
Hidden gems of
district #225
PRSRT STD
ECRWSS
U.S.POSTAGE
PAID
EDDM Retail
Local Postal
Customer
LEGALLY
BLONDE
Vaughan, Simpson Gravitate
To Wide Range Of Activities
"Kindness Cart" Teaches
Business Skills, Interaction
Cheerleader Overcomes
Burns With Faith, Resilience
Food, Clothing Needs Met
Via "Community Closet"
Many More "Hidden Gems"
Of District #225 Inside
A publication of Fairfield (IL) Community High School

Dear FCHS Community,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural issues of "Hidden Gems", the official annual magazine of Fairfield Community High School. Hidden Gems represents some of the best aspects of FCHS that many have not heard about.

In our first issue, we are so excited to spotlight a wide range of stories that showcase the extraordinary people and programs of Fairfield Community High School. It is our goal to celebrate the success and stories of our students, faculty, staff, and community that sometimes get lost in the shuffle of the day-to-day activities of a school year.

Today is the first day of many future celebrations of what makes FCHS a truly special place. In our first issue you will read stories of academic programs, community service, lifelong educators, and students who are doing remarkable things to make our corner of Southern Illinois a little brighter.

As you make your way through the stories of Hidden Gems, you will discover the goals and ambitions we have for the future of FCHS in both its people and programs. Readers will become acquainted with the stories of kindness, compassion, perseverance, and triumph through personal accounts of their time both at FCHS and away.

The stories held within Hidden Gems will profile how the ideas and compassion of our staff have given birth to viral programs such as The Kindness Cart and Community Closet. You will hear of programs such as Health Occupations that once ceased to exist and now is flourishing once again. These are stories of students and staff; some who are lifelong Wayne County residents, and others who, after time and travel, have made it back home.

We hope you enjoy these stories and many more in the future that represent the heart and soul of Fairfield Community High School.

As FCHS continues to evolve and grow, it is our goal to continue to highlight the outstanding achievements, programs, and people of FCHS. It is the goal and the dream of each and every faculty member to make Fairfield Community High School a place where every student wants to call home.

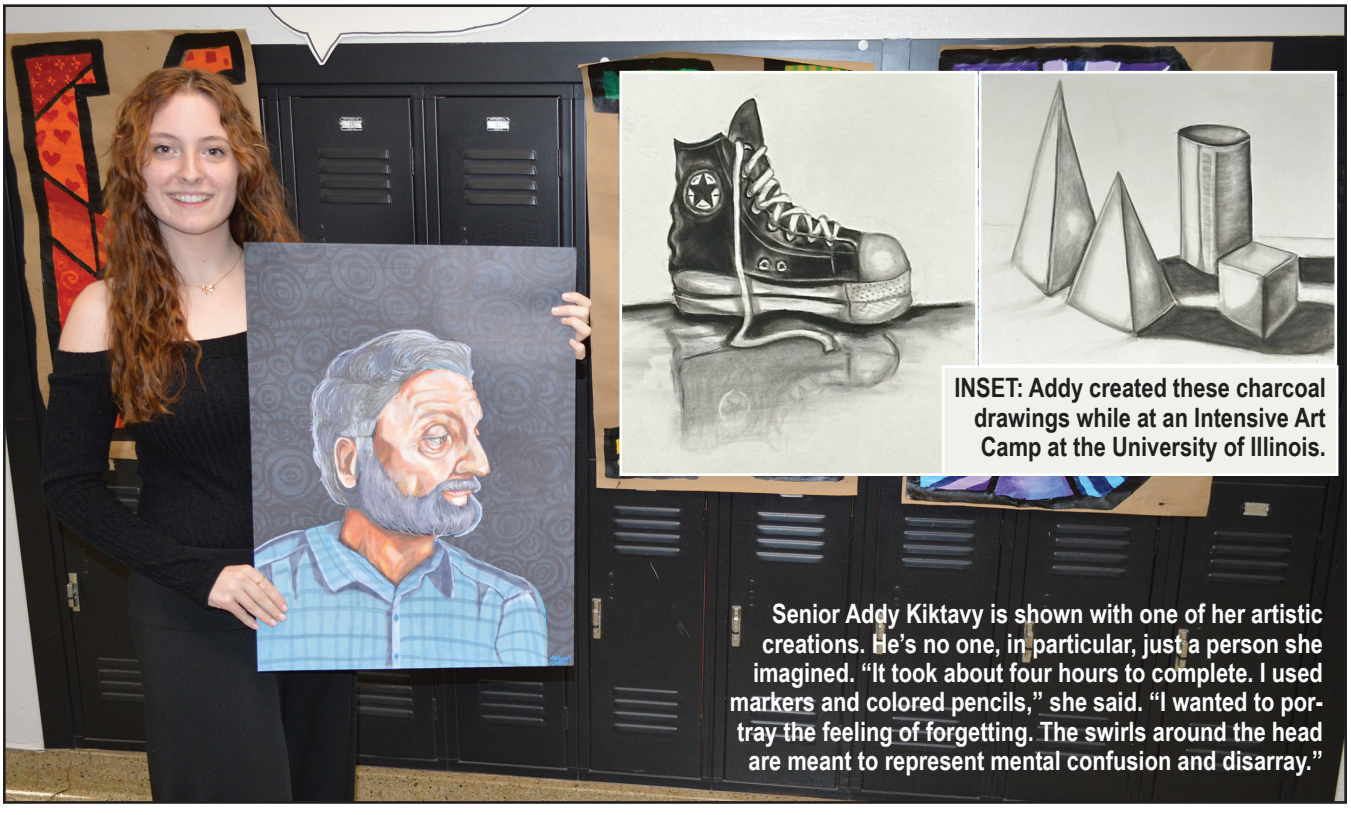
On behalf of myself, our faculty, staff, and students, we hope you enjoy Hidden Gems. We would like to say thank you for your support of Fairfield Community High School, and we look forward to sharing our future strengths and stories in issues to come. Go Mules!

Sincerely,

Robert D. Wells II

Robert D. Wells II, Supt.
Fairfield Community
High School #225





INSET: Addy created these charcoal drawings while at an Intensive Art Camp at the University of Illinois.

Senior Addy Kiktavy is shown with one of her artistic creations. He's no one, in particular, just a person she imagined. "It took about four hours to complete. I used markers and colored pencils," she said. "I wanted to portray the feeling of forgetting. The swirls around the head are meant to represent mental confusion and disarray."

Addy Kiktavy Plans To Incorporate Artistic Gift Into Field Of Psychology

When Addy Kiktavy's family moved to Geff in 2021, she faced a very different lifestyle than she'd been accustomed to.

The daughter of Roy and Kelli (Eckleberry) Irvin had grown up as a city girl due to her folks' careers. However, she has come to love her life as a small-town resident and high school student.

"I had never truly experienced culture shock until I moved to a small town. Suddenly, loud traffic and large crowds were replaced with tractors and empty fields," grinned the FCHS senior. "My freshman year was the first year I spent in Fairfield, and it was quite a shift in mindset. Adjusting from a large school where a select few know your name to a school so small that everyone knows each other felt impossible!"

The FCHS staff helped her adjust.

"The teachers are some of the most considerate people I've ever had the pleasure of learning from. From day one, I had teachers who desired to understand what helped me learn best, in and out of the classroom," Addy said. "In every school I had attended prior, teachers would have classes of 30 to 35 students per period. Most teachers had new students in every class, so they rarely made time to ask personal questions.

"I can say with confidence that the one thing that keeps me working hard in school is the teachers who not only care about the material they teach, but the kids in their classes, as well."

Addy's mom graduated from FCHS in 1995 and served in the US Air Force for five years, stationed in North Carolina, where she worked on the flight lines with F15 jets. While the initial intent was to utilize the military as an opportunity to leave town and spread her wings, the events of 9/11 changed the course of Kelli's career.

"Her squadron's new mission was solely to protect the White House. It was during this time that she was truly able to understand the meaning of serving the military for the sake of freedom," Addy said. "Upon discharge from the Air Force, my mom obtained a degree in Nursing and took a job at Indianapolis University Hospital (she's now a nurse with Anthem)."

Addy was born in Indianapolis and lived about 15 miles south of downtown in Greenwood until the end of her fourth grade school year.

"My time in Indy gave me the privilege of seeing a diverse range of people and lifestyles," she said. "In 2017, I moved with my family to Charleston, South Carolina for my dad's occupation. He worked as a quality manager at Boeing and specialized in 787 airplanes. South Carolina had a buzzing atmosphere of large crowds and new beginnings, and Charleston held a plethora of opportunities, especially in education."

When Addy was advancing out of elementary school, she auditioned for Rollings Middle School of the Arts and was accepted into its visual arts program.

"This was a key turning point in my life, as I received clarification that art is something I wanted to pursue in the future," she said.

However, a couple of things happened that once again changed her life.

"Dad began to see a change in Boeing's integrity and decided it was best to

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Artist Addy Kiktavy

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leave (he now works as an engineer with Rolls Royce)," she said. "And around that time, my grandma (Pat Lyke) fell ill, and we decided the best course of action would be to return to Fairfield to be close to her.

"My gratitude for this decision is beyond words, as I was able to spend almost every day with her until her passing in February of 2025," she said.

But how would the move affect her academic pursuits, especially when it came to art? No change, really; she spends most of her spare time painting and drawing.

"To get good at art requires practice, so that's what I do," she said. "I adore creating art and feel it is the most effective way to communicate my thoughts and feelings. I spend one or two hours every day learning (about art) and growing from experience, and although I still have a long way to go, I enjoy watching my personal progress."

While she loves any type of art, oil paint or charcoal are her preferred mediums. Her favorite style is hyperrealism, which she finds to be like a puzzle.

"When pieces of the art such as portions, dimensions, and shading are combined, the result is well worth the time and effort," she explained. "When referring to famous art, Surrealism intrigues me more than anything. Artists like Salvador Dali, Frida Kahlo, and Dr. Seuss (specifically Midnight Paintings) encapsulate me with their dreamscapes and unique messages."

There's never been a time when Addy didn't enjoy art; in fact, she started painting on anything she could find (and was allowed to paint on) when she was two years old. Through the years, her appreciation for art grew with her life experiences.

"I think my interest in art is a direct result of my time spent in both Charleston and Indianapolis. Exposure to artists better than myself in elementary and middle school created a sense of motivation that I carry with me to this day," Addy said. "When others around you are at a significantly higher level of talent, you may find that comparison leads to nothing but despair; however, self-improvement and creating for personal enjoyment will eventually lead to the development of advanced skills.

"I find this to be true in every aspect of life, not only art."

She sees a place for art in her plan to enter the field of Psychology.

"Art therapy is a form of counseling that utilizes psychology and the visual arts. In a hospital setting, therapy is provided for all ages with a wide range of illnesses. Therapy can give patients a feeling of control in times of need and helps them express individual pain in a way that does not require auditory description," she explained. "Art therapy can also be applied in neuropsychology as a way to assess cognitive functions, which I find to be the most intriguing aspect of the job."

She added: "The first time I came into contact with art therapy, I was visiting my cousin in the ICU of a hospital in Indianapolis. I stopped on the way to the cafeteria to look at a charcoal drawing of Pablo Picasso. The shading caught my eye, and when my eyes moved to identify the artist,



Addy Kiktavy is shown next to three of her artworks that were on display at a small exhibition. The top two are paintings; the lower, a drawing.

the description not only iincluded the name of a 73-year-old man, but also his illness: lung cancer. A plaque nearby contained information on the therapy department of the hospital, and since then my goal has been to work as a psychologist in a hospital setting."

When she's not active at school, studying, or working on an art project, Addy regularly volunteers at her community's food pantry.

"One of the greatest aspects of moving to a small town arose when I was given the opportunity to work at Hope Ministries in Geff. It is a faith-based, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing food and clothing to those in need," she said. "My favorite part of Hope is helping my Grandma Brenda (Eckleberry) organize clothes, hygiene supplies, shoes, and backpacks!"

After graduation, Addy plans to attend a four-year university—either the University of Illinois or the University of Indianapolis. She plans to pursue a Bachelor's Degree (and later a Master's) in Psychology with a minor in Visual Arts.

Addy has an older sister, Gracian Pomeroy, who works for a cast iron company and lives in Charleston, South Carolina with her husband, Chase.

Community Closet Meeting Needs Of Many Students

Clothing, Necessities, Weekend Food Packs Among Outreaches

Over half of FCHS' 448 students qualify for free and reduced meals, meaning that 53 percent of its students rely on the school for breakfast and lunch throughout the week.

Not only that, but some have (in times past) literally come to school wearing the same hole-filled shoes or worn-out clothing day-after-day.

These issues have long tugged at the heartstrings of staff members including FCHS Social Worker Becky August. While the school has always tried to help kids, August has led the charge this academic year to meet their needs in a more deliberate way through the new Weekend Food Program, which goes hand-in-hand with the four-years-old FCHS Community Closet outreach.

Both have been hugely successful, not just in providing much-needed sustenance, but in boosting the morale of teens who are often overlooked by programs that serve young children. Because of the Closet/Food programs, teens who once struggled now stand taller, sense more confidence, feel…normal.

The programs aren't just about meeting tangible needs, but intangible needs: building dignity and confidence, and giving students one less thing to worry about so they can focus on succeeding in school, academically and socially.

And for a woman like Becky August, who has always been inclined to see beyond the surface and advocate for the emotional well-being of other people? The Weekend Food Program and FCHS Community Closet are very fulfilling missions.



Becky August is pictured inside the Community Closet at FCHS, where items that students may need are stored.

Becky August wishes she could say that the needs of FCHS students have decreased over the years, but that simply isn't true.

Families in this community are hurting. Besides more than half having an inadequate amount of food, seven percent of the student population experiences housing insecurity. In other words, they don't have a fixed, permanent place to sleep at night.

But the school's Weekend Food Program and FCHS Community Closet are helping students in meaningful ways. To know why August is the perfect person to lead the efforts, it helps to understand her background.

"I worked as a therapist in a partial hospitalization/Intensive Outpatient Program for several years, as well as doing individual counseling. When I moved to Fairfield to raise my kids (14 years ago), there were little to no counseling services in the area," she said. "I had a lot of concerns about the unmet emotional and mental health needs of children and teens in our community, and decided that becoming a school social worker would be the best way to provide support to the largest number of youth.

"It was around this same time that FCHS was exploring the idea of hiring a school social worker. I applied for the job, and I have been here ever since."

The Closet/Food programs provide a centralized way to meet the basic needs of students while removing the barriers that have sometimes kept them from asking for or receiving help.

One major barrier was location. Previously, clothing and shoes were stored in a room behind the study hall. If a student needed something, they had to walk through the study hall with a staff member, then walk back through, carrying items they didn't have before. That embarrassed a lot of kids, and as a result, some wouldn't ask for help.

"The Community Closet provides a more private and respectful space," August said.

Stigma was another hurdle that had to be cleared. Some students and their families wouldn't seek help

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Donna Loves To Decorate For Weddings, Birthdays, Special Events

Longtime FCHS "Dress Giveaway" Lady Uses Gift Of Decorating To Help Others

When Donna Reever isn't at work or managing a giveaway of formal attire at Cornerstone Church in Fairfield (see other story), her creativity doesn't take a break.

In fact, she has worked as an event decorator for over 20 years.

Make that *served*, not *worked*, because Donna doesn't charge a dime and sees what she does as a ministry.

"I decorate for events at school, but I also decorate for about 30 events throughout the year, outside of school: weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, etc.," said Donna, who has traveled as far away as Carbondale and New Harmony to serve in this capacity. "I have two buildings on my property that are full of all kinds of decorations."

Regardless of what type of event it is, chances are that Donna has items to fit. Her stock includes lanterns, flowers, vases, glass, tablecloths, table runners...the list goes on. She has decorated for many functions over the years and has a number of themed items in stock, ranging from fall scenery to beach parties.

> ***I want to be a blessing and help make events stress-free. A lot of the stuff I have has been gifted to me, so how could I charge for a gift?***
>
> **Donna Reever**

A lot of times, people will simply borrow her items for their event, then return them. Other times, Donna will decorate for their event, herself.

"I feel like it's a pay-it-forward thing," she smiled. "For example, I think we have expectations of what a wedding is supposed to be like, but nobody knows if the couple has borrowed items or if those items have been used at another wedding. I tell brides not to get caught up in that.

"Our young brides don't need that added expense!"

Donna has decorated (or provided decorations for) hundreds of events over the years. Her interest in it was formed early in life when she watched her grandmother, the late Clemence Cox, arrange flowers.

"Then when my oldest daughter (Elizabeth) got married in the early 2000s, she wanted specific colors and my mom (Marty Cox) wanted to hire a wedding planner. But it was $5,000 just to plan it! I said no!" she recalled. "Mom and I sat down and made every centerpiece for all the tables, and mom made the table runners. We did it all!

"A year later, a woman from Geff contacted me asking if I'd decorate for her granddaughter's wedding reception. After that, it took off."

Donna doesn't charge for the items or her service for three reasons: 1) she doesn't want to pay taxes on it, as a business; 2) she prefers to keep her decor unique and within the parameters of what she is able to provide (if you want 200 tables to look the same, she's not your gal), and 3) she simply loves being able to help people.

"I want to be a blessing and help make events stress-free. A lot of the stuff I have has been gifted to me, so how could I charge for a gift?" Donna reasoned. "And it gives me the chance to see how creative I can get. When you use what you've got, you have to think outside the box.

"Is every table going to look the same? No, they're not," she added. "But if you're open to creativity, you can still do a lot of things and make things look nice."

What might that creativity involve? Well, where most folks would see a vase, Donna may see it flipped upside down and appearing like something else. And if you really want to see the gears in her brain turn, just give her an assignment that isn't focused on the feminine perspective.

"I did a birthday event for a retired attorney once, requested by the man's wife. I had to put my thinking skills to the task. I used his old law books, amber and brown colors, and decorated the tables with them, along with greenery," she mentioned. "And two years ago for (the FCHS) Homecoming, the group of football players from (Mules Football Coach) Justin Townsend's playoff years wanted me to decorate the tables.

"I asked for football helmets, cleats, and shoulder pads to decorate," she said, adding that she was also able to frame old photos and newspaper clippings about the team's successes in the 1990s.

Donna simply lights up when she talks about loaning her decorations and helping people prepare for their special events.

"I do enjoy it! It's fun and sometimes it's a challenge," she said. "But when you do pull it off, by golly, you've done it!"

Free Formal Attire Meets Tangible Needs, But Also Provides Chance To Serve

Sometimes, some of the most beautiful things begin with subtle pain.

About 15 years ago, while working as an administrative assistant at FCHS, Donna Reever got to thinking about girls who wouldn't attend Homecoming or Prom because they couldn't afford to buy a dress—and that big 'ole heart of hers felt an ache.

What could she do about it?

The short story is, Reever spearheaded an effort to offer formal dresses that girls could get for free—not just kids from FCHS, but from anywhere. She started with 30 dresses, but now keeps around 500 in stock, not to mention shoes, jewelry, and corsages, plus some suits for the fellas, and even wedding dresses.

In March, she held the spring giveaway at Cornerstone Church in Fairfield (it's held in the fall, too); about 70 dresses are given away, per event. She's also open to meeting folks throughout the year to make sure they have special attire.

It's a team effort, for sure, and nobody gets paid. But the rewards have value greater than money.

"I saw a new dress in an Evansville store several years ago that was marked down 80 percent. I told the clerk what we do and guaranteed her I would not sell the dress—I'd give it away. I asked if she could do any better; she called the manager and they gave me the dress for 90 percent off," Reever recalled.

Sound ordinary? Think again.

"Well, we had a girl at the time who had moved in (to the school district). I'd brought the dress home, and this young lady, who was a senior and living on her own, asked me if I had a dress that would fit her," she continued. "Now, I cannot make this stuff up: that dress fit like it was made for her."

Reever credits Divine guidance for that special connection.

"That dress fit her beautifully and this girl said 'I never had a new dress'. That's the human factor. If that doesn't take the wind out of your sails, I don't know what will!" Reever laughed, teary-eyed. "When prom was over, she brought that dress back because she wanted someone else to get to wear it.



Donna Reever felt a tug several years ago to provide free formals to girls who would otherwise not be able to attend Homecoming or Prom. Today, the outreach has grown to also offer wedding dresses, jewelry, shoes, flowers, and even suits for the guys. You can help! See story for details.

"I have never known anybody to try to sell what they received," she noted. "They either bring it back or give it to someone else."

The idea for the giveaway began to percolate in July 2000 when Reever (who had worked at Airtex for 24 years prior) was hired as an administrative assistant in the FCHS guidance office. She loved the job and extracurricular tasks, which over the years have included being the cheerleading sponsor, helping with musicals, directing plays, and co-sponsoring student council and the Class of 2006. Today, she is an administrative assistant to Principal Tiffany Lyons.

"I love it! Kids are challenging, but it's also super rewarding to be around them," she said. "You learn a lot from them, and you have opportunities to help them."

Well, some years back, students had to buy uniforms for Physical Education class (today they are good to go in shorts, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes). At the end of the school year when lockers were cleaned out, Reever and others

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Jenny Reynolds (middle) and Judy Blackford (right) helped at the formal attire giveaway in March. They are shown admiring the 'extreme' high-heels. "I couldn't get my big toe in these, not to mention the fact that I'd nose plant!" laughed Donna Reever (left).

Dress Giveaway Effort Has Grown Greatly

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at the school saw that there were a lot of those used PE uniforms left.

"Instead of hauling those things off, we knew we had kids that needed them, so we started laundering stuff," she said, noting that effort tied into what Becky August began doing with the Community Closet (see other story). "And that's kind of how the dress giveaway got started."

Reever worked with a friend and fellow church-goer at Cornerstone Church (then First United Methodist), Kim Hutcheson, and discussed how to go about it. Charlie McDonald was their pastor then.

"At the time, we were doing backpacks at the church for kids. I was outside one Sunday afternoon and Charlie came by and asked me what I'd like to see happen," Reever said. "I said, 'Charlie, you're not gonna believe this, but God spoke to me and told me we needed to start doing a dress program for girls, and open it up to anybody that wants to come'. He said okay!'"

Social media wasn't as big then as it is now, so Reever and Hutcheson sent out cards to schools and took out ads in the Wayne County Press to announce the giveaway. In the meantime, the congregation searched their own closets and put word out that they needed dresses. They collected and gave away over two dozen formals.

"We had girls come from Carbondale, Evansville, Effingham, from all over," Reever said. "That first time we had only about 30 dresses, but what God leads you to, He'll lead you through. We knew it was a stepping stone."

What sealed their commitment to the effort was this: at the end of that first giveaway, a mother came in with her teenage daughter and the girl's grandmother. They were from Carmi and had already been to New 2U and The Clothesline, but hadn't found what they needed.

"The mom and dad had been laid off from their jobs, and one of the parents had been diagnosed with cancer. This girl wasn't going to the prom (because she couldn't afford a dress)," Reever said. "But she found a dress, and her mom and grandma just sobbed. It makes me cry every time I think about it!

"That's what this is all about," she added. "It's not

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Dress Giveaway

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about me or the church, it's about providing the service to these kids."

The following year, 30 of the girls who got dresses were from FCHS—and went to Homecoming for the first time. By then, word about the giveaway had spread, and others started stepping up with donations. Teachers also pitched in by offering to pay for kids' tickets to Homecoming, if needed.

Since then, Reever has led the twice-a-year giveaway, but will accept donations (and give away) dresses, shoes, jewelry, suits, etc., all year long. She will also accept help in acquiring and managing stock, and does get a considerable amount of help, especially from the ladies at Cornerstone. FCHS students who need service hours pitch-in, too, and at the March giveaway, she was helped by Judy Blackford, Jenny Reynolds, and her own grandchild, Ella Gonzalez, 15.

"This teaches her so much. She has learned that even if she has the money to buy a new dress, why do that?" Reever said. "We're not here by accident. We're all supposed to be in service, and when you recognize the One who gives gifts to you, you can give blessings to others.

"I told someone once that I hope the Lord never calls me to go to Africa or live in a hut, because I don't think I could live without my blow dryer," Reever laughed. "But there are missions we can do here at home. Every day, a neighbor or a kid needs help. You don't have to be a preacher or rich or famous. But when you feel like you can meet a need? I just feel like that's God, moving in you."



"Shopping" for jewelry at the free formal dress giveaway at Cornerstone Church in March were (from left) Alice Bruce, Shaelyn Hall, and Maddeline Hall. Alice is from Fairfield; the girls, from Cisne.





At the formal attire giveaway in March, Rita Sakihama from Japan (left), an exchange student living with the Greg Smith family of Flora, tried on shoes while (from left) Nova Spofford, Skyler Spofford, and Alivia Clifton of Wayne City, found dresses.

If you are unable to reach Reever, you can drop off donations at Cornerstone Church from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

Donna and her husband, Clifford, have two daughters; both live in Fairfield: Elizabeth (Shaun) Scarbrough, a banker at Fifth Third in Mt. Vernon, and Bridgett (Jonathan) Mourey, a teacher in Special Services at Jasper School.

Elizabeth has three daughters: Ella and 11-year-olds Sadie and Marlee Gonzalez; Bridgett has a daughter, Kayleigh, ten, and a son, Graham, eight.

Building Positive Relationships With Students Is Important To Brad Sager

When Brad Sager came on board at FCHS as its School Resource Officer (SRO) in a full-time capacity three years ago, he did so with one primary goal in mind: establish a strong, trustworthy connection with the students.

After all, kids today are inundated with negative views of police officers via TV news, social media, even fake films created by artificial intelligence (AI).

"Given the direction of law enforcement in the past decade, I felt as though there needed to be a representative to the young kids of someone who is not what they see on the news or on TV," Sager reasoned. "I think it's important to build positive relationships—build trust with the students and work with school staff to solve problems."

Sager strives to be viewed as a safe person to run to if students are scared or are facing trouble.

"In some cases, they don't see that regularly. A large number of youth have never been in a sanctuary; that is shown by the actions and behaviors of some kids," he said. "I try to present myself in such a way to show these young people that a police officer they see on TV is not every police officer. I try my best to present myself as an honorable man."

He added: "If the way I hold myself is of any consequence, hopefully it will be a man who follows Christ, and that they may see that."

Supt. Robert Wells views Sager as more than just a campus policeman.

"He is the first person to greet the students at the door every morning. His relationship as a protector, mentor, and valued part of our school makes the students and staff of FCHS feel safe and secure," Wells said. "Whether it is roaming the halls, patrolling the parking lot during lunch, or acting as security during home sporting events, his work has made our school community stronger and more secure because of his commitment to his post."

Sager is a 1997 graduate of FCHS who served in the U. S. Marine Corps after graduation. He worked in logistics (loading ships, planes, and military helicopters) and was deployed three times. Following his tenure, he attended Western Illinois University, but left when he



Brad Sager has served full time as the FCHS Resource Officer for three years.

was hired as a patrolman with the Fairfield Police Department (FPD) in 2004.

He always wanted to serve in the military and law enforcement, thanks to the influence of his uncle, Terry Jackson, and his grandfather, Louis F. Jackson, Jr., both from central Illinois. Louis died in 2019; he was a drill instructor with the Marines in the 1950s, training Marines to go to Korea.

"My uncle was in the Marines in the early 1980s. He was in Beirut, Lebanon just prior to the embassy getting blown up, and was on the ship crossing the Atlantic when the embassy was bombed," Sager mentioned. "He's hard, disciplined, and fearless. He was a textbook explanation of what a Marine was, and I wanted to be just like that.

"When I was young, my uncle worked for the Logan County Sheriff's Office (from which he retired)," Sager added. "My uncle was my role model, and he is the reason that I chose to be a cop when I was 12."

Sager worked as a standard street cop for 18 years with the FPD, and in 2018 was promoted to the rank of Police Sergeant. Over the years, he has obtained certifications including AR15 Armorer, Glock Armorer, Firearms Instructor, and Field Training Officer.

But despite all of his military and law enforcement challenges, one of the toughest things he's had to deal with are students who don't want to change their behaviors or attitudes. However, he views those kids with a lot of care and empathy.

"Sometimes you try to help a kid who is so hurt, emotionally, that they do not know how to accept correction—or even the idea that someone wants to help them rather than hurt them," he said. "I have seen some kids who were headed down the wrong path, (but) I love to see when they make changes in their lives, start to make better decisions, and change the trajectory of their lives, positively.

"I do feel like I make more of a difference in the community while being at FCHS than I did on the street," Sager added. "It is very rewarding when I see a person years later and see that they have changed their lives."

Having been an FCHS student 29 years ago, and working with kids now, Sager has seen some changes. For example, relationships between the students are different now than they were

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Becoming Drum Major Brought Audrey Fletcher Out Of Her Shell

Not long ago, FCHS senior Audrey Fletcher happily kept a low profile at school, observing more than being observed and doing her best academically and in the band, where she played alto sax.

But all that changed when Band Director Josh Livesay asked her to consider becoming the school's drum major.

"At the end of my sophomore year, Mr. Livesay was looking for another drum major to follow up for the one we had. He came to me and said he thought I'd be great for leading the band, so here I am," she smiled. "At the time, the drum major above me was Maveryck Lyons, and he trained me, alongside Mr. Livesay."

She learned a lot from Lyons, who graduated in 2025.

"I watched Maveryck direct and lead the band my entire sophomore year and aspired to be just like him. He was confident, big, and loud, and I wanted the same for myself!" Audrey said. "He is one of the main reasons I'm where I am today. He was a constant presence of confidence and encouragement."

Becoming the drum major brought Audrey out of her shell, so to speak.

"While I was in the band my freshman and sophomore years, I just went through the motions. I went to practice, played my instrument, and kept to myself," she said. "But after becoming a drum major, I don't just go to practice—I lead the practice, and it's vital for me to be there. I definitely don't keep to myself, anymore!"

When Audrey was a quiet freshman looking up to the older kids, she never dreamed she'd have 40 students looking up to her. But that's exactly what has happened since she became the drum major.

"I have come so far from being a shy freshman to being a source of encouragement and grace for my band kids," she said.

The biggest hurdle she faced when accepting the role had nothing to do with the music. It was the social aspect, partly because Audrey has a functional neurological disorder that causes her to have psychogenic non-epileptic seizures brought on by stress.

"My biggest challenge was probably being able to get out in front of all those people and not get scared!" she admitted. "I was very worried about being out in front of everybody, but now it's not even a thought.



Audrey Fletcher has enjoyed her experience as the FCHS Drum Major.

"My biggest blessing has been being able to influence and inspire younger kids in the band," Audrey added. "I love showing them that anyone can do anything, even if they have anxiety, like me!"

It has been a terrific experience.

"I have learned to really be myself, and I have learned a ton about leading and being a good leader," Audrey said. "For music, I learned to direct and explain to others how certain parts go or how loud or soft I need them to play. I have also learned to listen to everything that my kids come to me with, even if it's just relationship problems."

Audrey has enjoyed success in the band extending back to eighth grade when she won an award for Outstanding Musician/Performance. While at FCHS, she has been part of many ranked and judged performances as well as the band that finished second at a national competition in Branson, Missouri (and the choir's first-place finish at the same event).

Audrey is 18 years old and the daughter of Ben and Rebecca Fletcher of Fairfield. She has a brother, Andrew, 16, who is also in the school band. She currently works at DiMaggio's Pizza in Fairfield, but plans to work at Fairfield Memorial Hospital over the summer.

She plans to attend Bethel University in McKenzie, Tennessee, entering the pre-Med program.

School Resource Officer Sager

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then.

"They used to be separated by cliques or socioeconomic backgrounds, but it's not that way so much anymore. And bullying has changed; it's not so much physical, anymore, it's digital," he observed. "But that has decreased a lot since I have been placed in the school full-time.

"And the fads have changed, of course," he said, adding with a laugh, "but some come back around, like JNCO pants."

He has also been studious of the kids, noting some of the biggest challenges he faces are how he, as an adult, deals with each teenage issue.

"Kids are not like they used to be. Kids today respect you more if you respect them, in return," Sager said. "I talk to them like they are adults. A lot of rapport can be built by the tone and inflections you use. There is no need to raise your voice like in past generations."

Brad is married to the former Amy Vaughan, a Deputy Assessor for Wayne County who is running unopposed for Wayne County Supervisor of Assessments.

They have two daughters: Ella, 18, who is studying Kinesiology/Pre-Physical Therapy at SIU-E, where she participates in cross country and track, and Emeri, 15. She's a sophomore at FCHS and is on the cross country, track, and swim teams.

The opportunity to employ Sager as the school's SRO is due to an intergovernmental agreement with the City of Fairfield. The FCHS District pays 80 percent of his salary while the FPD picks up the rest.

Sager is considered a member of the FPD and has regular shifts there during the summer and through parts of the year. He is posted at FCHS daily from start-to-finish, unless he is on vacation—during which time, the FPD provides the school with another officer.

Kindness Cart Teaches Business Aspects, Social Interaction Skills

Rarely can a single function teach business skills, compassion, and social interaction all at once, but the Kindness Cart at FCHS is an exception.

Special Education Coordinator Michelle Richards launched the Kindness Cart for her students in March of 2024 and it has been well-received by both students and staff. She explained how it works:

"I work closely with Rachel Jones, who works with our students to transition out of high school, and the Kindness Cart was something Rachel was doing at another school that we adapted," said Richards, noting the program completed its first full school year in May 2025.

"We have two carts: one is for students, which is filled with snacks and motivational stickers, pens, pencils, gum, chapstick, etc. The other cart is for teachers and it does have a few snacks, but it has lots of different kinds of pens, sticky notes, tissues, air fresheners, wipes, clips, mints, gum, etc.," she added. "These carts run daily on a schedule; all items are free."

Richards' students take the carts from room to room, asking if anyone would like anything. Not only does it teach them about meeting needs from a perspective of kindness and compassion, but it also provides learning opportunities.

"Students have to keep the carts stocked, so they have to compare prices, fill out purchase orders, review requests from students and teachers, and obtain approval for items (that they'd like to stock)," she said. "This is their in-school job every day!"

The effort is treated like real employment. Students fill out timesheets and are graded and given credit. Sometimes, an art project is added: the kids will decorate the carts for the holidays or homecoming.

"For my students who run the cart, it has been good because they get the chance to get out, socialize, and provide a service that the kids and teachers appreciate. I like seeing the interaction that my kids would otherwise probably never have," Richards said. "Also, the experience of comparison shopping and ordering is a life skill for these students.

"Some of them don't have a driver's license or transportation, so this is a crossover skill we talk about, like ordering food or setting up rides," she added. "Overall, the cart has made our kids feel seen and appreciated. Many of them have made new friends and have become more social.

"For all of those reasons, I feel the cart has benefited everyone in the school and brought a little brightness to the staff and students a couple of days a month!"

The school funds the program; staff and students help by making donations. Local businesses and organizations have also made donations to undergird the effort.

"The support is greatly appreciated," Richards said. "The administration and school board have been very supportive of this project and are willing to continue and grow it in the future."

Richards has been in education for 35 years, first for Sangamon Area Special Ed in Springfield before she moved back home to Fairfield. She then spent six years working at the Behavioral School in Norris City, then arrived at FCHS in the fall of 2005, first teaching Special Ed English and Math, then Math only until she became the Coordinator of Special Services in 2017.



Michelle Richards (right) is shown with two of the students who help manage and serve with the Kindness Cart--Athena Crnovich (left) and Shania Snow.

"Education has always been what I wanted to do, (but) Special Ed was not my first choice when I went to college (at Murray State). But they encouraged all students interested in Elementary Education to choose something else because the job market didn't look good, so I double-majored in Elementary and Special Education," Richards explained. "My first job was in Special Education, and I realized that was what I was meant to do!"

She has gotten a lot of satisfaction out of watching her students grow and figuring out new ways to 'teach kids who learn differently'.

"The genuine passion kids have to learn, even when it is difficult, is one thing that has kept me motivated over the years," said Richards, who will retire in May. "Most of my career has been with 9-12 graders, so my biggest concern has been the transition from high school to whatever they choose to do. Whether it's competitive employment or college, I want them to be ready."

Jones and April Grammer help Richards achieve that goal, she said. Also, when she assumed the role of Coordinator of Special Services, "it gave me more opportunities to work on transition planning with the other ladies; we mapped out the four-year plan for students.

"That became very important to get all of that right so they could have success after high school."

Richards lives in Fairfield with her husband, Brad, who works for Bi-Petro. They have three children: Madeline (Colton) Land, who owns Wayne County Abstract; Meredith Richards, who works with the Wayne County Family Enrichment Program through the Wayne County Health Department, and their "guardian angel" son, Caleb, who passed away in April 2012 as a result of a dirt bike accident.

Alumni SPOTLIGHT

From Bouncing Around To Landing On Solid Ground, Burkett Found His Place

Everyone has to find their own path in life, and for 2002 FCHS graduate Ryan Burkett, that took some time.

He bounced around for a while, unsure of what he wanted to do. But look now: the journey led him to his wife, Amanda, with whom he has two children (Karis, 12, and Elliott, nine), and he's knocking down six figures as a Systems Engineering and Technical Assistance (SETA) Contractor for the Department of War.

He works from their home in Geff, writing policies and providing cyber security training.

"I didn't really have a clear path," said the 42-year-old, of his younger years. "Previous to Amanda, 'change' was the only consistent thing in my life."

While at FCHS, Ryan thought he'd major in Kinesiology at SIU-E, but he was accepted to the United States Military Academy (USMA) and arrived at West Point on July 1, 2002. But by December, he was finished.

"I often say that going to West Point was the best decision of my professional life, and leaving West Point was the second best decision," he said.

Ryan went to Central Christian College of the Bible (CCCB) In Moberly, Missouri in August 2003. The high school football field bumped up against the college, and the former Mules player became the junior high defensive coordinator and equipment guy for the high school. Meanwhile, he played football for CCCB for a season and enjoyed a trip to the state quarterfinals with the high school team.



Ryan Burkett is shown with his wife, Amanda, and their children, Karis and Elliott.

While at CCCB, Ryan finished his Associate Degree in General Studies and played a year of basketball. "We weren't good, but it was fun," he laughed. "I led the team in fouls and technicals."

By the end of the school year, Ryan still didn't have a plan. The school wasn't accredited, so he returned to Fairfield to complete an Associate Degree that would transfer. He worked full time for Darrell Fickas at his sawmill, then headed to Eastern Illinois University in the fall of 2006.

"At EIU I tried my hand at the military again and enrolled in ROTC since that was an easy way to pay for college. I almost signed the full Army contract, but the guy wasn't in his office when I stopped by and I never con-

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Ryan Burkett Found His Place

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sidered it again during that time," said Ryan, who declared an Elementary Education major, played rugby, and got his first final grade of an F because he "spent way too much time in bars".

After that, he went back to CCCB to work on a degree in Youth and Family Ministry; however, he was one class short of finishing in the spring of 2008 and didn't want to return. Instead, he worked at a church camp in Texas, where he met Amanda Angel-Chun. He still bounced around a bit with different jobs, but earned his Bachelor's Degree in December 2009.

It is said that love has the power to transform lives, and that's exactly what happened to Ryan after he met Amanda.

"We were engaged and she was working two-to-three jobs, as well. At this point, we needed something different and I needed to learn to commit to something," he admitted, noting they were married in 2011. "I enlisted as a 35N (Signals Intelligence Analyst) in the Army with a ship date of November 2011."

He went through basic training for a second time. By then he was 27 and he breezed through it, even being awarded the 'Soldier of the Cycle' honor for his company (top soldier in his class).

From there, Ryan submitted to Advanced Individual Training (AIT) for six months at Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas, where he earned 'Distinguished Honor Grad', which goes to the top student. He then went to Hawaii, serving at the National Security Agency (NSA) as an Enlisted Specialist (E4) since he joined with a Bachelor's Degree.

Two years later, during his last six months in Hawaii, he was promoted to E-5, Karis was born, and he was working as a GS-13 (equivalent to a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army, Marines or Air Force, or a Commander in the Navy). Ryan ran a team of analysts, developers, reverse engineers, reporters, etc.

"There was an offer on the table for me to get out of the Army, stay there, and run the team as a civilian," Ryan said. "We chose to experience more at that point and I re-enlisted to be assigned to NSA-Colorado. There, I worked with an NSA think-tank, solving hard problems.

"It was an awesome time and I loved every minute of it," he said. "While there, I also made a move to the east coast for a bit and worked for the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), but that was not an enjoyable time. Elliott was three months old and Karis was in preschool when I took the assignment in Virginia—but my family stayed in Colorado. That time was hard on everyone."

Ryan got out of the Army two years later, declining an order to be a Drill Sergeant. He didn't quit pursuing growth in his career, though. Over time, he'd also worked with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) as well as the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. His certifications include Certified Ethical Hacker (CEH), Certified Information Systems and Security Professional (CISSP), and Project Management Professional (PMP).

In addition, he has his Master of Science Degree in Cyber Security and is working toward his Ph.D.

Ryan enjoyed the military; more importantly, he has always had a goal to enjoy not just his job, but his life.

"And with my family, we enjoy so much life," said Ryan, who has served in his current job for five years. They moved back to his stomping grounds in 2021, "because Fairfield is a great place to raise kids."

When they settled down in Geff, Amanda started subbing as a paraprofessional at Geff; she started the cross country team and color guard, and assisted with the cheerleading squad. Ryan, who participated in football, wrestling, and track for four years (and baseball for two) at FCHS, has assisted as a coach at FCHS or Geff in football, baseball, cross country, track, and basketball.

"My goal in coaching is to show kids they matter as humans, not just as players or performers," he said.

Ryan is the son of Steve and Peggy Burkett, who live north of Golden Gate. His brother, Chris, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in Indianapolis, Indiana.

"Depression Cannot Hit A Moving Target"

Vaughan, Simpson Rarely Slow Down

In some ways, things haven't changed on the high school scene over the decades--there are still those who gravitate to sports, drama, music, or who prefer Ag, shop, or getting out the doors to head home or to a job.

But seniors Ryan Vaughan and Grady Simpson are a little different in that way. They gravitate to... everything.

At school, 17-year-old Ryan is involved in Drama, Scholar Bowl, FFA, football, speech, and is the stage manager for the music department. Outside of school, he runs a good-sized Dungeons and Dragons (DND) group and takes part in Trail Life USA—a church-based, Christ-centered, mentoring and discipleship journey for boys ages 5-17.

Grady, the reigning Homecoming King, is Student Council President, Class President, National Honor Society President and is a member of the math, scholar bowl and speech teams, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), and is a varsity tennis player. He's also an Illinois State Scholar, has served as District President of the Eastern Illinois District Association of Student Councils, and is currently the State President of the Illinois Association of Student Councils, which includes 236 Illinois schools.

He also helps livestream sports for Mule Nation, is on the FNB Street Team, and is a youth soccer coach, basketball ref, swim instructor, lifeguard and assistant manager at the Fairfield pool, and is involved in a church youth group. He has also served on the Illinois State Board of Education Student Advisory Council and State Senator Terri Bryant's Youth Advisory Council, and has been a delegate to the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperative's Youth To Washington Program.

So where does all that motivation and energy come from? Simply put, that's just the kind of young men those guys are.

"Being involved not only suits my personality, it *is* my personality. I am constantly looking for more opportunities to be involved in my school and community," said Grady. "Being involved has forced me to step out of my comfort zone, which is the greatest step a person can take in self-growth.

"I stay on the go and keep myself as busy as possible because I have grown to live by the mantra 'depression cannot hit a moving target'," he grinned.

As for Ryan? Being involved suits everything about his personality—especially his inquisitive nature and his tendency to be a chatterbox.

"I've been an avid talker my whole life and I haven't stopped asking questions," he said, adding that



Ryan Vaughan (left) and Grady Simpson are two of FCHS' more active seniors. Ryan's interests range from football to theater while Simpson is involved in everything from sports to student government. He is also the reigning Homecoming King.

although he likes playing video games, he prefers real conversations over social media. "I enjoy the socialization of face-to-face conversations and I find people fascinating. Meeting new people opens up new experiences."

Grady admits that he stretches himself too far sometimes, and it would be easy to fall into a cycle of pity and exhaustion.

"But I never let myself stay down for long. I am motivated by the people around me, whom I love. My support system and close friendships light the fire under my feet and keep me striving toward greatness," he said. "Extracurriculars have introduced me to some of my dearest friends, and they are always there for me when I feel like I've hit a mental brick wall. They know exactly how to pick me back up."

Ryan has been on the gridiron since his flag football days—but confesses he wasn't very good. But he liked it, and by this past fall, he was contributing a lot on the defensive line. Drama is his creative outlet, but he prefers being behind the scenes.

"I am not an actor, but I've been on the stage crew all four years, and for three of them including this year I have been the stage manager. This role allows me to lead a team of crew members with the sole purpose of keeping the show afloat," he explained.

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Vaughan, Simpson Rarely Slow Down

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As a member of the FCHS Speech Team, Ryan looked to the area of radio speaking this year, earning second place at their last varsity tourney. He is also the vice president of FFA and has taken part in livestock judging, parli pro, and proficiencies.

Ryan really enjoys Trail Life USA, where he holds the organization's highest post (First Officer) and leads meetings and lessons that teach boys how to live from a Christian perspective. But his favorite non-school activity is as Dungeon Master for a community DND group.

"My favorite school club is definitely drama; I live for set-design," he said. "But my favorite memory at FCHS is definitely all the hours spent playing DND over lunch with my friends, and how much fun it has been."

Grady especially enjoys tennis, lifeguarding, and Student Council—which he credits for helping him become the person he is today.

"I joined as a freshman when I was extremely introverted and shy, but many of the upperclassmen took me under their wing and planted seeds of leadership within me, which eventually led me to serving as the State Student Council President—which is the accomplishment I am by far most proud of," he said.

Tennis has taught him humility.

"I am by no means a tennis pro, but I have so much love for the sport that it doesn't matter to me," Grady said. "I rarely win, but I keep playing because it is such an intimate sport built on relationships, whether the relationship is with your doubles partner or with yourself and your temper while playing. It is a very introspective sport that has taught me so much about myself."

Being a lifeguard is one thing that forced him out of his circle of comfort, as he had to pass swim tests and certification training. He loves giving back to his community by teaching kids how to swim and serving at the pool.

Academically, both guys love school. Ryan's interest leans toward the sciences. Chemistry 2 is his favorite class, and he pointed to two teachers who have had a great impact on him.

"My favorite teacher is Mr. (Colin) McDuffee, my History teacher and theater department director. We have similar personalities, so we get along well, and he is a very good teacher. His willingness to help me with any problem in my life, big or small, is why he is my favorite teacher," Ryan said.

"My other favorite teacher, even though he is now retired, is Mr. (Brent) Sutton," he added. "He was head of the Science department for many years and taught my Physics and Chemistry 1 classes. He was an incredibly smart teacher with a laid-back personality, and he was always willing to help me when I needed it."

> *"I enjoy the socialization of face-to-face conversations and I find people fascinating. Meeting new people opens up new experiences."*
> **Ryan Vaughan**

Those men are two of many who have inspired Ryan to become a teacher. He plans to start his post-high school education at an IECC school then will head to a university to become a Science teacher (grades 6-12).

Grady values learning, too, with his favorite classes being AP Calculus, Spanish, Basic Horticulture (he wants to have his own greenhouse someday), and Literary Themes and Theories. His favorite teachers are Tammy Austin, Katie White, and Melissa Kiefer.

"Ms. Austin (Math) is the most selfless person I have ever met, and she is always more than happy to help you where you are and understand your situation," he said. "Ms. White is my Spanish teacher and she has so much life experience and insight that I not only learn about a foreign language and culture in her classroom, but about life and compassion, as well.

"Mrs. Keifer (English) is the kindest, most caring soul I have ever known," Grady added. "She has a passion for her students' education that is unmatched by anyone in her profession. She makes it a priority to be active in our education and to get to know our interests and personalities, as well."

Ryan is the son of Freddie and Jamie Vaughan; he has a sister, Emily, a sixth grader at Jasper.

"My mom and dad are awesome and have always done whatever they could to keep me and my sister happy," Ryan said. "My father taught me life skills and got me into collecting (coins), and my mother taught me emotional intelligence and how to be a good person.

"I have always had a great relationship with my mother, and she has constantly taught me to always be myself and to keep pushing for my goals."

Grady plans to attend Murray State University to major in Economics and possibly study English. He has an eye on law school and hopes to become an attorney or even a judge, "as I find it important to ensure that United States citizens are represented and treated fairly within the justice system," he said.

"To me, success is making a positive impact on others' lives. Fulfillment, on the other hand, is entirely different. In my life, the only true fulfillment comes from God and the many blessings He has placed in my life," Grady added. "Everything I do is because of Him, and none of my accomplishments are truly my own."

Grady is 18 and the son of Nathan and Jessica Simpson. He has a sister, Lily, an Accounting student at USI.



The FCHS Health Occupations Class includes (seated on hospital beds, from left) Caitlyn Cuff, Kenzie Turner, Nykia Staton and Lela Duckworth. In back, Jodi Peach, RN/Instructor; Jayden Easton, Audrey Fletcher, Mylee Adcock, Ella Atteberry and Harlee Scott.

Health Occupations Course Directing Students To Careers In Medical Field

If there's one thing that Jodi Peach absolutely loves, it's the intent and purpose she finds among the high schoolers in her Health Occupations Class at Frontier Community College (FCC).

Nine FCHS seniors are taking this year's course, and upon completion will have CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) certification. In it, they are required to successfully demonstrate 21 skills, which they practice in class and demonstrate during mandatory, hands-on, supervised training rotations in healthcare settings (clinicals).

Technically, the course is listed as the Basic Nurse Assistant Training Program.

"Examples of a few of the skills are proper hand hygiene and how to change an occupied bed and take vital signs (such as blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, temperature, height, and weight)," said Peach, who is a registered nurse.

The CNA course is designed to meet the rigorous training standards set by the Illinois Department of Public Health, preparing students for immediate entry into the healthcare field.

It's not an easy path to walk. Students must be disciplined to study outside of class time, be willing to provide care to geriatric patients, and meet a strict attendance policy. But two of the greatest opportunities the program offers is the chance for students to 1) find out if they even want to be in the healthcare field, and 2) which area of medicine interests them the most.

"In the fall, we job-shadow and I introduce them to basic healthcare skills and medical terminology to get any type of job in healthcare. The benefit to this is, they have a complete grasp of medical terminology which transfers no matter where they go to college," Peach said. "It gives them groundwork for what they need to do in college and in any career.

"Job-shadowing with people in fields they are interested in helps

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Health Occ Students Discuss Their Plans

I think my favorite part about this class is the hands-on knowledge and feeling like you are making an impact. I want to be an RN and an OB-GYN. **Ella Atteberry**

I am called to be a teacher in the mission field, but I do really love healthcare and love what I'm doing here. I love being with the (nursing home and assisted living) residents and caring for them. **Mylee Adcock**

When I came into this class, I wanted to be a nurse practitioner, then I figured out that I definitely did not want to be that. I've switched to radiology, and this class helped me figure that out. **Harlee Scott**

This course has piqued my interest in doing more because I've gotten hands-on experience. It has helped me get a foot into the medical field and secure my end-goal of going into going into respiratory therapy. **Nykia Staton**

It has broadened my horizons a lot. Before, I didn't know what I wanted to do, but now I know. I want to be a NIC-U nurse and advance to pediatric surgery. **Caitlyn Cuff**

Before this I thought I wanted to be a social worker. Now...I realize I'm interested in Hospice. I have a big heart for people in their most vulnerable moments, and I just want to be able to provide them with comfort and make them feel seen…being able to provide them with a friend and listen to them. I plan to get my RN from FCC and go from there. **Kenzie Turner**

I wanted to be a NIC-U nurse, but now I'm leaning toward working as an RN in the ER. I like the fast pace of things in the ER; job shadowing in there helped me. **Jayden Easton**

I want to...specialize in podiatry. It's a lot of the older population: amputees, diabetics, people who really need the care, and a lot of times we even see little kids, so it's a very broad spectrum of people who need help. I want to be able to care for people who I feel like they aren't seen. **Audrey Fletcher**

I definitely recommend this class to anyone looking to go into healthcare. I want to be an anesthesiologist, but seeing the more human side of healthcare and getting a feel for patient care and what it's like to receive patient care will help me be a more well-rounded doctor in the future. **Lela Duckworth**

Students Consider Healthcare

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them see if it's what they really want to do."

In the second semester, which is currently wrapping up, the class has been doing CNA clinicals with Fairfield's geriatric population, and the students have come to know things about residents that have dementia or are unable to do things that healthier folks may take for granted such as walking, going to the restroom, or getting dressed.

"These students have jumped right in and done whatever the residents needed," Peach said. "They provide not only a smile and a gentle touch, but they are making connections and helping residents with basic activities of daily living."

One thing the students have learned is that not all patients will ask for help—so they have to be observant.

"Some residents will not ask for a drink, to be repositioned in bed, or for help getting up because they don't want to be a burden. They see how busy everyone is and don't want to bother them," Peach said. "But I really appreciate the fact that this group has been in tune with the residents."

The students have enjoyed working with geriatric patients, and most draw upon their personal experiences when relating to patients of all ages and health conditions.

"What motivates me the most is seeing the vulnerable population and wanting to help them; knowing I can make their day better by making them feel clean, listening to them, encouraging them. It's really rewarding," said Ella Atteberry. "My mom (Krista Atteberry) was an RN when I was growing up, and I loved hearing her stories. That inspired me."

But something else inspired her in a different way.

"A couple of years ago I was in a four-wheeler accident. I was taken to Deaconess then to Cardinal-Glennon. I had a grade 4 (severe) liver laceration…I had complications and it got pretty serious," Ella said. "Several students came in and practiced on me. It was scary, but it was exciting to see people start their journey in medicine from the patient perspective, being in a high-stakes situation.

"It was tough, but in the end it pushed me to make the decision that this is what I wanted to do."

Mylee Adcock was also inspired by a personal experience.

"My grandfather (the late Robert Cline) was in a wreck and he was in and out of so many different (nursing) homes. A lot of them were understaffed and couldn't really get him the care that I wanted my loved one to have," she said. "That pushes me to give everyone the care they need, because they are somebody's family. It makes me want to do good for people."

For Caitlin Cuff, deciding to consider the medical field was also personal.

"I had an older brother (Brandon Sellers) that passed away three years ago due to cerebral palsy, and I have a four-year-old nephew that had seizures when he was younger," she mentioned. "I want to be the person to really see patients, help them find the cause of their problems, and show them that I care."

The idea of truly caring for people was spoken of by all the

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Music Director Enjoys Watching Teens Develop In Skill, Character

If anybody was born to teach music, it was Joshua Livesay.

The FCHS Music Director has loved music since he was a little boy, and his melodic roots reach back two generations (more on that later).

But what really excites Livesay isn't just seeing his students learn and succeed with their instruments and voices. It's observing their all-around growth.

"They grow in skill and musicianship, but I also love the character-building aspect of their growth," said Livesay. "They learn to face their fears of public performance, and that changes a person! They become bolder, braver, more courageous, more willing to give, and more willing to work together to create something beautiful and special."

Livesay's passion for music was passed down from his grandfather, Bobby Huffman, who was part of the Huffman Dixieland Jazz Band, which played with the likes of Benny Goodman—a famous jazz clarinetist and bandleader in the 1930s and 40s. Bobby also taught at Mulkeytown Grade School and Christopher High School (band director, English teacher, and principal).

"He started me on the trumpet when I was in fourth grade, and I played through high school," said Livesay, who then took piano and bass guitar lessons and played harmonica with his father, who was in a touring local blues band.

When he was in high school at Christopher, Livesay learned to play percussion, baritone, and most importantly, French horn. He went to District (Festival Band, Honor Band, Solo and Ensemble), Organizational Contest, and played in community bands.

"I also gained a lot of life experience playing Taps for funerals," said Livesay, who also participated in the musical 'The Wizard of Oz', instructed by his high school theatre teacher.

All that experience gave him a solid background in different kinds of music, and by the time he was in



FCHS Music Director Josh Livesay

college, he began playing in the pit for operas and musicals. He played at Carnegie Hall in New York and toured Beijing, Xian, and Shanghai, China. It was during that time that he truly learned the joy of music.

"I also had an incredible Wind Ensemble Director, Christopher Morehouse, who was one of the most masterfully educated individuals I have ever known on the subject of band literature," Livesay mentioned. "He opened the door to musical conducting, directing, and teaching music to students, showing me the true passion for the art.

"The joy of music is in the opportunities to play with different people and in different places. It is in experiencing the feeling and emotion that the music has tucked away in its many nuances," he added. "It is in its translation and transference of the human experience that music allows, where mere words cannot describe. This is where the joy of music is found."

After college, Livesay played in and conducted the John A. Logan Community Band under the mentorship of Mike Hanes, alongside Fairfield Conductor Ted A. Hartley. He played in community ensembles and community-led musicals, and currently plays for the Roasted Chestnuts.

Livesay taught part-time music at Lick Creek School, then was elevated to full-time at Mounds/Meridian Jr. High and High Schools, where he taught Choir, Guitar, and Band. Afterwards, he taught K-5 General Music, Choir, and Handbells at Northside and Center Street Schools for District 112. Four years later, in 2017, he went to FCHS.

Since then, the school's ensembles have grown.

"Our Show Choir was the top ensemble in our class last year at Branson, Missouri and we have received Superior Ratings at Contest for the last four years," Livesay said. "Our band has had many successes, including first place at the Mt. Vernon Parade, Division 1 Superior Ratings at Organizational Contest, 2nd Place Band Ensemble at Branson, and Best of the Day at Organizational Contest.

"We also played twice at the IHSA Basketball Tournament in Champaign, (and) this past March, our Rock Band received the highest award possible at the IHSA Solo and Ensemble Contest for the second year in a row: the 'Best of the Day' award.

Under Livesay's leadership, the FCHS music department puts on three concerts per year: one around Halloween (something he introduced when he arrived), one in the winter, and one in the spring. All feature the Band, Show Choir, Concert Choir, and Rock Band (all high-achieving ensembles), and all are open to the community.

Students are also allowed to do Solo and Ensemble Contests in the spring, as well as Organizational Contest. The band also performs in at least three parades per year, and at football and basketball games. They sometimes go uptown with the Band and Choir to do a little Christmas caroling—another first organized by

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Livesay Loves Teaching Music

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Livesay.

"The Show Choir also does Valograms in February, which is a fun little thing where we go into classrooms and sing love songs to students," Livesay said. "Rock Band was not offered here previously, but it allows our guitar students to use their skills to create high-quality rock and roll music across decades."

Students are also allowed to be in the Fairfield City Band, which Livesay leads. He simply wants to offer kids as many opportunities as possible to explore their interests in music and to thrive, and he especially enjoys it when he learns about students who continue exploring music after they graduate.

"The greatest joy is watching them succeed in music after high school. We have gotten our students thousands of dollars in scholarships to go on with music," he said. "My proudest moment as a director was when, recently, a former student that I had since he was in first grade, came up to me to proudly tell me that he was changing his major to music education.

"He's going to go in and teach music to students! In this, I finally feel like I might be becoming a successful music teacher!"

The most challenging part of his job is giving the kids meaningful, achievable challenges. Livesay spends hours per week preparing daily lessons that will assess where students are and take them where they want to be, musically.

"Right now, we are preparing for the Organizational Contest. Many of these students are fairly inexperienced with the process, so getting them to trust the artistic path and stay the course can be a real challenge," he said. "But it is, as the great Stephen Covey once said, 'Begin with the end in mind'."

Livesay considers music to be the most important subject that students can learn.

"Other than the skills required in cooperation and teamwork, music hones the finer social reflexes. Music gives students a way to listen to tone, volume, and pitch in a way that they normally would not be able to hear," he explained. "Students gain the ability to channel their emotions in real-time that they would not get anywhere else. This gives them emotional control and understanding.

"Music offers an outlet of expression that no other medium can give," he added. "Whether the music comes from the voice or an instrument, students are able to project raw emotion and feeling through the power of their song. Through practice and discipline, students gain a command of depicting their innermost emotions through the command of their art."

But in the end, the most satisfying aspect of his job is...joy.

"Students have dreams of becoming musicians, and here at FCHS, they are mentored to achieve that dream in any way they can, from singing to dancing to playing in ensembles," Livesay said. "We travel and share the love of music wherever we go!

"It is such a joy to see others enjoying our art, touching their hearts and minds, and giving the gift of music to all we perform for."

Livesay earned his Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts in 2004 at SIU-C, where he was in the top musical ensembles--the Wind Ensemble, the Southern Illinois Symphony Orchestra, and the Marching Salukis. He was also part of the university's Brass Quintet, Symphonic Band, Community Orchestra, Jazz Band, and Community Choir.

His wife, Shelby, is a first grade teacher at New Hope and also serves as show choir choreographer and vocal coach. Their children are Sophia, 12 (dance, flute, voice, Jiu-Jitsu); Aleeah, 10 (tumbling, basketball, soccer); Kaizen, 8 (baseball, basketball, soccer, Jiu- Jitsu); Lenity, 5 (basketball, soccer, Jiu-Jitsu), and Creed, 2.

Health Occupations Course

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students, and the inspiration to take care of people is often rooted in their own pain. Instead of allowing difficult experiences to define them, they turn them into victories. Take Audrey Fletcher, for instance.

"It's never nice to feel like a burden, and I've felt that way, myself, with my own medical condition," said Audrey, who has a functional neurological disorder that causes her to have non-epileptic seizures brought on by stress or anxiety. "You don't want people to take time out of their day by saying you need help. You don't want to feel like a burden.

"And I've had grandparents go through medical issues including cancer, being in nursing homes or assisted living, and seeing the good and bad of that from a family member's perspective and now a caretaker's perspective," she added. "I'm an observer…I see struggles that others may not pick up on, and I want people to know they are seen and will be cared for."

Kenzie Turner agreed.

"It's like Audrey said: if people aren't feeling seen, I want to make them feel seen and understood. It's very rewarding," she said. "It feels good being able to make a difference and help people in such a cruel world.

"It's always good to be kind," Kenzie added. "And kindness doesn't cost anything."

That's exactly the type of approach that Peach hoped the class would draw out of her students. They have not only found their passion in healthcare, but their empathy has become a valuable tool for helping the geriatric patients they work with.

"The students make sure those residents know they are there for them, and they're not a burden," Peach said.

"This class is absolutely awesome. They're going to go really far in healthcare," she added. "Patients and their families will be fortunate to have them, with their big hearts."

Peach has been teaching at Frontier Community College since 2015.

Faith, Resilience Carried Kacie Through Accident That Burned 15% Of Her Body

It is said that hard times will either make you or break you.

In the heart of Kacie Kinsolving, it was determined long ago that her Christian faith would carry her through any difficulties she may face.

Sure enough, hard times came.

"When I was in eighth grade, I was in an accident involving rubbing alcohol and a candle. I was in my bathroom and had just gotten out of the shower. I…tried to light it, but it wouldn't, so I was not thinking and tried to put something flammable in the candle so it would light," she explained.

"There was a spark on the wick of the candle, and it caused fire to spread quickly."

Kacie had no time to react as an explosion occurred.

"I immediately ran back to the shower and turned on the cold water. I did not breathe-in that whole time; I screamed," she said. "My brother (Kohen) kicked down the door, and I looked completely normal, but I knew I was not fine."

Kacie was taken to the Fairfield Memorial Hospital Emergency Room, where medical personnel considered having her flown to Mercy Hospital in St. Louis. She was taken instead by ambulance, as weather conditions were too risky for flying.

"I was in the emergency room at Mercy for the longest time because they couldn't decide if they wanted me in the kid's unit or the burn unit. My hands were completely blistered, and if I had breathed in during the accident, it would have gone into my lungs, costing my life," said Kacie, who suffered burns over 15 percent of her body.

Initially, doctors thought her hands would need to be completely skin-grafted, even making casts to prepare for the procedure—but Kacie had other plans. She remained calm and simply told her family to 'just pray'.

"The next day, my hands were completely normal," Kacie said. "They were perfect."

Doctors still anticipated a long road to recovery, but yet again, Kacie defied the odds.

"I had 14 skin grafts in the first month,



KACIE KINSOLVING
Iconik Studio Photo

and most of my (20) surgeries were when I was inpatient in the burn unit. After my surgeries, they decided to send me to a rehab facility. I could not walk and was on a lot of medication. They told me I'd be in rehab for at least another month—but I was there for a week when they sent me home," she said. "Not even two days later, I began walking."

Starting out, Kacie confessed she felt sorry for herself because she was the only school-age kid in the burn unit. But once she got into rehab, she saw lots of kids of all ages who were also burned.

"It helped me realize that other people were going through similar events," she said. "I saw a little boy who was completely burned…seven years old. I no longer felt bad for myself."

Since she was about to start high school, Kacie was worried that other students would make fun of her scars (which has happened and still does, on occasion); she has also endured false rumors about how the accident happened. Each time, she latches onto her faith and allows resilience to speak louder than anger or fear.

"I used to hide my scars out of embarrassment; now, I show them. I've kept my head up," she said. "I also thought that I would never be able to cheer again—but I have cheered all four years of high school."

The most difficult obstacle to overcome, said Kacie, was accepting 'the new me'.

"I had never cared very much about my appearance until after it happened. I think what got me through it was the people I met. My friends—more specifically, Madison Speck, Jayden Easton, and Lydia Webb—taught me how to love myself," Kacie said.

Kacie has gained more confidence through the hard times. Before, she was 'just getting through the day'. But now?

"I see every day as an opportunity to truly live. My days went from 'I have to do this' to 'I get to do this'," she said. "I think that everything happens for a reason in your life, (and) someday I believe I will figure out my reason.

"God has a plan for my story and how I use it," Kacie added.

Kacie hopes to encourage other people to face their challenges with faith and purpose.

"I would tell them my story and explain that right now it's hard, but it can only get better. But in order for it to get better, it starts with you and staying positive," she said. "Do not ever hold yourself back or give up; you have a purpose!

"God was my biggest source of encouragement during my recovery. I also had everyone in my family right by my side, every step of the way."

Besides cheer, Kacie has been involved in 4-H since she was eight years old, and has shown rabbits all ten years. She's also been a member of FFA for four years, is a member of the Elm River CP Church in Mt. Erie, and attends North Side Baptist Church in Fairfield.

The 18-year-old senior is the daughter of Erin Kinsolving, Canaan McKinney, and Jonah and Lindsay Kinsolving. She has three brothers: Kogen is 19 and works at Ultra Products in Fairfield; twins Graham and Rowan are first-graders.

Kacie loves animals and hopes to become a Veterinary Technician.

Community Closet Meeting Needs Of Many Students

Continued From Page 5

because they felt ashamed, but August created a Google form so teens and their families can request items privately.

Another important piece of the puzzle is giving kids a choice in clothing, which is a key part of identity and self-expression.

"I wanted the Closet to feel more like a store where students can choose items, themselves, rather than having an adult select things for them," August explained. "I also make every effort to stock clothes and shoes that teens would genuinely want to wear."

Food quickly became another essential part of the Closet, and when SNAP benefits were reduced earlier this school year, August became very concerned about the lack of food available to FCHS students.

"We had participated in a weekend backpack food program years ago, but it ended due to low participation. This year, I reached out to families on the free and reduced lunch list to see if there would be interest in restarting a weekend food program. Thirty-three families responded that it would be helpful," August said.

FCHS has received a considerable amount of help in these efforts.

"When I first started the Community Closet, I reached out to FNB and the FCHS Foundation. Both organizations donated very generously and helped get the ball rolling," August said. "FCHS teachers and staff are extremely generous in donating clothing, shoes, and hygiene products to the school. We have been blessed by the financial contributions of area churches and clubs, and clothing donations from CDC and The Clothesline."

In addition, community members donate clothes and hygiene products and give financial contributions. The Step OJT (on-the-job training) students help with hanging items and organizing them, and the school's WOVSED social worker helps August on a regular basis.

"Our cafeteria saves leftovers to supplement the Weekend Food Program. Our school registrar, Cassy Fuller, helps keep me organized," she added. "The FCHS Be the Change Club did a Food Drive around Thanksgiving this year; the donated food was divided between the FCHS Community Closet Weekend Food Program and WADI. The Midwest Food Bank offers assistance, too.

"We are blessed to live in such a generous community," she said.

With additional help from the First Christian Church, Tri-State Food Bank, and donations to the Closet, the program is now able to provide easy-to-prepare food each Friday to help students through the weekend. Because kids receive breakfast and lunch at school during the week, the Weekend Food Program supplies breakfast, lunch, and a few snacks for Saturday and Sunday.

The last barrier that had to be addressed was simply making kids aware of what was available to them. Teachers now have signs in their rooms, the Closet is on the school's website and social media, students receive reminders in Google Classroom, and it's included in the FCHS Community Resource Guide.

"We want every student to know it's there—and that it's there for them," August said.

Living in poverty is hard in ways that aren't always visible. For many students, it's not just about needing clothes or hygiene items—it's about not wanting to stand out. Kids want to blend in with peers, avoid embarrassment, and feel like they belong.

"High school is already a time when students are hyper-aware of how they look and how they fit in. Not having appropriate clothing, shoes, or basic necessities only adds to that stress," August reasoned. "The Community Closet helps remove that burden."

The Closet is a major undertaking. There are countless hours spent sorting through donations, shopping for needed items, keeping inventory current, and maintaining some level of organization in a very small space.

"It's meaningful work, but it's a lot," August confessed. "The Weekend Food Program serves about 28 students each Friday. We've developed a good system for distribution—it's set up almost like an assembly line. Students grab a bag and move down the line, choosing their food items along the way."

Although August currently has limited space for the Closet, donations won't be turned away. You can send a check to the school, to 'FCHS Community Closet', or you can contact August at the school if you prefer to donate via another method. She indicated interest in obtaining more 'Mules gear' such as sweatshirts and t-shirts for kids who don't have them.

Another way folks can help is to spread the word that these services are available to FCHS students that need them, and keep an eye on the school's social media accounts for updates.

August has been truly touched by the kids.

"Our students inspire me daily. Teenagers experience emotions deeply and bring remarkable passion to their interests and beliefs. They are incredibly resilient," she said. "So many of our students have endured traumas that would surprise you. And, still they rise.

"If that's not inspirational. I don't know what is."

August earned her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Purdue University, and her Master's in Social Work from I.U., focusing on clinical social work. She lives in Fairfield with her husband, Brad; they have three grown children.

‘Quiet-Type’ Xavier Keele Plays Sax, But His Real Passion Is Under The Hood Of His Car

Every class has those ‘quiet-type’ kids.

The ones that mind their own business, don’t talk much, and prefer flying under the radar.

They’re the students that stick to themselves, and if you ask the more outgoing kids about them, they won’t know much:

I don’t know his number.

He’s hardly ever on social media.

We haven’t heard much about him.

Xavier Keele is that kind of a guy, and he’s content to keep things simple: enjoys playing tenor sax in the band (he’s done it since the sixth grade), likes being in parades and marching band, and has fun at school mostly because of band and the chance to hang out with friends.

Granted, he’s not much of a talker to just anyone, but if you want to peel away a layer, just ask him about cars. Or more specifically, *his* car.

And—you guessed it—his love for cars is something most folks don’t know about.

“I do like mechanics, and I love cars,” said the son of Jake Cottrill of Mill Shoals and Loretta Keele of Olney. “I worked on my own car, a 2011 Dodge Challenger. I replaced the transmission, brake lines, and the starter.

“Right now, we’ve got four derby cars at the house (he lives with his dad), and I work on ‘em,” he added. “Dad’s a diesel mechanic, and he taught me.”

The Challenger is a little banged-up because he ran into a building when the brakes gave out (which is when he learned the brake lines needed to be replaced), and the only thing that’s heated in it are the seats (he still drives it in cold weather). But it’s his baby.

“What am I most proud of about that car? The sound of it,” he said, his eyes lighting up in a brief expression of enthusiasm. “But, sadly, it’s got a V6. I’d like a V8.”



Xavier Keele is pictured in front of his 2011 Dodge Charger. He worked with his dad, Jake Cottrill (a diesel mechanic) to replace its brake lines, starter, and transmission. He’s most proud of “the sound of it,” he said.

Xavier started working on the car two years ago when he was a sophomore, after his dad brought it home.

“He traded a 2004 Tahoe for it,” Xavier said. “Working on it with dad was pretty fun.”

While cars are his thing, Xavier still loves music. He grew up listening to country, but prefers rock (which his mom introduced him to), and he’s a big Creed fan.

“Saxophone has seemed like my favorite instrument so far. When I started in the sixth grade, guitar wasn’t an option, but that would have been cool if it was,” he said. “I’m not sure if I’ll continue playing sax, but I would like to learn to play the guitar.”

Xavier is unsure what he wants to do after graduation in May, but he plans to move to Evansville, where he wants to join friends and seek job opportunities. He is considering studying to become a certified mechanic.