

A year in the making: CMR seniors present collection of senior research projects

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Career paths were firmly planted and curiosity grew into pursuits in this year's crop of seniors in the English research class at C.M. Russell High School.

Hannah Vining spent time doing an internship with Benefis' Sletten Cancer Institute for her project. Though it was emotionally challenging to work with cancer patients, Vining realized that she will, indeed, pursue a degree in medicine and wants to become an oncologist some day.

She and the 41 other students who participated in the research-based class, which required volunteer work, creating a product, working with a community mentor and writing about a controversial topic related to their field, had to present a year's worth of work to a panel of community judges Wednesday.

"By the end of (the internship) I just really loved it," Vining said. "It was a really rewarding experience."

It's a lot of work, but for the last five years, English teacher Jamie McGraw has had a cadre of students willing to put the work into the senior research class, which combines senior English and government curriculum. Now that the program has been running for five years, she said she's heard back from a number of students ? especially those who have gone on to study medicine ? that they felt ahead of the curve when they started their college and career path.

"The learning is personalized for them, and they get to work on something they're passionate about," McGraw said.

A number of students have earned jobs because of their projects and others decided they weren't going to pursue a career path after doing their senior research, which McGraw said is just as valuable.

"You get the opportunity to explore something before you've dedicated time and money," she said. "They've all grown."

To successfully complete the class, the students must pick a topic; write a research paper addressing some controversy related to their topic; complete a professional portfolio; complete at least 15 hours of community service related to their research; and create a product based on service, careers or a hobby.

Wyatt LaBelle loves to go paint-balling and he loves to win, which means he needs to blend into his surroundings.

So naturally, he decided to make himself a ghillie suit, which involved bags of burlap, an Air Force jumpsuit, canvas, paint, dye and a lot of patience.

LaBelle spent hours nearly two months stripping the burlap bags, dying them nine different shades of green and brown and gluing the canvas onto the jumpsuit and the strings of burlap to his hat and suit. He said he learned quickly he would never get done if he tied the burlap to his mask and hat one string at a time.

"I have never tried anything like this before," LaBelle said. "I had to learn a lot of patience with this."

He included in his presentation research he did on gun control in the United States and wrote about the controversy surrounding it. He worked with Great Falls Police Sgt. Doug Otto to learn about sniper skills as well as gun safety and spent time volunteering with the Montana Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics.

At the end of his presentation, he told the many students in attendance that they should take this class when they're seniors.

"It's a great program and a lot of fun," he said.

He also won his latest round of paintball.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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