

New experiences at CMR: Senior projects provide extra challenge

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A desire to make a wood kayak, a passion for helping the disabled and the drive to overcome an eating disorder are just a few examples of the reasons 43 students from C.M. Russell High School decided to tackle intensive research projects during their senior year.

On Wednesday, they presented their products and research to panels of community judges and fellow students as the culmination of hours of volunteer work, research, writing and working with community mentors in order to receive their final grades.

This is the fourth year English teacher Jamie McGraw has run the program that requires students to spend time tackling a project they are passionate about, creating a product out of that passion, volunteering at least 15 hours doing something related to that topic, working with a community mentor in their subject area, and writing a research paper on a controversy related to their subject.

This is not a required class for seniors, but McGraw said many choose to take on the extra challenge in their already demanding senior year.

"They're passionate about it. It relates to all 12 years of their educational career," McGraw said. "It's relevant to them so they're willing to go that extra mile."

For senior Alex Potts, going that extra mile meant saving her life.

Last summer, she weighed just 75 pounds, and her eating disorder was sure to end her life before it ever really got started. She showed the panel of judges and room full of students photos of her, all skin and bones, in a bikini last summer. She talked about how she got that wake-up call and then went on to learn more about healthy living through a 45-hour internship with a dietitian, ultimately leading her to a much healthier weight.

"Senior year for me has been a lot about recovery," she said. "I knew I needed to improve my future or I wasn't going to have one."

She talked about her internship with a dietitian, which also is part of the medical-preparation academy classes she has taken at CMR, and how she was able to do a case study on a woman so obese she faced massive health problems. Through the dietitian's involvement, Potts said the woman has been able to slowly start improving her health and life.

Because of this case study and internship, Potts said she plans to study nutrition at Montana State University this fall.

"This is really the right career for me," she said.

Mandi Monroe loves dogs, and the idea of helping out those less fortunate has always appealed to her. So, through the help of her parents and with approval from her school, she adopted a golden lab, Leslie, in September and began training her as a service dog for the California nonprofit organization Canine Companions for Independence. The organization helps train service dogs and then places them, for free, in the care of people with disabilities as a way for them to gain more independence.

"Growing up, I've always wanted to do something bigger than myself," Monroe said.

Leslie was flown to Great Falls in September when she was just 8 weeks old. By 12 weeks, Monroe had enrolled her in beginning behavior classes. Soon, though, she started teaching Leslie the commands CCI wants the dogs to learn. By Christmas, Leslie was coming to school with Monroe, but staying in her kennel most of the day. By mid-January, Leslie was following Monroe to each of her classes and, finally, two months ago, Leslie was allowed into the cafeteria.

Monroe estimates she volunteered more than 5,000 hours living with and training Leslie, which included teaching her commands. That will be enhanced when Monroe turns her back over to the nonprofit for advanced training before she is placed with a caregiver.

Because she is a service dog, Monroe said she was often challenged to train Leslie differently than the family's other two dogs.

Though she's bonded with Leslie, Monroe said she'll have to turn her back over to CCI in November. After Leslie completes advanced training, Monroe said she'll have just 24 hours to spend with Leslie before she's given to a person with disabilities who needs the companion. She cried a little bit as she told the crowd gathered at CMR about the next steps.

"Leslie has a bigger purpose," she said. "I'm a small step in her life. She's my baby; I feel so proud. But really, Leslie is not mine."

Though Chris Gray's presentation required far less tears, there was a lot of blood and sweat poured into creating his 17-foot wood kayak, especially since he didn't take any formal wood shop training in high school. He also volunteered time cleaning up state lands and local parks.

He completed a lot of research on the environment and negative impacts made by humans, but he spent even more time ? and approximately \$700 ? building his kayak.

"I've never built one of these," he said. "It was a huge time commitment."

But after hours of sanding, gluing and fiberglass applications, he took his 50-pound kayak out for a quick test on the Missouri River earlier this week.

"It floats," he said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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