

## Four years of (mostly) firsts

by Darcie Kim

For me, as it was for most people, high school was filled with a variety of firsts. I had my first kiss, a sloppy and awkward amalgamation of lips and saliva that I couldn't wait to tell my friends all about.

I went to my first party and giggled nervously every time I made eye contact with anyone and clutched my friend's arm the whole night for fear of looking out of place.

I received my first F on a test and immediately ran into a bathroom before bursting into tears, not accepting the reality that I would earn a diversity of grades ranging from a hundred to the forties before graduating.

I had my first real fight with my parents, one that didn't end with me slinking off to my room with my meek voice trailing behind me.

I was ditched for the first time by friends who bought tickets with me for a New Trier basketball game then decided at the last minute they didn't want to go with me anymore.

I received my first rejection from my dream university and sat in my bed staring at my computer screen hurt and in shock with tears welling in my eyes.

It's difficult for me to put into words how much or why I've changed since my first day of freshman year, but I guess the point is that all of these firsts served a large, rather critical role in shaping me into the person I am today.

For the past four years, I've stumbled with my peers along a road of mistakes, successes, regrets, and wishes and begun to embrace the discomfort of new experiences.

I used to be so convinced that I knew who I wanted to be, but in reality I was desperately forcing myself to fulfill an expectation I had created for myself. I wanted to fit in perfectly and be an always agreeable, outwardly social, remarkably vanilla, dutiful student. I was terrified of showing insecurity or vulnerability and fought to resolve any parts of me that didn't fit.

I was scared of voicing controversial opinions confidently in class discussions for fear I would be judged by my classmates. I refused to stand up for myself to friends I knew



were treating me poorly because I didn't want to risk being alone on the weekends.

I did everything conceivable to avoid or conceal failure and rejection of any kind.

But as I experienced more firsts and emerged from them relatively unscathed, I began to realize that hiding behind this false persona forever was impossible. Not only was it impossible, it was wrong. As outstandingly cheesy as it sounds, I began to inch towards truth and discomfort.

I sat at a table in front of the four varsity tennis coaches and the other three captains on my team and explained through heaving sobs why I felt my teammates and I had been wronged at the past weekend's tournament.

I recognized their expressions of mild disdain but I let them slide over me.

I committed to a university I far from loved, and decided that rather than linger on past failures, I would accept that I had given my all in the college process and anticipate all of the future opportunities I would undoubtedly reach out and grasp.

This isn't to say that as I near the end of my time in high school, years dramatically different from Gabriella Montez's perfect "High School Musical" experience, I have an unwavering understanding of myself. If anything, I have more questions of who I am, what I believe, and who I want to become.

But the difference from the first day of freshman year and the last day of senior year is that I'm beginning to welcome and seek out confusion and insecurity.

As I prepare to enter the next chapter of my life, I can only wonder what questions I'll be confronted with and how those will prompt change in me as well.

## Four (mostly) funky and fresh years

by Alyssa Pak

I believe that there are two kinds of people in this world: "high school forever" and something along the lines of "ew... high school."

These four years are such a short period of time in our lives, albeit incredibly significant. We learn how to solve differential equations, spend hours writing our junior themes, and memorize the periodic table.

We get lunch with our friends on early dismissal days, spend weeks planning for school dances, and do the awkward wave at people we know in the hallways. I guess it's all part of the ~experience~.

When I think about how we came into high school as such innocent and unsuspecting freshmen, I want to laugh.

I remember being afraid of getting FOMO if I didn't go to the football games; I saw them as a staple of the whole high school "experience."

Unfortunately, I only made it to the first one before I realized that I'd rather be chilling at home than huddled in the freshman section taking pictures for Instagram as proof that I went.

And the mixer with the neon theme? Prom doesn't even begin to compare... All in all, the freshmen campus was awesome and it was so nice to not have to worry about any of those classic horror stories involving upperclassmen. Plus, I miss being able to walk outside to all my classes.

Sophomore year it felt strange to be the youngest at school. I can very clearly picture myself carrying

my Vera Bradley lunchbox (which, by the way, is not a "cool" thing to do, leave the lunchbox in your locker, Alyssa) with my head down and my long hair covering half my face as the scary seniors strut past me in their Green Team sweatshirts.

And although not scary, I'm now a senior, which seems really weird, because I could've sworn that it was only yesterday that I felt like a small goldfish in a giant toilet bowl just waiting to be flushed at any minute.

If I could sum up junior year in two words, it'd be "the grind." But truth be told, it was also probably my favorite.

I think this was the year that we all thought we were hot stuff just because we were no longer at the bottom of the age hierarchy on this campus. Everyone was trying to flex how late they were staying up each night, and it was basically a competition of who could work the hardest, but we also bonded over all the stress and the chaotic nights.

Yoga pants and sweatshirts were the move on most days. The words "ACT" and "straight As" and "college" were thrown around like confetti.

Despite all the flak that junior year gets, many people who I talk to say that it was one of the most rewarding years academically.

Nevertheless, when I look back, I feel like I had the emotional intelligence of a pea, so senior year was much better in that department because, you know, growing up.

Then came first semester senior year, which I think is analogous to when someone \*really\* hypes up

a movie and then once the movie is over you're just left wondering... why?

With the added pressure of college apps, first semester was a million times worse than writing any junior theme.

"Senior year will be fun" they said, I thought each day with a feeling of betrayal.

Sifting through college apps, I wondered what I hoped to do with my future and what I wanted it to look like. Nothing was certain and contrary to what our new "senior" status meant, everything was terrifying.

But after college apps were over, instead of showing off how late we were staying up, seniors started to brag about how early they were going to sleep and "ugh, the senioritis."

We pushed through finals, and then we were finally second semester seniors.

I remember the day that I finished my last final: I went home, curled up in bed, and watched the whole first season of "Sex Education" which people had been talking about for weeks.

I can't even remember the last time I watched Netflix before that because Netflix is a dark hole, one that is too easy for a disheartened senior to fall into.

But aside from AP tests, this last month or so has been pretty great. I wore a long red dress to prom, which is something I would have been way too scared to do a year ago, and realized that it's okay to not always do what everyone else is doing. I run outside and revel in the familiarity of Winnetka, a place I'll be leaving soon.

And I try to spend as many moments with my friends and family as possible because whether it's going on a quick walk to the beach or actually taking the time to get a nice dinner, these are the small moments that I'm going to remember.

I'm definitely the type of person who starts homework and studying days in advance just to get ahead. I skip hang outs with my friends in order to take care of my horse and spend my summers at the barn.

But lately I've been leaving it until Sunday night, which, despite sounding trivial, has been quite wonderful. The opportunity cost of taking the time to make memories with the people I love might involve putting "Hamlet" aside for a second or two, but I'm okay with that—these are the people who have made my last four years so worthwhile. As corny as it may sound, I can happily say that high school is indeed, forever.

## Letter to the Editor

From time to time, the New Trier News will publish guest opinions. These letters do not reflect the views of the New Trier News. To submit a letter for consideration, email us at [nnews@nthn.net](mailto:nnews@nthn.net).

by Elizabeth Yamin

In eighth grade, I scored high on an autism test. I've been placed in staff-facilitated groups with other students on the spectrum to handle my socializing issues since the fourth grade. Eventually, I was diagnosed with an emotional and learning disability so I could get accommodations that better reflected my academic needs.

While some autistic people are debilitated by their symptoms, the disorder is not inherently harmful; widespread ignorance does the most damage.

During these social groups I was placed in, students would converse while teachers offered feedback on what we did right, and how we could improve our social skills—usually by repressing who

we were.

Adorned in puzzle pieces, teachers told us not to flap, to give eye contact despite our discomfort, and in one activity, to act out personality traits that weren't our own to supposedly build "empathy," as if we were the only ones who had to learn it. Helping students develop social skills is not wrong, but insisting we hide who we are based on arbitrary standards is.

This is what Autism Speaks implicitly advocates. Every April, students wear their puzzle-piece t-shirts and participate in the annual Autism Speaks Walk, hosted at the Northfield Campus, in the name of "Autism Awareness." And every April, my complaints about this sponsorship have been ignored by the school. The closest I've gotten to acknowledgment was in my junior year, where after presenting packets

of sources regarding Autism Speaks with two other peers, the activities coordinator said she could not prevent the annual walks, as Autism Speaks is entitled to rent New Trier facilities.

In 2009, Autism Speaks released their "I am Autism" commercial, where a menacing voice representing autism describes itself. The ad claimed that, "I [Autism] work faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer and diabetes combined." No, autism is not a progressive condition, it's a developmental disorder, and no, it's not worse than three lethal diseases. One year ago, Autism Speaks posters decorated New Trier High School, claimed that autism is simply diagnosed more than the three diseases, which, while true, is still an odd comparison meant to invoke fear.

With the expressed purpose of

funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a possible cure for autism, Autism Speaks was founded in 2005 by Bob and Suzanne Wright after their grandson was diagnosed with autism. By introducing the unheard-of disorder to the public as a danger to be eradicated while silencing the voices of autistic people, Autism Speaks has garnered support from the pervasion of misinformation and mischaracterization.

According to their 2017 Strategic Plan for Science, their most recently published plan, their goal is, "...funding studies on the underlying biology of autism, including studies to better understand medical and genetic conditions that are associated with autism that could potentially be linked to adverse responses to immunization." This has been a fundamental aspect of AS' platform since

its conception. According to their 2017 990 Form budget, 32% of their budget was spent on this research, and not counting scientific grants, only 3.8% was for "Family Service" grants. The organization continues to prioritize erasing autism over serving those living with the condition.

Of their 26 board members, only 2 are autistic, meaning the direction of the organization is still run by allistic people. In other words, Autism Speaks speaks over autistic voices. As if we don't know what's good for us.

It's time we stopped letting an allistic-run organization represent a disorder as diverse as autism. Celebrate Autism Acceptance and consider supporting autistic-run organizations like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and the Autistic Women & Nonbinary Women Network.