

Amazing Valley Kids

Written by Written by Nichole Brophy, Christina Caldwell, Meghan Keck, Darcy Jo Gaugler and Christine Whitton

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While every kid possesses their own unique talent, not every child is able to develop that gift into a career at a young age. This month, we pay tribute to five amazing Valley kids who are anything but average. They have gone above and beyond the expectations of parents, teachers and coaches to achieve great things—all before the age of 18.

Isabella Roessle

For many young girls, Miley Cyrus's alter ego Hannah Montana is the ideal image of fame, inspiring them to learn to sing, dance and act. Nine-year-old Isabella Roessle of Scottsdale is no different, except that she has shaped that dream into a budding acting career in commercials and film.

While the soon-to-be fourth grader takes pride in her acting roles in school plays, she has also appeared in a national Claritin commercial as a soccer player and in a made-for-television movie called S.I.S., set to air on Spike TV. In her acting career, Isabella ranks these two jobs among her greatest achievements so far.

Isabella recently signed with Valley-based agency Signature Models and Talent in April. She says she is looking forward to any potential jobs that the agency helps her book. "I had never been with an agency before, so I thought it was really cool that I got to sign with Signature," Isabella says.

Isabella began acting professionally at age 7, but her mother, Deb, says she has been a ham as far back as age 3: "She was always doing dress up, organizing little plays, wanting to be the center of attention and singing," Deb says. "Of course, back then it was either Teletubbies or Barney songs."

When she's not acting, Isabella stays active in softball, soccer and karate. She has also traveled the world and speaks fluent German—bonuses that she attributes to her father, an international commercial airline pilot living in Germany.

Deb, a full-time investment broker, says scheduling Isabella's auditions, as well as her younger sister Cecilia's acting activities, has become a second job. But as long as Isabella wants to act, Deb says she is willing to drive her wherever she needs to go.

Julie Yang

"I'm a really worldwide type of girl," says Julie Yang. For those who know Yang, that is a sizable understatement. Born in Seoul, Korea, Yang's family moved to Thailand when she was 3 and enrolled her in an international school two years later. Already fluent in Thai and Korean, Yang began learning English and had her first glimpse into the game of golf all by the age of 6.

"Just to know this game is a privilege for me," Yang says. "And just to be able to go to the golf course and meet so many great people, I think that's the best part."

Enticed into the sport after following her dad around the course, Yang quickly improved her game by leaps and bounds, catching her family's attention. Aware of her supreme talent and drive, the Yangs immigrated to the United States when Julie was 10, in support of their daughter's bright golf future.

Now 13, Yang, who practices four hours each day after school and all day on weekends, is one of the top junior golfers in the country. A recent seventh-grade graduate, the Chandler teen has claimed more than 60 tournament victories and established a low-round score of 64.

"I don't care what I win or stuff like that. I just wish that I can do my best; and whatever I get, I get," Yang says.

Yang's "best" is proving to be more than enough. In fact, she became the second youngest champion in American Junior Golf Association history with a win at the 2007 AJGA Randy Smith Classic. She was also the youngest qualifying medalist at the U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links, foreshadowing perhaps, her ambitions to play on the professional circuit.

When she's not competing on junior golf's main stage, Yang indulges in common teen practices like hanging out with friends and going to the mall. "Golf takes a lot of my time," Yang says. "I'm kind of addicted to golf in a way. But that doesn't really change me as a person either, because I like doing other stuff that normal kids would also like to do."

James F. Warne

James F. Warne is an adventurous 18-year-old who loves the outdoors. That is, of course, when he's not working. But already, his persistent spirit has paid off: he already has to his credit a book, a publishing company and the fortitude to make a difference.

Warne's inspiration for his book "Character for Tomorrow" surfaced his sophomore year at Brophy College Preparatory. The father of a friend of Warne's died on the friend's 15th birthday. Soon after, this friend's mother fell suddenly ill, all while the teen transitioned to Brophy. "I was so inspired by just how he got through it, and that he did get through it," Warne says. "What I learned [is] he can't be an anomaly; there have to be other kids like this." The story motivated Warne to compile "Character for Tomorrow," a book of short stories written by his peers about the obstacles they've faced in their lives.

Warne spent the entire summer making phone calls to persuade Brophy alumni to write their personal accounts. "[It's] an anthology of stories from kids who have encountered many difficult problems and roadblocks that have come up in their lives...via suicide of a brother or crossing the

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border," Warne says. "And how they have worked through that and become successful in what they've done, despite their odds." Although he wrote the foreword and the author's note, Warne made a personal decision not to pen a story for the book. He felt his contribution was to make certain that "Character for Tomorrow" hit bookshelves.

Persisting further, Warne even started his own publishing company, Camelback Press. "Rather than jump through the hoops of these large publishing companies, I can just start my own; it can't be that hard," says Warne. "Knowing what I know now about the industry...I probably would not do it [again]."

Although other books are not in the works for Camelback Press, Warne acknowledges that it is not out of the question. Now a graduate of Brophy College Preparatory, he is off to conquer new dreams. In the fall, Warne will begin Georgetown University, where he will study international business and finance.

Braxton Bilbrey

Braxton Bilbrey just turned 10 years old. Already, it's clear—the kid has got guts, vision and stick-to-it-ness. Oh yeah, and talent.

His parents enrolled him in swim lessons at age 3; at age 7, he made history in the sport. Bilbrey recounts, "I saw the guy that set the record for being 9 [years old] that swam from Alcatraz in a magazine. And I went to my dad and said, 'I want to swim this,' and he said, 'O.K., go ask your coach about what you should do.'"

The five-month training, facilitated by his coach, Joe Zemaitis, included trips to chilly Lake Pleasant to acclimate Bilbrey to sub-par conditions. On May 22, 2006, surrounded by television crews and reporters, Bilbrey became the youngest person ever to swim the 1.4-mile choppy channel from Alcatraz to San Francisco.

Bilbrey and Zemaitis wanted to use the feat as an opportunity to raise money for a cause. So, they created the local nonprofit F.A.S.T. (Foundation for Aquatic Safety and Training), which was inspired by Bilbrey. "We talked about what he wanted to do, and [Bilbrey] came up with the idea of stopping kids from dying in pools," coach Zemaitis says. "In the beginning, we were just looking for an organization to raise money for. Then when we didn't really have luck with that, we just decided to start our own organization."

Bilbrey's dedication and drive inspired many of his fellow teammates on Swim Neptune, a team started by Zemaitis, to brave the frigid bay. On their most recent Alcatraz swim (now a yearly event), approximately 50 kids participated and raised \$50,000 for F.A.S.T., which utilizes a "kids saving kids" approach to drowning prevention.

Bilbrey, who trains three to four times per week, recently added another accomplishment to his list: In March, he won the 2008 Arizona State Championship for the 50-yard breaststroke in the age-10-and-under division.

However, coach Zemaitis points out, the records and wins are just the icing on the cake. He is mostly proud that Bilbrey, at such a young age, set a goal for himself, trained for it and stayed focused until the end.

Michael Moorehead

When 13-year-old Michael Moorehead picks up a copy of the book "The Student from Zombie Island," his facial expression changes completely. His eyes widen, and so does his smile, because it's not just any book—it's his book.

Last year, Moorehead became the published author of the 40-page children's book about rumors in a classroom, a book he originally penned in second grade as a thank-you gift for his teacher.

After fourth grade, Moorehead polished his story and sent manuscripts to more than 100 publishers. Five Star Publications, a Chandler publisher, agreed to turn Moorehead's story into a hardback book.

"It just blows me away. I know adults who would give their eyeteeth away to do what he's done," says Lynda Exley, Moorehead's mother.

One of Moorehead's most special moments came when he presented a published copy to Nancy Lujan, his former teacher at C.I. Waggoner Elementary School in Tempe, and a character in the book.

"She was just ecstatic. She started crying. She reads the book to her class every year," Moorehead says.

In May, Moorehead traveled to Los Angeles to promote his book and meet other authors at Book Expo America 2008. His book was so popular that he signed copies for two hours.

Moorehead hopes his experience in front of audiences will prepare him for what might seem like an unusual career choice—an environmental scientist spokesman.

"Polar bears are my favorite animal, and I hope to save them from global warming," he says.

This summer, Moorehead has been working to address rumors through two more books in the Zombie Island series.

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Although his book has won two major awards—an Arizona Book Publishing Association Glyph award and the 2008 Reader Views “Best Children’s Book” award—Moorehead said his classmates don’t treat him any differently.

“I try to keep my business life separate from my school life,” he says.

“The Student from Zombie Island” is available for \$15.95 on Amazon.com, <http://www.fivestarpublishations.com/>, Zombieislandbooks.com and at Barnes & Noble and Borders.