

A+: 5 Star Valley Students

Written by Melissa Larsen

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From a Harvard-bound valedictorian to an award-winning singer and actress, these five outstanding Valley students—each with a mile-longlist of accomplishments—shine as bright as the gold stars that deck their report cards.

JOSHUA BENJAMIN 18, 2016 VALEDICTORIAN AT BROPHY COLLEGE PREPARATORY

WHAT DRIVES YOU TO BE A GOOD STUDENT? My parents have always taught me that it is important to give my best no matter what I am doing. They taught me the importance of education and how it will open doors for me. I was motivated by myself because I knew there are certain things I couldn't do in life if I didn't do well in school, certain colleges that wouldn't be available to me and certain careers after that. It would be in my best interest to make the most out of my high school years and succeed.

HOW HAS BEING A STUDENT AT BROPHY IMPACTED YOU? Exposure to different topics. Brophy is really big on social justice teaching. I went on an immersion trip with the school that was centered around that. I wasn't sure if I would be able to learn about that if I went to another school. The second is technology. They forced us into being big on technology before we got to college. That has helped a lot.

WHAT TEACHER INSPIRES YOU? My English teacher my sophomore and junior years, John Damaso. He really inspired me in two ways. I always disliked English as a subject. He showed me it is a lot more than just reading. He showed me it is a lot more than just learning how to speak; it is about learning how to write and communicate. He helped me get a better appreciation for learning on my own time. After my class, I did a lot of self-studying—not just reading books for English, but math and science and other things. I was inspired to take [education] into my own hands as well.

HOW DO YOU RELATE TO AND DIFFER FROM YOUR PEERS? I feel I relate to my peers in a sense that we all have a general interest in doing well in college and trying to make something out of our lives. We all want to accomplish something. A way in which I differ from them, at my school, is that I am one of not very many African-American students. The difference is not that I am African-American; it is in what I am doing. Instead of it just being me acting alone, it is viewed as this is my race in general. So I just have to be more careful about what I do because I am not just representing myself. I noticed that some of my peers don't have to worry about it.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO ATTEND HARVARD IN THE FALL? Two reasons. The schools that it came down to for me were Harvard and MIT. I wanted to continue studying foreign language, and Harvard's foreign language department in the research that I conducted was stronger. It would be in my best interest to go there for undergraduate school, and I also want to go to graduate school for a degree in math and computer science. MIT's math graduate school is the highest ranked in the country, and I wanted to make sure I didn't go to the same graduate school as I went to undergraduate. I decided to go to Harvard, and I will apply for MIT later.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER GOALS? I plan to begin a technology company, a startup, that deals with programs and software development and data manipulation.

PHOTO BY CORI ROBERTS



SUSAN PETERS 17, SENIOR AT XAVIER COLLEGE PREPARATORY

HOW HAS BEING A STUDENT AT XAVIER IMPACTED YOU? Because it is an all-girls school, Xavier has enabled me to meet some of the most hilarious, intelligent and interesting girls my age. Making friends with them in an environment mostly isolated from boys has assisted my intellectual and emotional growth. Some of the best discussions I have ever had have taken place at Xavier with my friends. On an academic level, Xavier has given me every opportunity to succeed. They have over 75 different clubs and many engaging teachers who take an interest in their students. I am exceptionally lucky to go there.

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WHAT TEACHERS AND COACHES INSPIRE YOU? In my freshman and sophomore years, I had an extremely competent and knowledgeable biology teacher named Mrs. Weiland. She is serious about education and is certainly one of the best teachers at Xavier. Because she holds her students to a higher standard, it was useful to have her early on in my high school career, and I believe taking her classes has made me a better student overall. Mrs. Grubisic, a wonderful geometry teacher I had freshman year, had a similar effect on me. Her no-nonsense approach and clear passion for the subject inspired me to work harder. No matter what, my geometry homework was always a top priority. My mock trial coach, Mr. Cosden, is the definition of dedication. He has put his heart and soul into Xavier's mock trial program, and, because of his guiding hand, we are one of the best teams in the state. He acts as though he is from another era, a better era, when people were more authentic. He inspires me to be unafraid in my passions and to never, ever give up.

HOW DO YOU RELATE TO AND DIFFER FROM YOUR PEERS? I can relate to much of the pressure my peers feel as teenagers living in the age of social media. It is a noticeable presence in our lives, as separation from technology is not easy. We all feel how high competition is for acceptance into excellent universities as well. As far as being different goes, I was recently listening to some music in a car full of teenagers and literally knew none of the songs. Everyone else, on the other hand, could sing every lyric perfectly. I never thought I was a stranger to what the kids are listening to these days but apparently I am. Additionally, I am very much a homebody, and I enjoy spending time with my family.

HOW HAS BEING IN STUDENT COUNCIL IMPACTED YOUR TEENAGE YEARS? It has taught me how to make the most of meetings and to never be afraid to propose an idea. Creating a useful dialogue in student council meetings replicates real-world marketing discussions. The difference is that we're dressed in plaid skirts, and business executives are not afforded that luxury. The skills of time management and scheduling awarded by student council will inevitably be invaluable later in life as well.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER GOALS? I am interested in a variety of things all across the board. Because of this, I have trouble narrowing my focus to one specific career, but I do know that the professional athlete ship has sailed. I hope to have a job I enjoy for much of my life. Then, I will run for congress and open a winery before retiring to a quiet life in the mountains.

PHOTO BY CORI ROBERTS



AUBREE BOSCHMA 14, FRESHMAN AT CHANDLER CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

HOW HAS BEING A STUDENT AT CCA IMPACTED YOU? CCA has always encouraged me to do my best in all of my school work. I really learned a lot at CCA, and I am so thankful for everything they have done to help me. They have spiritually helped me by having bible class every day and chapels with the most impacting sermons.

WHAT ARE YOUR STRATEGIES TO KEEP FOCUSED WHEN LIFE GETS BUSY? I believe I am a very organized person and when it comes to my school work, I like to put that first. Yes, sports can make it hard to complete my school work but, at the end of the day, I always end up finishing it. Determination is a big factor in my life because, without it, I wouldn't be a straight-A student and I probably wouldn't care about college.

YOU WERE DIAGNOSED WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES ON THE DAY OF YOUR EIGHTH-GRADE GRADUATION, AT WHICH YOU WERE THE SALUTATORIAN. HOW HAS THAT AFFECTED YOU? I can still remember that day like it was yesterday. Right after my graduation rehearsal, my mom took me to the doctor because I wasn't feeling well [and had experienced symptoms of diabetes]. When they checked my sugars, it was 560 and the normal glucose is between 80 and 120. Since my sugars were so high, they were positive I had diabetes. I was then rushed to the hospital so I can get insulin in my body right away, and during that time I was in complete shock. I learned that I would have to give myself a shot of insulin and prick my finger to check my blood sugar every time before I would eat. I would have to count my carbohydrates for every meal and snack. Did you know that a Coca-Cola has about 50 carbohydrates in it and for me that is a whole meal? That day I tried to forget it and remember that I had my graduation and I still had to give my speech and, luckily, that went great but that night everybody looked at me differently. They didn't really know how to talk to me and everything was awkward and that made me angry. That night I wondered, why me? I was pretty healthy, and I was an athlete so I worked out often. The next few days were a blur. We had about three hours of diabetic training, and it was not the way I pictured the start of my summer break would begin. But then the next few days I realized that this wasn't just a disease. This was a blessing. It made me see the world differently, and I am actually thankful that I got this. Yes, it has been a struggle, and I will not deny it. But, in the future, I hope to be able to use my diabetes to help others. My family has helped me so much, and I can't imagine doing this without them.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER GOALS? I have been wanting to be a nurse for a very long time. I am thinking about being a pediatric nurse, because I love working with children. After college, I want to go to a country that is in need and help them medically. Since I was diagnosed with diabetes, my parents and I thought it would be very cool if I went to school to be a diabetic educator for children. I can help people learn about what they have, and I will be able to say I know how they feel.

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PHOTO BY LORI KRENZEN



MAX JOHNSON 17, JUNIOR AT PHOENIX COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL

WHAT DRIVES YOU TO BE A GOOD STUDENT? I work to impress myself and fulfill my own curiosity and pride. I think that I am fortunate because I do have a natural interest in many things others find boring that helps me to do well academically. Therefore, I would say that the main thing that drives me to be a good student is my desire to do well for its own sake, and so that I can go to the colleges where I think I can best reach my full potential.

HOW HAS BEING A STUDENT AT PCDS IMPACTED YOU? PCDS has inspired me with a sense of individuality and control of my education that few schools can compete with. I rarely feel forced when it comes to my education, and instead feel that I am pursuing my own interests in ways I find fascinating more often than not. The teachers express obvious care about me and my personal development, and I have never felt as though I were just a name in a sea of students. Instead, I am constantly thankful for the amount of individual attention available.

WHAT TEACHERS INSPIRE YOU? Almost all of my teachers have inspired me throughout my 13 years at PCDS; however, I would say that Dr. Allison and Mrs. Driscoll played the largest part in forming my interest in and love of the English language. Likewise, Mr. Martin has helped to form my curiosity for historical cause and effect.

HOW DO YOU RELATE TO AND DIFFER FROM YOUR PEERS? Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, and mine happen to be mostly centered in the academic realm. Obviously, I relate to some students more than others, but at PCDS I generally feel at home and I am surrounded by like-minded individuals who all care about their education.

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST SUCCESS? I think that being allowed to design my own curriculum and teach my own class on programming at PCDS Summer Camp is the achievement of which I am most proud because it made me feel respected by the faculty and showed that they trusted my abilities.

WHERE DO YOU PLAN TO ATTEND COLLEGE? My first choice would be Stanford, with a bias toward the West Coast where I have spent most of my summers. I am also partial toward other academically competitive schools on the East Coast.

WITH COLLEGE AROUND THE CORNER, WHAT PERSONAL GOALS KEEP YOU FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE? I want to maintain my academic success while simultaneously exploring my passions further next year by working harder in robotics as a senior member of the team and through tutoring or other outside activities.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER GOALS? I am not entirely sure what field I will go into when all is said and done, but I hope to be able to provide for my family and live a comfortable life while still feeling that my work significantly and positively impacts the lives of those around me. For that reason, my first choice at the moment is biomedical research.

PHOTO BY LORI KRENZEN



ANNA SERA 16, JUNIOR AT NOTRE DAME ACADEMY

HOW HAS BEING A STUDENT AT NOTRE DAME IMPACTED YOU? Notre Dame has afforded me the opportunity to do more of what I love while in a school setting. In middle school, I did not have a theater program at school. I always had to do outside theater. Notre Dame finally allowed me the opportunity to blend my passion, musical theater, with my school life.

WHAT TEACHERS INSPIRE YOU? Mrs. Wilson, my director and teacher at Notre Dame, has been a great inspiration to me. She is able to find

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different sides to my characters that I was unable to see before. She then challenges me to try new things and move outside of my comfort zone. One of the biggest inspirations in my life was my fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Byrd. He had complete faith in me, no matter what. He pushed me to be a better student than I was. He is the reason that I am in advanced math today. He taught me to manage my time by working smarter, not harder.

WHAT ARE YOUR STRATEGIES TO KEEP FOCUSED WHEN LIFE GETS BUSY? I personally love making lists. I am a visual person and if I can see a list of everything that needs to be done, it begins to feel more manageable. Otherwise, I feel like everything is piling up and there is nothing I can do about it. This can leave people feeling overwhelmed. Organization is the best way to combat a busy life.

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST SUCCESS? My biggest success was probably getting the role of Sandra Bloom in "Big Fish" at Notre Dame. There is a significant amount of people who never saw me as a leading lady. I was always the goofy characters or the best friends of the lead. I am not trying to diminish the role of these characters. They often add more to the show than the main characters, but they never get the recognition. These roles are not bad, but no one thought that I was capable of doing more than that. The fact that Mrs. Wilson was able to see me as a mother and caretaker as well as a cutesy, young girl was an incredible triumph, in my opinion. The character of Sandra actually has three different ages (18-ish, 30 and 60). I had to play all three ages, causing me to investigate ways of adapting to make myself seem older during one song and young in the next scene.

HOW HAS BEING IN THEATER IMPACTED YOUR TEENAGE YEARS? Musical theater has taught me how to speak in public. Public speaking is the No.1 fear among people. Many are more afraid of public speaking than they are of death. Theater helps you overcome this fear by putting you in front of crowds which can range from two people to 2,000 people. It has also boosted my confidence level. Even when I am feeling down in the dumps, my acting skills can help me put on a happy demeanor, allowing me the choice to keep moving forward. It has also improved my hair and makeup skills. I do all of my own styling for every dance I attend.

WITH COLLEGE AROUND THE CORNER, WHAT PERSONAL GOALS KEEP YOU FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE? My goals for the future are to attend and graduate college, win an Oscar, originate a role on Broadway, get married and have children.

PHOTO BY LORI KRENZEN