban farm projects across the city.

Beneath the Roof Depot building sits four feet of arsenic-contaminated soil. The building was once a warehouse and next to it was a chemical plant that produced arsenic-based pesticides.

The neighborhood has faced environmental racism for decades. Years of pollution from industrial plants and highways has crept into the lungs of the community, raising rates of asthma and childhood lead exposure, according to reporting from MinnPost. In 2016, the city bought the building intending to

demolish it, a move that could have released more pollutants into the air.

The East Phillips Neighborhood Institute (EPNI) has spent more than a decade trying to buy the building to turn it into an indoor urban farm and community center. But, both the state and the city have failed to support their efforts. This reflects a larger problem: funding community-led urban farms.

Urban farms matter to local communities. They provide fresh food to residents who struggle to access it, create green and open spaces, and generate local jobs. As the climate crisis worsens, their role becomes even more critical.

"Climate change makes it harder to grow food, and big ag is failing to increase their crop production," said Marcos Giossi, Market Garden Farm Manager at Urban Roots, an urban farm located on the east side of Saint Paul, where I've worked since the summer of 2024. "The result is food insecurity, when fresh, nourishing food becomes less available and more expensive," Giossi said.

Transforming polluted land into farmland is possible. At Urban Roots, our largest farm site, Rivoli Bluffs, sits on land that was once polluted.

"It was basically a neighborhood dump," Giossi said. "It went through a restoration process... so the food we are growing is far

away from the garbage that is below." But unlike Rivoli, the Roof Depot site is profitable to the city, making it harder for the community to reclaim it.

Rivoli sits near an airport, where building is restricted. The Roof Depot site, however, is developable land. The city originally planned to build a new Public Works facility there.

Despite this, EPNI and the East Phillips community have never stopped fighting. The biggest roadblock for the Roof Depot project, like many other urban farms, has always been funding. After years of pushback, the city dropped its Public Works Facility plan, and made several deals to sell the building to EPNI, tied to local and state funding.

Reporting from Sahan Journal indicates that state lawmakers promised \$12.2 million, but only \$6.5 million was delivered, even after EPNI raised the required match for the remaining \$5.7 million.

After that devastating news, EPNI then lowered its offer to buy the building for \$10.2 million. The city rejected it. Officials have given EPNI until Nov. 15 to purchase the property at the full \$11.4 million. After that, it will consider other buyers.

I have seen what urban farms like Urban Roots can do. From providing youth jobs and

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SCHOOL-PROVIDED MEALS AREN'T A LUXURY. THEY ARE A RIGHT



By Elisee Voumadi,
Math and Science Academy

Because Math and Science Academy (MSA) didn't get enough funding and space to build a kitchen and cafeteria, we eat lunch brought from home on the stage. Nearly every day, I hear students echo through the halls: "I'm so hungry." Some days those words come out of my mouth, too. Many of us struggle to stay focused in class because of the growling of our stomachs.

Food at schools shouldn't be a luxury. School-provided meals should be guaranteed, protected from funding cuts, and made from quality ingredients so students can learn without worrying about hunger. In the U.S., school lunch is not prioritized the way it should be. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which oversee and make the final decision in school meal funding

around the US, are making decisions that don't reflect students' interests.

At MSA, the lack of meals, despite universal free meals in Minnesota, has affected my ability to learn. Hunger makes it hard to concentrate, participate, and sometimes even stay awake in class.

This issue isn't just a problem at MSA. Many students across Minnesota rely on school lunches. A recent study by Second Harvest Heartland, one of the nation's largest food banks, found that 26% of households with children in the state are food insecure. That means tens of thousands of children worry about whether they will have enough food at home or at school.

Despite this need, support for school-provided meals is shrinking. In March, the USDA cut \$18 million in funding from school-provided meals, according to reporting from the Minnesota Reformer. Minnesota schools are feeling the effects at a time when US food inflation has surpassed 3%, driving up cost and making it harder for programs to provide affordable nutritious meals.

When funding is cut, meal quality can suffer. Schools may switch to cheaper and ultra-processed foods, which are not prohibited. Some may argue low quality food is better than none, but a study from the National Institutes of Health shows a link

between the consumption of ultra-processed foods and higher risks of chronic diseases like obesity, cardiovascular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, and cancer."

Others might say students should just bring their own lunch before they go to school. But rising food prices make that less realistic. In an interview, my classmate Albiol Nya Checkou said, "it brings an extra responsibility upon me, which can sometimes lead to extra stress due to having to cook or buy something beforehand, which costs extra money." Albiol also plays soccer, so juggling meal preps with school and sports is hard. Many students face similar challenges, especially families with limited food access or packed schedules.

If we don't address this, students will keep falling behind, not because of the lack of effort or intelligence, but because they are hungry. Every student should be able to focus and thrive at school. If not, what's the point of having school at all?

Instead of cutting funding for school meals, the USDA and NSLP should increase it to support engaged and fed students. At MSA we will keep bringing food from home this year. But after two decades, the school is finally planning a new building with a cafeteria. That's a basic right every student should be able to count on.

MINNESOTA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS LACK CRITICAL THINKING



By Naomi Miller,
Richfield Senior High School

I am a senior at Richfield Senior High School, and I despise my political science class.

Reading an outdated textbook and learning the Bill of Rights while my own rights slip away with every breaking headline feels pointless.

Our state's social studies standards do not fit the needs of current high school students to learn the critical thinking skills that will make them productive citizens of tomorrow's society. Guidelines must be amended to match the times we are living in.

I have been passionate about my social studies classes for as long as I can remember. My seventh-grade social studies teacher told us over and over that those who fail to learn history are doomed to repeat it. His class encouraged us to think critically and apply history lessons to current events.

That is not happening in my twelfth-grade political science class. As we learn about the

purpose of the constitution, I can't avoid thinking about the unconstitutional abuse of power being committed by the current presidential administration.

My friends and I discuss current events in the hallway on the way to class, in the lunchroom, and across our social media pages. But these discussions stop at the door of our political science classroom. In a class that is supposed to be talking about government and citizenship, we don't talk about our government.

Most social studies classes aren't encouraging or requiring us to apply what we learn in school to the world outside. In this current political climate, where issues are polarized, critical discussion of current events is even more important than it ever has been.

The implementation of Project 2025, the racial profiling of ICE raids, the cruel conditions of Alligator Alcatraz, and the dramatic erosion of press freedoms need to be examined in our schools.

Under Minnesota state law, high school students are required to take social studies classes in American History, World History, Geography, Government and Citizenship, and Economics.

I asked my political science teacher, Benjamin Powers (whom I respect), whether he believed social studies standards were adequate at encouraging critical review of current events to prepare young people for engaged citizenship.

He says it's complicated to teach social

studies classes at the moment. "I think what's tricky is schools are cautious ... My job is to challenge students' thinking and their preconceived notions of the world. ... [What teachers say] could be taken out of context."

In this politically charged environment, some teachers seem to have a reluctance to discuss controversial topics.

While teachers are supposed to be protected by the First Amendment in their discussion of current events, in many states, there have been restrictions on discussing polarizing, controversial topics such as the LGBTQ+ community and the ongoing conflict in Palestine. Recently, southern elementary school teachers have been fired for discussing LGBTQ+ media with their students that fall into the curriculum.

In higher education, professors have been fired for discussing issues related to Palestine. Firing a teacher at any education level elicits fear in teachers across the country at the thought of losing their jobs for discussing what could be considered controversial material.

We must discuss these issues anyway. We need our teachers to be brave. They must implement state education standards in their classrooms in ways that allow us to cope and reckon with the complicated world around us. It is a disservice to young adults to refuse to discuss critical events at a time that demands discussion. We are the future of America, and

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ANNUAL WORKSHOP HELPS TEENS FIND STORIES ONLY THEY CAN TELL

By Kenzie O'Keefe, Staff

A MULTIGENERATIONAL migration story. A first car. Music. Surviving war. An eating disorder. Crochet. Urban farming and reciprocity. Metro Surge. Quitting ballet. Not being the best. K-pop. Managing anxiety through dance and shyness through soccer. ADHD and overcoming. Running and resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic. Being Somali in a white school. Parental addiction. Gender and culture. The value of listening. Gardening. Qimem, a spice and a nickname. Stranger Things and government surveillance. Letter writing in a family.

These are the wide-ranging topics the 24 students participating in ThreeSixty Journalism's 2026 College Essay Workshop explored during the four-day camp at the University of Saint Thomas.

Led by ThreeSixty's program director Pechulano Ngwe Ali and local author and poet Sun Yung Shin, students learned the mechanics of personal essay writing and what college admissions offices are looking for from college essays.

"The camp provides a wonderful, engaging, focused, and highly productive experience for high school students," said Shin, who was

back for a second year as guest instructor for the program.

According to Ngwe Ali, the College Essay Workshop is about "more than helping students write an application essay."

"It gives students space to practice self-discovery through storytelling, recognize that their experiences and perspectives have value, and to begin seeing themselves as people who belong in higher ed," Ngwe Ali said.

Through the experience, students learned about themselves and formed new relationships with writing itself. "Writing doesn't always have to be educational. It can be for fun too," said Ah'jenae Williams, an incoming senior at Central High School.

Many students shared that a highlight of the experience was working with volunteer coaches and receiving one to one support. "It was helpful talking to someone who doesn't know me and can read my story objectively and can figure out if there's really a story there," said Sydney Baxter, also an incoming senior at Central.

More than 15 volunteers stepped into the classroom and supported students during their processes: Tyger Callahan, Rose-Marie Athiley, Sarah Gedrose, Bill Wareham, Gino Terrell, Lynda McDonnell, Terry

Walkerstorfer, Danielle Wong, Muna Isse, Samantha Stroozas, Jim Seitz, Deb Sakry Lande, Wendy Wyatt, Chris Havens, Valerie O'Keefe, and Kendall Shostak.



Back for a second year, acclaimed Minnesota author and poet Sun Yung Shin served as lead instructor for the program.



ZACH STARK

Two Rivers High School

Upon the successful completion of my driver's test, my dad let me use a red Mazda 2 he had bought from his ex-girlfriend. My friends were overjoyed that I finally had a car. It would become the center of the remainder of our childhood.

For a group of teenage friends, having a car feels like one last step toward freedom before adulthood. Memories we make with friends during our teenage years can't be bought or sold for any amount of money. My car came to reflect that aspect of transition to adulthood.

My car both shapes me and shaped by me. I wrecked the mirror against the garage while learning to drive. The mirror remained intact, but its shell shattered. While the car was teaching me to drive, I left it a permanent scar, one that tells the story of an important part of my development.

The metal on the hood of my car bends into a crescent-shaped dent. This dent reminds me of a time in the car when we decided to make

our own fun. Sick of doing the same activities, the three of us drove off in a random direction in search of adventure. On that adventure, one of my friends jumped onto the hood, leaving a large dent. I was angry at the time. Now, I find the dent charming. My friends have also improved the car, as the air freshener they bought for it proves.

"The features of something simple like a car can illustrate what it's like to be someone transitioning from childhood to being an adult. The car is my life and I'm the one driving it."

Driving in the car, you'll soon notice that the radio does not work. When alone, the silence can be deafening. But when I'm driving with friends, the lack of music can be good. We will fill the silence by sharing our thoughts and making jokes. You can listen to music at any moment in your life. You can only experience childhood once.

As the primary driver in the friend group, gas can become expensive. Our response to this should have been to get jobs. We were

seemingly spared from that when my Grandma offered to give me a box of old plates. The idea became to become salesmen with the plates. However, after hours of calling and driving we encountered no luck. To this day the plates remain in the trunk. Each clatter it makes a reminder that it's time to grow up.

An aspect of childhood is a sense of imagination. Even in late teenage years my friends and I still had the imagination to put significance on insignificant objects. One day a coin was found in my car. The coin exhibited some random religious text, which is why we attributed it to our survival in the car. But it's easy to forget that the coin has no effect. Whether we live or die, whether we experience happiness or boredom, is entirely up to us. It's too easy to forget that we control the wheel of our own destiny.

The features of something simple like a car can illustrate what it's like to be someone transitioning from childhood to being an adult. The car is my life and I'm the one driving it. Only time can tell where I'll go and who'll drive with me.



SALMA ALI

Minnetonka High School

In seventh grade, my parents bought a new home. My siblings and I were excited; each of us now had our own room, a private space where I could escape my often-annoying younger brothers, with whom I shared a tiny room beforehand.

Finally, it felt like we were now living the so-called ‘American Dream.’ Our own home; what should be an immigrant family’s greatest achievement. Plus, it was in a neighborhood with good schools. What could go wrong?

I moved from a communal neighborhood where I could play with children who looked like me, could knock on someone’s door when my family was out of sugar and still feel welcomed, to one where being the only Black, Somali kid walking in the park, or in every classroom in school was my daily reality. Then I started feeling like an outlier. In classes, I was isolated. Other students would not partner with me during discussions, choosing even peers diagonally from them.

I started secluding myself and finding refuge in my bedroom. For the first time

in my life, I felt stereotyped. People already assumed I was an outsider, and I internalized that. I stopped talking about myself to fit in. I no longer talked about the funny moments at Dugsi (Islamic weekend school) fearing my peers would see me as foreign. I never spoke about the food I ate, even if it was my favorite Maraq (meat-based stew) and Basmati rice, avoiding having to explain myself and what I felt was normal.

“I can’t force people to not stereotype me, but I can control how I move in the world.”

I sanitized myself to be the palatable Somali girl, not too loud, not too different, and always just right, to be a listening ear to my white peers’ conversations, never as an addition, fearing an awkward conversation.

Once in general conversation, during a before school meet up at the school gallery, the topic of if women should change their last names when they get married came up and in a rare moment I spoke about my cultural experience. I said, “identity is an important part of being Muslim, your name and your heritage matter, so changing a last name to fit another household is actually perceived negatively, compared to the European

standard of a woman leaving her home to be a part of another family.”

Then came the brief silence, followed by facial expressions of surprise and curiosity. It was the first time since entering high school that I actually felt proud of what my identity could bring to the table. I learned to just speak up instead of becoming another assumption.

It started my reflection on the culmination of my past experiences since moving, how I suffered mentally for general acceptance, but when I finally spoke, people were interested, and the conversation flowed normally with my addition to the topic. It validated a growing sense of easiness I yearned for when chatting with my peers, conversations where I would bring up my own heritage and opinions and feel accepted to do so. That my fear of further ostracization wasn’t as valid as I stressed over.

Now, slowly, I’ve started to come out of my shell in conversations and make the active choice to not put too much weight on my concerns in social situations, and to go with my truth rather than worrying about my palatability around my peers. I can’t force people to not stereotype me or to always find me ‘normal,’ but I can control how I move in the world and I want to live being proud of my identity, and of myself.



MAHA BELAY

Woodbury High School

Google Search: “Does the government really listen to our phone calls?”

“How to get telekinesis?”

“Is Stranger Things real?”

If you read these search queries today, you might wonder why an 11-year-old is asking such strange questions, especially the ones that sound similar to the manifesto of a conspiracy theorist or the beginning of a supervillain origin story.

In third grade, my best friend Anya told me about the show *Stranger Things*. She talked about a monster called the Demogorgon, a group of kids, and men in lab coats attempting to develop telekinesis. I didn’t think much of it. In fact, I couldn’t think at all; I would simply nod, masking my confusion.

Later that summer, Baba and Mommy decided to purchase a Netflix subscription. In the world of Netflix and choosing what show to watch, my sister Betre and I felt like we were entering an ice cream shop without knowing which flavor to pick. We eventually settled on *Stranger Things*; I remembered Anya’s deep infatuation with it. What began as a way to cure our summer boredom became my first deep dive into government secrecy.

One scene from *Stranger Things* stuck with me. Nancy and Jonathan, frustrated by the government’s attempts to conceal the truth, avoid discussing it over the phone. Later, when they notice strangers watching them, I remember wondering: how did they know?

Out of excitement about the show, I would attempt to explain the plot to Baba and get him as interested as I was. But why would a fictional story matter to my Ethiopian immigrant father? Surely it meant nothing to him compared to his responsibilities. Nevertheless, after my dad’s long shifts—working 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.—I would try to sneak in an episode or two to watch together, but he would usually fall asleep midway through.

“I realized that our ideas about the government weren’t rooted in the same experiences. What had seemed incredible to me was normal for Baba.”

But I wouldn’t give up. Whenever I had the chance, I would explain the key takeaways I was getting from *Stranger Things*, including the scene about Nancy and Jonathan’s phone call being monitored. After that explanation, I realized that Baba understood something I didn’t. To him, the idea of a government monitoring communications wasn’t just a concept; it was something that routinely occurred in his home country.

It finally made sense why Baba got his news from YouTube and independent journalists when it came to Ethiopia. He learned not to rely on a single source, so he sought out multiple perspectives. I had once treated those concerns as background noise, never connecting them to the show I was watching. But suddenly, the two worlds overlapped. What felt like a frightening possibility to me was something my dad had dealt with. I realized that our ideas about the government weren’t rooted in the same experiences. What had seemed incredible to me was normal for Baba.

At 11, I would regularly call Baba: “Hello! Get home safe!” Now, I think differently about that ordinary act. *Stranger Things* introduced me to the idea of surveillance, while Baba’s experiences showed me that they can exist outside of fiction.

I’m no longer interested in how to get telekinesis or proving that *Stranger Things* is real. Instead, I’m interested in the questions underneath that childhood curiosity: What does a government choose to tell its people, and what does it leave out? Why does one person trust an official statement while another searches for a different source? And how much of that trust is shaped by what we have already experienced? *Stranger Things* may have piqued my curiosity, but Baba’s experiences of the world made that curiosity real. Thanks to both of them, I know I’ll continue asking tough questions.



**AH'JENAE
WILLIAMS**
Central High School

The summer after 8th grade, I grew my first bell pepper. I named it 'Bella.' My mom has been gardening vegetables for practically my whole life. Sometimes I think I could be a vegetable too the way she watches me grow up tending to my needs, but gardening never sparked my interest until I went into a YouTube rabbit hole in organic chemistry.

On a school night in my room, I turned on my desk lamp while getting ready for bed and grabbed my iPad. I lowered the volume so as not to wake anyone as I noticed a suggested video catching my eye. It described the process of how plants have an organically engineered defense mechanism—something I hadn't heard of before—and it sparked curiosity to start improving my skills in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM). That fall I checked out my first book from the school library about plants that had flashy cards describing in detail their functions. This led me to a personal question I began looking into, "does gardening affect how I grow?"

I already struggled connecting with my

peers and felt an absence of community as I was trying to discover who I was. While I began to explore my newfound interests in robotics club, my peers would say words I didn't understand, which made me feel dense. I believed I was an "underqualified STEM kid." I wasn't successful in finding a sense of belonging in the program, making it hard for me to stick with it. This isolation made me question if I would be able to immerse myself in my new passion. I realized with drive and focus I could use this self-doubt and allow it to fuel me and make me better. Through my perseverance I have seen my attitude change toward myself, my studies, and my family. I believe I am an asset in the STEM field, and someone who belongs.

Then I remembered the garden, realizing that it too helped me grow into a better individual. At the start of my journey me and my garden were in a "dormancy" phase where everything felt dull and lifeless. Soon it started becoming a "state of grace" with my new improvements. My squash, herbs and strawberries flourished together as I did too. I wouldn't be able to recognize myself as this person if I hadn't put hard work and discipline into my life that resulted from taking care of my plants.

My garden made the language of organic chemistry fluent to me. It taught me that

various vegetables have allium fistulosum's, using the "Root apical meristem." Metabolic mechanisms provide them the power to regenerate by threonine metabolisms, allowing them to be efficient and durable at surviving due to adapting to their environment. The green onions I watch over are the perfect example because they replicate rapidly and have longevity. Making them the powerhouse of reproducible vegetables.

"Sometimes I think I could be a vegetable too, the way my mom watches me grow, tending to my needs."

"Bella the bell pepper" is part of the lesson of growing into the individual that I am. Without that one blissful moment outside with the sun blazing, my hands soiled in gritty dirt, sweat and a pair of gardening scissors, I wouldn't be able to find the thing I love the most and have the opportunity to grow into something new.



ASA LEE
Washburn High School

I think the purest expression of ourselves is left behind in the letters we write. It's only through the careful selection of words and moments that these imprints become visible.

I've always seen myself as a writer. Within the cyclical motion of identity, it's one of the few constants that exists in every iteration of myself. So why have I found myself struggling to write a simple letter over and over again?

Writing for me has always followed a moment of inspiration: the emergence of a muse. For a long time, I felt that my letters lacked spontaneity. Even a birthday card would be covered in eraser marks, every thank-you note accompanied by a handful of crumpled drafts. I followed the standard formula: sound happy, include something specific, be reminiscent. And yet, every time I signed my name, I couldn't help but feel empty.

I only came to understand the beauty of letters after reading a letter my grandfather wrote to my father, tucked in the pages of his old bible. In broken English, he urged my father to study harder, encouraging him,

telling him he was our family's last hope. It was the only time that I've ever known my grandfather to use the word "love."

"Our letters became the bridge between generations, the connection between two ideas of what it means to be American."

My grandfather has lived with us for most of my life. At times, it feels like he is a stranger, only appearing to rummage through the fridge or tell us the light in his room was broken. Our relationship has always been complicated: I'm still learning to embrace my heritage, and he has trouble finding the right words to say.

Yet what made that letter beautiful was that I finally understood everything my grandfather couldn't say: it was in the spaces between his words that I saw his vulnerability, his fears, the love he never knew how to express. And in that moment, under the light of my bedside lamp, I saw him.

I decided to write a letter of my own to my grandfather, an attempt to reconcile the differences between us. For the first time, I was willing to accept the empty spaces between words; willing to acknowledge the past, to voice my regrets. I've never shown him that letter, and he may not know I've read his. But in a way, our letters became the bridge

between generations, the connection between two ideas of what it means to be American.

That bridge is growing more fragile with each passing day. My grandfather is 93 now, and most days he struggles just to get out of bed. Every step I take to know him better challenges me to turn inward first, to find my footing within all the memories. Often, I find myself looking for this stability within my own writing. For years, I hadn't been able to read anything I had written. Collections of stories and poetry, gathering dust on my bedroom shelf, always felt incomplete.

It was only as I wrote my letter to my grandfather that I realized the muse I'd been searching for was just a passing reflection of myself. My refusal to read my own work had been a refusal to acknowledge my own existence. Flipping through the pages, I learned to have empathy for the person I'd been. I finally understood that I'd always been writing letters to myself.

And slowly, I've started to know my grandfather too. I've learned we share a passion for art, and he's started to tell me some stories of his own. These experiences, the emotional connections I've formed through writing: they've taught me what it means to be a writer.



**LEO
HARWOOD**
Two Rivers High School

Whenever I think about my identity, I immediately think of my musicianship. Music is really important to me. Not just because I love playing and listening to it, but because it has become a prism through which I relate to the rest of the world.

I've been playing drums since the age of five and trombone since the age of ten. But I didn't always take music seriously. I was more interested in videogames and youtube videos.

In ninth grade, things began to change. My social life became unstable and I started questioning who I was as a person. I tried to convince myself I was a musician but felt like I was just pretending to be one. For nearly a decade of my life I'd been playing drums and trombone, but I still didn't sound like the jazz or rock musicians I listened to.

My trombone playing sounded clogged; it offended my ears. My drumming was sloppy – I couldn't play in time with most songs.

Music was the only activity I did. No sports or robotics, only music. Still, I had almost

nothing to show for it. This realization crushed me. I felt defeated. One question haunted me: Who am I, if not a musician?

After a few weeks of feeling this way, I decided I wanted to at least try to play some music again. It didn't matter what, I just wanted to try and see how I felt. Maybe I could still find enjoyment in it. So, I sat back down at my drum set and pressed the shuffle button on my Spotify playlist. I don't remember what song came up, but I do remember how I felt after playing it.

Electricity was still zipping through my fingers, arms, and legs as the music faded from my earbuds. The dust from the cymbals and toms now hazed the air around me. For the first time in weeks, I didn't feel a weight on my chest. The fresh feeling of life flowing through me was then suddenly interrupted by the next song in the queue, loud and hard in my ears. I picked up my sticks and kept playing song after song.

I don't know how long I spent at my drum set that day, but by the end of my playing my palms were sweaty and numb. I set down my sticks and pondered that question—"Who am I?"—once more, and came to a realization: Maybe I shouldn't be asking who I am, but rather who I could be. Yes, I was not a musician, but I could be if I actually tried for

once.

That year, I saw more improvement in myself than I had in the last ten. I could play higher notes on my trombone than ever before. My drum fills sounded clean and in time.

"Maybe I shouldn't be asking who I am, but rather who I could be."

From my progress I concluded, "If simply putting in effort did so much for me in music, it could do so much for me in everything else".

I started putting effort into all aspects of my life. I no longer sat in class just waiting for the day to be over, nor did I do homework simply for the sake of getting it over with. Instead, I started really trying to think about what I learned in school and connecting points from my lectures to the homework I was assigned.

I also began listening to my friends more and caring about their wellbeing. As a result my social life improved, I made more friends, and I formed closer connections with the people I cared about.

Committing to music showed me how far putting in effort can take you in life.



**AMAL
BEDRU**
Math and Science Academy

ቅመም. Qimem [kuh-mum]. Spice.

It was one of the first words from my mother tongue I learned to recognize, not because I studied it, but because I heard it so often. My mother, grandfather, and "aunts" all called me Qimem.

Since I was five, I wondered why I was given such a name. The word seemed woven into my family, present in ordinary moments I never thought twice about.

Family gatherings meant the younger cousins and I crowded in the basement while our older relatives took over the living room, turning on traditional Ethiopian music and dancing. Downstairs, the ceiling shook beneath their footsteps. Echoing from upstairs I'd hear: "Where's Qimem? We need Qimem up here."

Their voices carry the beat to my feet, my shoulders moving side to side with the rhythm. I'd always loved eskista, the Ethiopian dance known for its quick shoulder movements, but in that moment, I was less focused on my dancing and more on the people watching me.

From across the room, I caught the sparkles in my relatives' eyes as they smiled from the couch. Their smiles held more than amusement; they carried a sense of pride. In front of them were their children carrying on a

tradition they'd grown up with and worked to preserve. As I danced, I watched my younger cousins slowly make their way into the circle. I reached for their hands and pulled them beside me, laughing as we tried to match each other's movements. Watching us, my aunts and uncles weren't only seeing tradition continue; they were seeing their children learn from one another, just as we'd learned from them.

I grew up surrounded by people passing down our traditions, and it was my grandpa who taught me why they mattered. My እያት [ah-yaht] often sat me down to teach me our history, where we came from, and the traditions that shaped our family. I loved listening to him, even when too young to understand why every story mattered. One day, he told me about Ethiopian food. He explained how our meals can consist of countless stews and meat dishes, but the real flavor comes from the qimem. Spice isn't necessarily the entire meal; it's what brings the different flavors together and makes the meal feel complete.

As he explained this, I began to understand the word that defined my childhood. I looked at him, and suddenly the word I'd heard my entire life felt different. If qimem could bring together all the flavors of a meal, was that what my family had seen in me? I finally asked the question I'd carried for years: Why Qimem?

He smiled, his eyes carrying the warmth of someone who had known the answer all along, and said, "እንደ እርስዎ ያሉ ሰዎች ባይኖሩ ኖሮ፣ ነገሮች ሁሉ ጣዕም አልባ በሆኑ ነበር። በሕይወታችን ውስጥ ሁሉም ቅመም ያስፈልገናል።"

((Ende erswo yalu sewoch baynorun

nor, negeroch hulu ta-im alabehon neber. Behiywetachin wist hulemem "qimem" yasfelegnal.))

"Without people like you, everything'd be bland. We always need a qimem in our lives."

"Without people like you, everything'd be bland. We always need a qimem in our lives."

Qimem used to be a cute little nickname I'd answer to without a second thought. Now, when I hear it, I think about the way people around me have always viewed me. The actions I once considered mundane were never as small to the people experiencing them. I began to understand that impact doesn't always come from the moments we recognize. Sometimes, it's found in the smallest gestures we make without thinking, the moments we might forget but someone else carries with them. That realization followed me into high school. I noticed the same instinct when I became president of my school's International Club. I wanted to create the same feeling I'd known in my family's living room: a place where people could share pieces of themselves and feel they belonged.

For years I answered Qimem without understanding. Now, I answer with intention, purpose, and pride.

ቅመም. Qimem [kuh-mum]. Bringing out what's there without replacing it.

Immigration Crackdown Continued from page 19

because it is so important to Minnesota schools and students,” Jordan said. “I hope that one of my Republican colleagues will join me.”

In the Minnesota Senate, lawmakers introduced bill SF 3611, the companion bill to HF 3435. It passed in committee in a unanimous vote.

Sen. Jim Abeler, R- Anoka, who has been outspoken within the Republican caucus, and criticized ICE’s actions in Minnesota, is on the Education Policy Committee. He voted in favor of SF 3611.

In early February, Abeler also drafted and sent a letter to former DHS Secretary Kristi Noem and border czar Tom Homan, calling for changes in federal enforcement tactics and urging agents not to target schools and children.

“From the left, [responses] were all positive,” Abeler said of the responses he received from colleagues. “There was a lot of silence from the right and then a few snide comments.”

“If they got a green card, leave them alone, same if you’re a refugee,” he said. “There were so many citizens that got picked up. What are we doing?”

While lawmakers debate policy at the Capitol, Minnesota students have been among the loudest voices protesting the immigration crackdown, chanting “ICE OUT.”

Youth across the Twin Cities have staged walkouts in protest, including protests at Roosevelt High School. St. Paul Public Schools students organized a district-wide march to the Minnesota State Capitol on Jan. 14.

Mongereri was among the students who participated in walkouts at her school. She said she marched to raise awareness of the stories of others and with one reminder to share.

“This isn’t something we should even be going through in the [21st] century,” Mongereri said. “Why are we going through discrimination and racism like this? America is supposed to be the land of freedom.”

Civic Seal Continued from page 20

will review the Civic Seal guidelines.

With the help of Mike Dean, YMCA Center for Youth Voice Director, Jensen and other students created a progress and validity tracking app for Civic Seal participants.

The app will be “vetted by other high school students on the Civic seal board,” Jensen said, adding that the app factors into “why [the seal is] like zero-cost, because volunteers and students are doing all of the tracking basically.”

Last legislative session, the seal received a large fiscal note, illustrating advocates’ concerns that sustained funding for civics

instruction and media literacy could be hard to come by.

Sen. Kunesh said many public schools have not been able to hire staff necessary to provide basic guidance for students doing research.

“I would say the biggest barrier is not having library media specialists in the schools,” Kunesh said.

Some media literacy experts say school-based programs must be paired with efforts from local nonprofits and civic organizations.

“Even if we do introduce media literacy in schools, who’s to say that isn’t going to get cut next time there’s a funding challenge?” said Kevin Kalla, a former film educator and current communications director at the youth music organization CommUSICation.

Zachary T. Milford, University of Kentucky doctoral student who researched the Kentucky Civic Seal, said that the seal can empower students to take ownership of their learning while still in the classroom.

“[The seal challenges] the idea that we’re going to restrict what we teach students to a finite number of skills,” Milford said.

Instead, it encourages students to “lead the way and determine where they are going to take their research project.”

Time constraints within the school day present another challenge.

“There are so many pressures in the school day anyway on just getting through other state mandated standards,” said Connor Rohwer, a former youth worker in the Twin Cities who is currently getting his education license at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Milford said unlike Kentucky, which does not have officially recognized First Nations, the Civic Seal may face unique challenges in Minnesota where the state’s tribal communities and tribal contract schools may require additional consideration to ensure equitable access.

Despite these challenges, supporters say they are optimistic about the proposal’s chances in the ongoing 2026 legislative session. The Civic Seal bill has bi-partisan support, and is co-sponsored by Sen. Karin Housley, R-Stillwater and Sen. Julia Coleman, R-Waconia.

The bill passed the Senate Education Policy Committee on a unanimous vote, and advocates say it could become law.

“Regardless of where on the political spectrum you come from, you want people to be well-informed to have a working democracy,” said media artist and educator Jordan Lee Thompson, adding that his long-held statement is “no longer as obvious as it used to be.”

For Jensen, the Civic Seal strives to strengthen the link between media literacy and democracy. Its supporters maintain that it prepares future voters to navigate an increasingly complex media environment by embracing technology’s growing presence in civic education.

Now, Jensen manages the Civic Seal’s Instagram account, paying tribute to the role social media played in her involvement.

“Maybe we don’t want social media to be a huge aspect,” Jensen said. “But it still is.”

SNAP Cuts Continued from page 21

“They [my mom] just noticed that the money they were getting on the card was way less,” M.O. said of her family’s SNAP benefits. “One trip would use one food stamp, and then half of her out-of-pocket money.”

Urban Roots Continued from page 24

access to fresh produce to donating more than 6,000 pounds of food to the community this year, Urban Roots has changed my life and many others.

The money that farms (or potential farms) like EPNI’s Roof Depot site are asking for is a tiny fraction of the state budget. To put things into perspective Sahan Journal reports that the Minnesota legislature passed bills to finish a \$66 billion two-year spending plan. Included in that was a \$700 million capital improvement bill, but local funding wasn’t included. Out of the capital improvements the \$5.7 million would make up only 0.081% and of the whole budget only 0.009%.

Despite overwhelming community support for this project and proof that projects like this do improve local communities, the city has made it difficult for EPNI to buy the land.

As the November deadline and Minneapolis mayoral election nears, it’s important that we continue to support and vote for candidates that support the Roof Depot project and similar community efforts.

We need to keep fighting for our neighborhoods. If we don’t, who will?

Social Studies Continued from page 25

our success as a society depends on our ability to think critically about current events.

One way that social studies standards could be more effectively implemented is by encouraging media literacy. That will force students to discuss what they are seeing in the media and the world around them.

Students and parents: talk to your teachers, principals, school board members, and legislators. Urge them to promote classroom discussions that will prepare students to be civically engaged, not just test ready.

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