Staff Editorial

Cady Heron would not approve

We all watched Lindsay Lohan as the character Cady Heron struggle to balance her old friendships with the pressure of maintaining her glossy new life amongst the plastics. We all witnessed the breakfast club rectify their differences to connect with each other on a profound level. And if we haven't seen these movies, we've seen others just like them. We all get the premise: social environments in high school are toxic; we should all be nice to each other.

And yet, if you've read the article on page 6 called "Why is "friend group" exclusivity our norm," or better yet, looked around at the social environment we live in, you'd notice that people here for the most part unquestioningly accept the same toxic environments that plague the characters in the movies.

While walking through the Trevian Commons may not exactly mirror Cady Heron's animalistic experience, it certainly could be made more welcoming. Groups are held together by the primary glue of fear that without their group, they'd have no way of partying. Friends gossip an unhealthy amount about people in other groups and about people within their own. Exclusivity causes people to feel isolated and question what's wrong with them. We end up doing things we wouldn't normally do and tolerate behavior we wouldn't normally tolerate from others because our values feel secondary to the hunger to fit into a group.

This issue intersects with the issue of mental health as examined in the special section on pages 4 and 5. Humans are social animals whose individual identities are inextricable from the community that shapes and is shaped by our interaction with it. Waking up everyday to a toxic social environment fueled by stereotypes, judgement, fear, and competition can be detrimental to our mental health.

And yes, it's actually quite comical opening Instagram to some exclusive pic-collages of groups with a tally of who's committed where.

But if we're being honest with ourselves, we can't deny the unnecessary negativity that happens behind the weekly instagram posts of the squad posing at someone's house party. Needless to say, if the creators of "Mean Girls" could see how blatantly we've jettisoned their heartfelt warnings, they'd be shaking their heads.

Maybe it boils down to the inevitable limitations of art in teaching us valuable life lessons. Maybe we misinterpreted the movies and have instead accepted that toxic social environments as depicted are a fact of life we could never reform. Maybe it has to do with our own limitations.

But regardless, what's interesting is that we all have had one thing the characters in the movies don't have. No, it's not homework. It's the infinite wisdom of the messages imparted during the falling action of these films where the protagonist and the larger community realize that we'd all be so much happier if we were nice to each other.

"I had gone from home-schooled jungle freak to shiny Plastic to most hated person in the world to actual human being. All the drama from last year just wasn't important anymore. School used to be like a shark tank, but now I could just float," says Cady in the last few moments of "Mean Girls."

It's true that there is an exorbitant amount of pressure to conform to detrimental social standards in our environment. It's not hard to see why we've accepted them despite the wise influence of Cady Heron. We entered high school as eager but slightly intimidated freshies ready to fit into our new high school life. When something is new like that, it seems so much bigger than it actually is. Somehow in the process of high school, and maybe even middle school too, we ended up accepting the supposed permanence of social structures we inherited, assuming they'd always preceded us and would, thus, reign long after we're gone.

But we've forgotten that we are the constituents of that environment. We now comprise it, and we can now change it through the integrity of our own actions. If we don't like the limitation, the negativity, the exclusivity of our social environment, we can take responsibility for changing it.

Divisions between groups are natural; of course you are going to be good friends with your teammates, your castmates, or other club members. But we should make efforts to be inclusive, to be thoughtful about the way we talk to people and about people, to spend time with people we actually like, and to seek relationships not out of fear but our of genuine connection.

ACTUAL IMAGE OF A HORSE GIRLS BRAIN

Liebovich

I got the horses in the back

by Alyssa Pak

We all have places we go to relieve some of the stress of our academic and social lives, and for me, going to the barn and seeing my horse taking an afternoon nap after school does just that.

But the general perception of horseback riding is that it's an elitist sport, and debates regarding $50,000 or $5,000 horses really don't help. I mean, it seems pretty difficult to find a sport more privileged than that.

The ironic thing is that for all the money we invest, it appears that all we do is go around in circles and jump a few jumps.

While this is partly true, there's definitely a lot more to the sport than simply gallivanting in expensive clothes.

On the surface, horseback riding seems like a glamorous lifestyle for people who like to throw money around. But, despite all the pricey animals and costly competitions, I've found aspects of the sport that are incredibly meaningful to me.

I love volunteering at my barn's therapeutic riding program just as much as I love the actual riding aspect. At the risk of sounding corny, I feel incredibly happy when the kids I work with totter into the barn calling my name, excited for their 30 minute lesson.

In our everyday lives, we're often so caught up with ourselves; if I counted the number of times I say "I" in a day, I'd probably hate myself more than my horse hates me when I have to drag him away from the hay.

But being able to volunteer at the barn, spending time helping disabled kids both physically and mentally, gives me the sense that I can actually use my skills for something bigger than myself.

Obviously volunteering isn't about me, but I find that conversing with the chatty kids as I help them weave through cones is infinitely more gratifying than any 50 cent ribbon I could win at a show.

I do fully enjoy the competition aspect, too. Waking up at 5:30 A.M., seeing the sun rise, and helping my trainers set jumps before a hectic day of running around from ring to ring is addictive. Not to mention that winning rounds and receiving blue ribbons feels pretty great when it seems that all of the afternoons spent preparing have finally come to fruition.

But unlike other sports, horseback riding means having a non-human teammate, an experience in and of itself. Sometimes my horse, Romeo, will refuse a jump because he's terrified of the box underneath and sometimes he'll spook or buck simply because of a leaf drifting on the other side of the arena. I don't have control over these things, and I know it doesn't do me any good to get frustrated at him, even when the entirety of his 1500 pounds steps on my foot and leaves a bruise on my toe.

In this way, horseback riding has taught me to be patient with humans as well. Just like with horses, I can't control the way people around me act, so when I'm unhappy, I think about how I can re-adjust my own actions. I believe that the horses are what make the sport so special. Whether I'm using a school pony to help a disabled kid stretch or I'm trying to figure out the most effective way to get 1500 pounds of Romeo to listen to me, I'm definitely learning what it means to care for something other than myself.

In the summer, I've gotten used to coming home smelling like horse manure and pungent fly spray and in the winter, when it's 20° out and too cold to ride, I'll trek out to the barn to hand-walk Romeo, watching the cold air coming out of both of our noses

Despite what's often presented as an inaccessible, flashy, and elitist sport, I feel confident enough to say that no amount of money could compensate for the loyalty and compassion that horses have taught me over the last six years.

When you play the game of thrones

by Ezra Wallach

Just last week, as the first episode of "Game of Thrones's" final season aired, I saw a quote from the show as I was scrolling down my Twitter feed: "When you play the Game of Thrones, you win or die."

Someone told me this my sophomore year, attempting to prepare me for social life at New Trier. Now that I'm six weeks away from graduation, I figured I could use my platform to pass on the knowledge I've gained about the social scene here. Specifically, how the social environment is its own sort of "Game of Thrones."

Considering the way New Trier is fed from six different junior highs that all already have their own social scenes, getting yourself into a stable friend group is a stressful task.

In the show, there are several houses entrenched in a constant struggle for power with other kingdoms and within the ranks of their own house.

Just like the Lannisters or the Starks in Game of Thrones, there is often an internal power struggle within groups for who will be considered the "queen" or "king" and who will have the final say in what moves are to be made on a given weekend night.

Let a friend outside of the group come to a party, or call out the king for not inviting you to something or saying something mean, and you might sacrifice your chances of staying in the kingdom altogether.

Being in a friend group means you have a group for school dances, you have somewhere to be every Saturday night, and you have people to post birthday shoutouts for you among other things.

Being in a friend group at times seems mandatory, just as being in a more "powerful" kingdom seems enticing enough to ditch your friends.

Being in the kingdom that sits atop or near the throne could mean a few things. It could mean that you are able to hang out with the hottest guys or girls. It could mean that you are able to go to the best parties or sit at or near the front row at the football games. Or maybe it could just mean that you got what you wanted or what you thought you wanted. Part of what makes you happy comes from being popular or friends with certain people, which I guess is okay.

But, as much as this process brings joy and pride to a few in the kingdoms who "win," it leaves many people alienated and disillusioned just as it does in "GOT." The whole system can be exclusive, isolating, and cruel. Or, it leaves many people, who, despite avoiding death, obey the king in a way that stems from their fear of what life without the kingdom could really look like, making their life not too fun either.

People who do question the social game of thrones and are kicked out of a group, are subject to seeing superficial Instagram posts, watching these people have fun, and again yearning for that life, which can spark anxiety and sadness. The next step is either starting or joining a new friend group, or leaving the game altogether, which means just "settling" for a few friends, or considering yourself a "floater".

Don't get me wrong, many groups are great—they are built on supportive friends with real similarities.

But, some groups are different—they are built on attractiveness, athleticism or other things, which dwarf the ability to make real friendships within it, which is a recipe for disaster.

It is ridiculous for our happiness to be dependant on fear or superficial social pyramids, and it is just as ridiculous to [ruin] the high school experience of other people who want to be your friend for this reason too.

The fact is that a great social life is possible without playing the game.
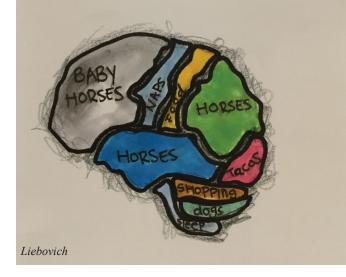
Obviously the concept of popularity in high school is normal, but ghosting your friends is not, posting pictures on Instagram with all 9 of your other friends with the caption "10/10 committed," so that the people not in your group can see it is not, and kicking people out of group chats is not.

But, as I'm saying this, I know how tempting it can be to flaunt your popularity or ditch old friends for newer, more popular ones. But at the same time, the social game of thrones causes anxiety, suffering, ridicule, judgement, and isolation.

I've had friends tell me that "all they want in life is a stable friend group." I've had friends tell me that I needed to "start over" after I called people of a certain group out for ditching me and going to a party. And I've had friends tell me that "this is just how it works" after a friend lied to me about where he was on a Friday night.

Through all of this, I've realized that to win the game of thrones, you just have to play the game well. You have to be exclusive; you have to do bad things to people you used to be friends with; you have to sacrifice some of your true self in order to survive; you have to tolerate things from others that you wouldn't normally—all things I, too, have done in the past.

Do these things and you'll either win or die: it's a coin flip Or, don't play the game at all and survive. Your choice.