

Mr. Cornelius: Spreading the Love of Science

By Alex Van Auken

Meet Mr. Joseph Cornelius: one of the awesome science teachers at Well-Trained Mind Academy. His students love his humor and cheery personality, always starting class with a sing-song ‘Good morning, everybody!’ and a conversation about everyone’s weekend. While many students might view learning science as simply “filling a credit,” Mr. Cornelius’ enthusiasm for teaching is contagious, making everyone just as ecstatic about the cell cycle as he is. As he says, “learning doesn’t have to be boring,” and his classes are anything but.

Mr. Cornelius grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. During high school, he took International Baccalaureate courses, and after completing his first semester of biology in ninth grade, he knew he wanted to become a biology teacher. In college, Mr. Cornelius earned a minor in secondary education and his main degree in organismal biology from Rockhurst University. He also served as a teaching assistant and even performed a human dissection, but Mr. Cornelius’ life as a student didn’t stop when he became a teacher; he is currently in the fourth year of his doctoral degree in science and medical education.

In March of 2024, Well-Trained Mind Academy welcomed Mr. Cornelius to fill in for another teacher, and he’s been with us ever since. He taught chemistry and lab to middle schoolers and the AP versions to high school students. This year, he shared his long love of biology by teaching Biology for the Rhetoric Stage. Outside of WTMA, he teaches anatomy and physiology to undergrad and graduate students at a local college.

Mr. Cornelius is known to always have a project going. He says, “My colleagues joke with me because I’m like ‘I want to do this project, and I want to do this project, and ooh, a squirrel!’” Throughout the 2025-2026 school year, he’s been developing a new course to introduce to his students: AP Biology, which will be expanded to include both lectures and labs.



What a project! If you’re a biology lover, be sure to check it out, and if you’re not, you will be by the end of week one. Signing up for an AP class can be a bit overwhelming, but Mr. Cornelius encourages his students to take healthy academic risks. “If you want to take the class, I am here to support you; you’re going to do great,” he assures his students.

Outside of his teaching, Mr. Cornelius enjoys traveling. He has a goal of visiting as many national parks as he can. Students love to see pictures from his travels. In the past year alone, he’s been to Seattle, Portland, Florida, France, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. (And if you were wondering why you didn’t see him at the WTMA spring break trip, that’s because he was traveling in Europe.) His students wouldn’t be surprised if he logged on to teach class from the top of the

Eiffel Tower. “I like to be very busy,” he admits.

Being both a teacher and a student, Mr. Cornelius brings a unique perspective to teaching. As a student, he says, “I remember the things I don’t like,” which helps him understand how to turn those things around and keep students engaged and content when he’s teaching. Engagement is especially helpful in online teaching and learning. When COVID-19 started, Mr. Cornelius was in college and working as a teaching assistant but had to switch from in-person to online teaching quickly. “I love teaching online,” he says. “I think there is a special spot for online teaching and Covid helped me figure that out... It’s a lot more flexible. I feel like I’m connecting with students the exact same way I would in person.”

Students truly appreciate the effort Mr. Cornelius puts into using the challenge of being both student and teacher to enhance their learning. “It also makes me a lot more understanding of deadlines,” he says. “It helps being a student, know[ing] I have this many deadlines on this day and this many exams. I always remember, those are my students, they have the same thing going on, too... Every student has a life, every student is going through things... [It] makes me feel more connected [to]and more respectful [of them].” *Continued on Page 3*

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the spring 2026 issue of the Well-Trained Tribune! Our staff put in so much dedication and hard work to write these pieces. I would also like to give a tremendous thank you to our wonderful advisor, Dr. Lisa Gentile, who made this all possible.

In my third year at this newspaper and my last at WTMA, I’ll be forever grateful to have been part of the club, one of my favorite parts of high school. I highly encourage students to join – it gives you writing experience, helps you stay connected to current events, and provides a lot of peer feedback. Even if you aren’t interested in journalism, this club enhances your writing skills and gives you the opportunity to write about what *you* find interesting. In my two years as editor-in-chief, I’ve gained leadership experience and learned how to give constructive feedback. Funnily enough, writing the letter from the editor is the hardest part for me.

As a final farewell, I wish good luck to all fellow graduating seniors in whatever is next on your journey. To middle and high schoolers, I know the road to graduation sometimes feels incredibly long and difficult, but keep plodding along. This is such a unique part of your life, so embrace it!

Happy summer and happy reading!
Mae Paul, Editor-in-Chief

Science & Tech What Makes a Supercell?

By Alexis Sutterley

... Supercells are classified as violent, rotating thunderstorms that are notorious producers of large hail, strong winds, and tornadoes... **Page 2**

Arts & Culture Celebrating 40 Years of a Musical Phenomenon

By Lawrence Wunderlich

... *Phantom* still holds the record for the longest-running musical on Broadway...

Page 4

Off the Beat A Guide to Teen Slang

By Mae Paul

... This guide is a sneak peek at how the kids talk, so next time you hear a teen say, “you’re so Ohio,” you’ll know a tart reply... **Page 9**

Can 3D Printing Solve the Organ Donation Crisis?

By Liam Cummings

Three-dimensional (3D) printing is an advanced technology that involves printing solid, 3D objects. But what if this technology could be used to print human organs? Scientists are already working to print living tissues and even basic or model organs. It's important to understand the distinction between the types of organs successfully printed: functional organs for implantation into the human body and surgical models used for training and research. The goal is to allow bioprinting of functional organs as a solution to the global organ donor crisis.

The process of bioprinting is complex and fascinating, which includes the dispensing of living cells, often layer by layer, using a specialized machine. This process is generally broken down into four main steps: design, preparation, printing, and maturation. First, the organ or tissue is meticulously designed using sophisticated software. Then, the correct amounts of cells and materials are carefully combined to create the "bio-ink." After that, the actual printing begins, and the bio-ink is deposited with high precision. The final step is maturation, which allows the printed tissue to develop and gain functional integrity. Two common methods used in this process are extrusion, which pushes the material through a syringe, and stereolithography, which uses light to bond bio-resins together.

Bioprinting holds immense promise for the medical community. The technology enables remarkable morphological precision, creating structures with incredible detail and accuracy, which are invaluable to medical researchers. For example, bioprinted tissues can be used to study how diseases spread and to test the toxicity of new medicines in a more controlled environment. Moreover, a key advantage is the potential for personalized medicine. Using a patient's own cells significantly reduces the risk of transplant rejection by the immune system, addressing a major challenge in traditional organ transplantation.

New research from Harvard's John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) introduced a groundbreaking method called coaxial sacrificial writing in functional tissue (co-SWIFT). This innovative approach allows for the 3D printing of two-layer vascular networks that closely mimic the structure of natural blood vessels. The co-SWIFT method uses a specialized nozzle to print a sacrificial, gelatin-based core simultaneously with a collagen-based shell with living cells. After printing, the sacrificial core is removed, leaving behind a hollow channel. This two-layer design is crucial for replicating native vasculature and is essential for transporting nutrients and oxygen. The co-

SWIFT method has yielded remarkable successes. Researchers successfully printed vessels containing both smooth muscle and endothelial cells, which remained viable and functional.

Despite these exciting advancements, major hurdles remain, particularly in the creation of complex, viable organs. The most significant challenge is vascularization, the ability to establish a functional network of blood vessels that supplies nutrients and oxygen. Without a functional blood supply, the cells in the center of a printed organ would quickly die from a lack of nourishment. Another major obstacle is the development of suitable biomaterials. Finding materials that are both biocompatible (non-toxic to the body) and "printable" with the necessary structural integrity has proven to be incredibly difficult.

While simpler structures, such as 3D-printed ears and patches of skin, have been successfully implanted, a fully functional internal organ remains a distant goal. Experts in the field acknowledge that a complete, 3D-printed internal organ is likely still 15 to 20 years away from being ready for clinical trials. However, the promise of bioprinting is immense, with the potential to solve the global organ donor crisis and to revolutionize personalized medicine, transforming the future of healthcare as we know it.

What Makes a Supercell?

By Alexis Sutterley

Sometimes the weather is nice and sunny, and sometimes the weather causes catastrophic destruction. Supercells are classified as violent, rotating thunderstorms that are notorious producers of large hail, strong winds, and tornadoes. These violent storms produce many of the same effects as a typical summer thunderstorm, except that they are bigger and more catastrophic. For example, you may see pea-sized hail in a summer thunderstorm, while the hail in supercells may grow up to be half a foot in diameter. The 40 mph gusts in a regular thunderstorm become 60+ mph consistent winds, which may be catastrophic.

Your location might have a massive effect on what you can do to protect yourself from these violent storms. The wisest thing to do in a supercell is to stay away from windows and stay on the first floor. If a tornado warning is issued, get underground if possible, or into the lowest interior room with no windows.

Do not go outside and take photos! If there is large hail, you could get seriously injured by the rocks of ice hurling at your head at 100 mph. If there is wind, you could get hit by debris. In a tornado, you could possibly get hit by hail in addition to the flying debris.

If you are driving towards a supercell, you may want to park under a gas station canopy and take shelter inside. If you are already in the hail, get down and cover your head. If there are violent winds, pull over. If there is a tornado warning in any of these situations, you should get into a ditch on the side of the road. Or you could just check your weather forecast for the day and avoid the thunderstorms in general.

If there are severe winds or a tornado, never take shelter under an overpass. The Bernoulli effect states that fluids in a smaller space move faster than liquids in an open space. Because air is a fluid, the wind will tunnel through the overpass, and you may get blown out. If it is just hailing really badly, you should find a covered place for your car (that isn't an overpass) so you can rush inside if there is a tornado warning.

If you are one of the unfortunate people to receive a flash flood warning and a tornado warning at the same time, go to your bathroom. An underground room would likely not be an option in a flash flood, so your best option is the bathroom, specifically the bathtub.

If you are driving when you see a tornado, take shelter in a nearby building, or just get into the watery ditch if there are no buildings nearby. If it happens to be hailing, windy, and there is a tornado warning all at once, do the same things that you would do in the case of a tornado. Being underground will protect you from the hail and the winds, and so will the bathroom.

The most important thing to do in any scenario is to never ignore weather warnings. If there is a severe thunderstorm, stay inside away from exterior walls and windows. If there is a tornado, you should immediately proceed to your tornado safe spot. Never try to drive away from the tornado; most of the time, you have a better chance of survival staying in the same place. Perhaps the best piece of advice would be not to drive into the tornado, no matter what.

Tornado with dust and debris cloud forming at surface



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Avatar: Fire and Ash, An Underrated Blockbuster

Review by Kaitlyn Lamb

The *Avatar* franchise has always been a bit of an enigma. Nearly twenty years after its release, the original remains the highest-grossing film in history. Its sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, takes third place after *Avengers: Endgame*.

Despite its immense financial success, *Avatar* remains an underrated franchise. It has no fandom, and people are quick to dismiss it as “*Pocahontas* with blue people” or the lesser *Avatar* franchise, in comparison to the popular animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. In reality, *Avatar* tells a profound story in one of the most immersive fictional lands of all time: Pandora.



"Avatar wallpaper" by [Rego - d4u.hu](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

The visuals of *Avatar* have always been its strong suit. After the first film came out in 2009, there was even a phenomenon known as Post-*Avatar* Depression Syndrome, whereby people would leave the theater deeply depressed because they were unable to visit the beautiful world of Pandora. 2022's *The Way of Water* elevated the special effects even more. Every frame of water was digitally created, but the Polynesian-inspired landscapes felt incredibly real.

While it is true that elements of the first *Avatar* can be compared to Disney's *Pocahontas*, with a foreigner learning the ways of an indigenous group thanks to the daughter of the group's leader, that does not inherently discount it from being a good story. With each installment, director James Cameron manages to improve his craft and make the story better.

Avatar: The Way of Water, Tokyo Press Conference James Cameron & Sigourney Weaver



Dick Thomas Johnson from Tokyo, Japan, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The emotional core of *Avatar: Fire and Ash* is the Sully family's grief. Jake Sully, the main character of the series, clashes with his wife Neytiri over her prejudice towards humans, or Sky People, as she calls them, the result of their destroying her home and killing members of her family. Jake and Neytiri's son, Lo'ak, narrates this film, marking a departure from the previous two narrated by his father. Lo'ak had already been one of the main characters of *The Way of Water*, and focusing on his side of the complex father-son dynamic was a brilliant decision.

Growing up, Lo'ak and his siblings were treated like soldiers by their Marine-veteran father, causing tension between Jake and his children. Jake was constantly comparing Lo'ak to his older brother Neteyam, making Lo'ak more desperate to prove himself, more reckless, and more likely to disappoint his dad. In a heartbreaking scene in *Fire and Ash*, after Lo'ak inadvertently puts his family in danger yet again, Jake lashes out and blames Lo'ak for the strife and death the family has suffered. Lo'ak weeps and runs away, and considers taking his own life, but is stopped by his love interest, T'sireya, and his sister, Kiri.

Jake and Neytiri's adopted daughter, Kiri, continues her arc as the Chosen One figure with a unique link to the spiritual world. The planet of Pandora functions as a hive mind — separate beings all connected through a seemingly magical network. In this film, Kiri uses her special connection to Eywa, the central deity, to perform otherwise impossible feats. This baffles the technology-based humans and the Na'vi healers alike, setting her apart from either group.

...*Avatar* tells a profound story in one of the most immersive fictional lands of all time: Pandora...

While Kiri's subplot is fascinating, it's a bit awkward because teenage Kiri is played by 76-year-old Sigourney Weaver. Weaver is obviously a fantastic actress, and her mannerisms are surprisingly convincing, but her voice is that of an older lady, which becomes more distracting when Kiri starts a romance with Spider, whose actor was only fifteen during filming. This romance is cringeworthy on three levels: their actors could play a grandmother and a grandson; Spider is an average-height human while Kiri is a nearly 8-foot-tall blue alien; and both call Jake Sully “Dad,” making them almost siblings.

The first *Avatar* focused on the forest environment, and *The Way of Water* largely took place underwater, so one expects *Fire and Ash* to delve into the fire-themed antagonists seen in the trailers. While the Ash People are some of the best parts of the movie, very little time is spent on their backstory, which has immense potential. Their base, only seen in a couple of scenes, is in a giant tree trunk in a wasteland beneath a volcano. More time could have been spent developing this group and their fascinating world.

Avatar: Fire and Ash proves that James Cameron has no shortage of ideas for story beats and worldbuilding in his flagship franchise, which deserves far more credit for its writing, characters, and creativity.

Mr. Cornelius Profile

Continued from Page 1

Mr. Cornelius loves trying out different techniques to help students learn. “I’m always exploring new ways. I never want to stay stagnant in one teaching area,” he says. Mr. Cornelius understands that his students don’t want to stay stagnant in their learning either. He creates a fun environment, encouraging students to propose ideas for extra credit projects and allowing them to partner up and work together, always offering “out of the box” options such as creating a science-related podcast episode, a slideshow, or a graphic novel as alternatives to a traditional paper. “If you can make a personable connection with it, you’ll remember it forever,” he says. Due to his fun personality, there’s always a lot of joy and laughter in his classes. “We’re going to laugh, and we’re going to have fun!” he declares.

Mr. Cornelius stays up to date when relating to his students. When joking about how hard some scientific words are to pronounce, he compared it to reading the Grimmerie from the new *Wicked* movies.

“There’s no reason to make a topic really hard when it can be broken down,” Mr. Cornelius explains. He inspires students to get creative with their study skills. Review days have included silly acronyms (often involving guinea pigs) and intense games of biology Jeopardy.

Once, while explaining endocytosis and exocytosis (when a cell takes in new matter and expels what it doesn’t need), Mr. Cornelius compared it to picking up and dropping things, then proceeded to drop his set of colorful pens across his desk, and we watched as they one by one rolled onto the floor while he scrambled to

pick them up, only to drop them again. Anything for science! At the end of that review day, students took the test, and when answering questions about the functions of endo and exocytosis, I guarantee we were all thinking of that moment in class — thank you, Mr. Cornelius.

Students love how Mr. Cornelius creates a welcoming class space for everyone. “I want every student in my classroom to know it’s a safe space and it’s a place to learn,” he says. “You can’t learn something until you feel safe, until your physiological needs feel met in a classroom.” He individualizes his teaching in a way that includes every student in the love of learning. “I’m very open to working on a plan that meets a student’s needs,” he shares.

Continued on Page 5

Celebrating 40 Years of a Musical Phenomenon

By Lawrence Wunderlich

Beneath the Paris Opera House, there lies a man-made lake. Around that lake stirs darkness. And, at night, there is faint music to be heard from the operas on the stage above. This mysterious landscape may not seem like much at first. But, since its creation during the Paris Opera House's construction in the 1860s, this man-made lake beneath what many consider the most lavish opera house in the world inspired legends, a novel, films, and, finally, in 1986 – exactly 40 years ago – a musical that would take the world by storm and become one of the most successful musicals ever written. That musical is, of course, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, a highly regarded musical masterpiece that continues to mesmerize audiences, especially as it celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2026.

The Paris Opera House, *Le Palais Garnier*, in the Late Nineteenth Century



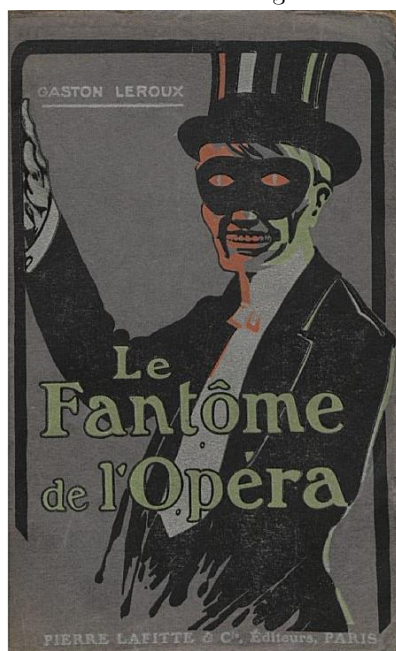
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The_Opera_House,_Paris,_France_ca._1890-1900.jpg

Originally adapted from the 1910 novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* by the French journalist and author Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera* in theater form has a stunningly rich history. Among the most significant inspirations for the story were the uncanny 19th-century rumors of a disfigured man dwelling among the darkness of the gloomy lake below the Paris Opera House (in French, also called the *Palais Garnier*). Still, some myths delved deeper, with the most cryptic avowing that Box Five of the theater was cursed, and the most daring insisting that a ghost haunted the *Palais Garnier* and caused unexplained incidents without warning (such as the fatal crashing of a 7-ton chandelier counterweight mid-performance in 1896).

Such legends became the groundwork for Leroux's original 1910 novel. Seventy-six years later, they set the stage for a captivating worldwide sensation – complete with extraordinary drama, romance, and tragedy – when the acclaimed English composer Andrew Lloyd Webber put the story of the Phantom to music. In 1986, *The Phantom of the Opera* debuted in the West End at His Majesty's Theatre, London, marking the beginning of an enduring phenomenon.

Cover of the 1910 edition of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* by Gaston Leroux (1868-1927) Adolphe Cossard, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



Largely stemming from its intriguing blend of myth, reality, and fiction, *The Phantom of the Opera* has had a profound international cultural impact since its premiere. The most staggering testament to this influence is the sheer number of *Phantom* performances across the world. The West End alone has held over 15,600 performances and counting, and Broadway stands close behind with 13,981 performances between 1988 (the Broadway debut) and 2023 (when Broadway closed the show).

Phantom on Broadway in 2023



Photo by Lawrence Wunderlich

Despite ending its run three years ago, *Phantom* still holds the record for the longest-running musical on Broadway. Worldwide, it has been performed roughly 70,000 times and has been viewed by more than 160 million theater-goers across 195 cities in over 40 countries and 21 languages. Put into perspective, that's equivalent to one performance a night for roughly 192 years straight. These 70,000 performances, though, have occurred in 20% of that time. Evidently, such a volume of shows in such a short span of time is bound to have left a lasting impression on the world.

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The scale of the 2026 celebratory 40th-anniversary performances only further confirms the musical's cultural magnitude. From March through the beginning of May 2026, a breathtaking outdoor residency ran at the Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour in Australia. An opulent North American tour is still underway. With *Phantom* no longer running on Broadway, this tour, which began in late 2025, is notably the first time the beloved original musical has been performed professionally in the US since 2023.

Moreover, *Phantom* will tour Spain, Estonia, Poland, and Lithuania in its original English-language form for the first time ever. What's more, with Lithuania having never hosted any performances of the musical, even as a native-language production, this tour will mark the musical's true debut there in any form. In Estonia, though, the upcoming performances of *Phantom* will take one step further and, reportedly, make Estonian history as the largest indoor event Estonia has ever hosted. And so, the story of the Phantom will be weaving its way through city after city in 2026, reaching both old and new audiences, captivating them with "the music of the night" – just as it has for the past four decades.

To remain an active international cultural phenomenon for forty years is no easy feat for a musical. Society changes, tastes change, audiences change. But one thing always remains: the musical itself. No matter how external factors shift, the Phantom of the Opera is there. And this constant, with its masterful blend of music, romance, drama, and tragedy, is why people are still gathering to celebrate *The Phantom of the Opera* forty years after its premiere.

Kennedy Center's Controversial Name Change

By Catherine Fusz

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, commonly referred to as the Kennedy Center, is a historic theater in Washington, D.C., that hosts many forms of the performing arts, from theater troupes to ballet to opera. Since its opening on September 8, 1971, the Kennedy Center has served as the national cultural center for the United States, and is a “living memorial” to John F. Kennedy.

On December 18, 2025, the board of trustees voted to rename the cultural center The Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts. According to President Trump, the board “voted unanimously” in favor of this name change. While the president and other members of the White House said that the vote was concordant, Democratic Representative and ex-officio member of the board Joyce Beatty stated in a video she posted on X, “I was on the call, and as I tried to push my button to voice my concern, ask questions, and certainly not vote in support of this, I was muted. Each time I tried to speak, I was muted.”

The name change has led to the cancellation of many performances that were scheduled for this year, including those by Grammy-winning soprano Renée Fleming, the cast of the hit musical *Hamilton*, the U.S. Marine Band, folk singer Kristy Lee, “Seattle’s Children’s Theater,” and the composer and lyricist of the musicals *Godspell*, *Wicked*, and *Pippin*, Stephen Schwartz. In addition to the canceled performances, the Washington National Opera, for whom the Kennedy Center served as the official residence, left in January of 2026 for the Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University.

The Renamed Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts



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The artistic director of the company, Francesca Zambello, who had been with the company for 14 seasons, stated regarding his leaving, “I am deeply saddened to leave the Kennedy Center.”

Mr. Cornelius Profile

Continued from Page 3

“What drives me to really keep teaching and being the best person I can for my students is to help them meet both needs... combining both those things to make a fun environment.”

When asked what inspires him to keep learning, he smiled and said simply, “I get bored.” Teaching and learning “keeps me on my toes in the best way possible.” Let’s all take the opportunity to learn from Mr. Cornelius’ example and use our boredom as our superpower!

The New Venue of the Washington National Opera The Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University



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In the coming years, as we explore new venues and new ways of performing, Washington National Opera remains committed to its mission and artistic vision. Our repertoire will continue to include diverse offerings, from monumental classics to more contemporary works, presented in bold visual productions with first-class musical values.”

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In addition to the extensive list of canceled performances, the Kennedy Center will be shut down for two years beginning on July 4, 2026, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, due to President Trump’s \$250 million renovation plan for cosmetic changes and facility repairs.

The Kennedy Center has served as a memorial to the 35th president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, and as a venue for performers of all kinds to share their talents with diverse audiences. However, after the “unanimous” name change, many of those performances were canceled, with many major artists accusing President Trump of politicizing the arts.

As a final note to his students, Mr. Cornelius says that when taking his classes, “You don’t have to love my subject area because science is not everyone’s favorite, but I want you to come away a better person, a better scientist.” He emphasizes that the most important thing is to have fun. “Be adventurous,” he tells his students. Mr. Cornelius leads by example, showing us to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

Thought-Provoking yet Overlooked: Teen Lit Author Neal Shusterman Merits More Readers

By Kaitlyn Lamb

People often cite as the best authors of the young adult genre those whose works have been adapted into films, such as Suzanne Collins of *The Hunger Games*. However, Neal Shusterman, who is relatively unknown, deserves to be considered among the best. Each of his books takes an incredibly creative premise and makes the story deep and often off-putting.

Neal Shusterman graduated from the University of California, Irvine with a double major in psychology and drama, and those influences are constantly present in his writing. Nearly all of his works contain elements of psychological thrillers, and his complex questions about human nature enrich his characters and make them feel real. Because of his background in drama, Shusterman writes in a cinematic style, with a fast-paced momentum and efficient worldbuilding.

Scythe, published in 2016, is the first book in the Arc of a Scythe series. Unlike most futuristic novels, which take place in post-apocalyptic worlds, *Scythe* presents a utopia, one where humanity has progressed so far that immortality has been achieved. But a lack of natural death causes a problem: overpopulation. In order to keep Earth's resources from running out, "Scythes" kill a certain number of people each year.

The novel follows the journey of two teenagers, Citra and Rowan, as they train for this gruesome occupation. Naturally, many philosophical questions arise from the existence and ideal behavior of Scythes, and each character gives different answers. Citra and Rowan have three mentors: Scythe Faraday, who kills those who would be most likely to die naturally if that were still a possibility; Scythe Curie, who kills those most ready to move on; and finally Scythe Goddard, who prefers huge massacres and spectacles of gore. These competing points of view provoke Citra and Rowan's respective character arcs, transforming them from average teenagers into symbols of good and the morally gray.

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Those arcs continue in the two sequels, *Thunderhead* and *The Toll*. In those later installments, Shusterman explores more of the science-fiction side of this universe and adds layers of religious allegory. While some authors write sequels only to appease their audiences, *Gleanings*, a collection of short stories related to *Scythe*, demonstrates that Shusterman has an abundance of ideas for each of his series. Each installment of the *Scythe* universe invites the reader to ponder morality, mortality, and the future of our constantly innovating society.

Like *Scythe*, *Unwind* takes place in the future, but this fictional world is far from perfect. Decades before the events of the first book, the debate on abortion escalated to a full-scale conflict between the pro-life and pro-choice armies. During that war, the government was quickly running out of money, so all public high schools were shut down, causing teenagers to run rampant on the streets with nowhere to go.

Eventually, scientists proposed a solution to both the conflict and the feral teenagers: unwinding. Unwinding is a fictional process through which a child between the ages of 13 and 18 can be retroactively aborted by harvesting their organs. In *Unwind*, it is encouraged by the government and accepted by society because, technically, since every part of the body is used and kept alive, it is not murder. The three main characters are all set to be "unwound" for different reasons: for Connor, it was simply that he was becoming too disobedient for his parents to put up with; for Risa, the state orphanage she lived in ran out of room; and as for Lev, he was born to religious extremists, knowing his whole life that he would be unwound as a tithe.



Photo by Kaitlyn Lamb

Throughout *Unwind* and its sequels — *UnWholly*, *UnSouled*, and *UnDivided* — Connor, Risa, Lev, and the characters they meet along the way attempt to escape the federal authorities trying to unwind them and make a stand against the practice at the same time. Though the book deals with pro-life and pro-choice themes, Shusterman never lets his personal opinions get tangled up in the story. Positive and negative characters are shown on both sides — and in the middle — of the debate, making the situation thought-provoking rather than trying to convince the reader of something.

Everlost is the first book in the Skinjacker trilogy, which takes place in an afterlife of Shusterman's invention. When fourteen-year-olds Nick and Allie die in a car accident, their souls manifest as "Afterlights" caught in between life and death. They find themselves in a parallel dimension where the only objects that are real to the touch are those that have been destroyed in the real world. For example, many Afterlights live in the World Trade Center in New York City.

The purgatory described in *Everlost* is fascinating and incredibly unique. Though its premise and setup are dark, the atmosphere is significantly more wondrous and less horrific than *Scythe* and *Unwind*, partially because the main characters are middle schoolers rather than high schoolers. *Everlost* addresses themes of materialism and memory loss as the Afterlights desperately hold onto the few objects that tie them to reality, but in doing so, idolize those objects and push themselves further from true peace.

Mindworks is Shusterman's latest work: a compilation of short stories from throughout his career. As he explains in the introduction, "each story...is eerie, or surreal, or mind-melting, or darkly absurd, or all of the above." The short-story format is a perfect fit for his dry sense of humor and his ability to make you latch onto the characters quickly.

Shusterman frequently collaborates with other authors, including his children. *Dry* was co-written by Shusterman and his son Jarrod Shusterman. Together, they take elements of a classic zombie apocalypse story and make them alarmingly plausible. *Dry* takes place in Southern California during a severe drought, and the complete and utter lack of water drives many people to madness. The characters struggle to survive in the barren suburban landscape in their search for water. When the book ends, they — and the reader — are shocked back to reality when they must return to normal life.

Even after writing and co-writing over fifty books, Neal Shusterman lacks the critical acclaim and commercial success of his peers, despite his immense creativity, fast-paced prose, and compelling characters.



Reflecting on America's 250th Birthday

By Anonymous

There is so much I love about America: its food, its people, its natural beauty. But there is also so much to dislike: a pathetic public school system, the lack of universal healthcare, and historic racism. As we celebrate 250 years of independence, the anniversary naturally invites us to ask a tough question: has the American experiment truly succeeded?

Glancing at the state of the country now, I am inclined to say “no.” It’s clear that America faces serious challenges right now – a president flouting constitutional norms, a paralyzed Congress, and political divisions shaking our democracy. But acknowledging these realities doesn’t mean we cannot feel pride. Our story is one of resilience, innovation, and the ongoing effort to live up to our ideals, even if we fall short. Our nation has faced immense trials before, and each time, ordinary citizens have risen to meet them, making the nation a better place and a global power in less than 200 years. So, let’s go back in time to really understand the question – all the way back to 1776 in the dusty streets of Philadelphia.

It is July 4, 1776, and the fledgling colonies have just announced their independence from Britain. Farmers, clerks, and bankers all joined together in a rag-tag army to defeat the world’s most powerful military. That these everyday people with inferior weapons and military knowledge were able to defeat Britain is, in and of itself, a reason for pride. America’s humble and chaotic beginnings did not prevent the creation of a strong national government with a carefully crafted list of checks and balances. Slowly but assuredly, America began inserting itself into the world equation: sometimes through conquest, but also through innovation and trade.



America 250 Logo Painting on Artemis II
NASA Kennedy Space Center / NASA/Ben Smegelsky,
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Founded by immigrants, the US became the destination for millions seeking opportunity, freedom of religion, and the American Dream. Immigrants came to Ellis Island by the thousands, willing to work in the American economy, buy American goods, and set up an American life. With the Industrial Revolution, America became the hub for innovation and free thinkers.

America was the city upon a hill – the lighthouse in the dark, guiding the oppressed to our shores. For once, instead of an unfair system of hereditary power, ordinary citizens could rise to great heights and gain power through their own hard work. Andrew Carnegie was a child laborer. Ben Franklin was the son of a candle-maker. Lyndon Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, and James Garfield are just a few presidents whose childhoods came from the humblest origins.

...Look upon America with a critical eye, but do not forget the amazing things our ancestors have accomplished.

US economic power is another marvel to behold. Europeans often laugh at the American work ethic and claim we have no work-life balance. Yet without intense ambition, America wouldn’t be the leader in technology, education, and space exploration. In Menlo Park, New Jersey, Thomas Edison displayed electricity; in 1969, America became the first nation to reach the moon. In Silicon Valley, Apple’s founders invented the iPhone. Thanks to the tech boom and the farming industry, California’s economy alone ranks fourth in the world, ahead of the UK, France, and India. There is something special about the American spirit and something unique about our energy, work ethic, and ambition. Maybe it all stems from the pursuit of the American Dream.

Thanks to our hugely successful economy, most of America’s poor are, on average, richer than their counterparts in most European countries. Low-income American families have access to a trove of welfare programs, free school meals, and low-rent housing. This doesn’t necessarily mean they live a better quality of life, but their consumption and material resources are better than those of our friends in Europe.

Yes, America has its flaws – hypocrisy perhaps being our worst. We claim that everyone is “created equal,” yet our first president owned slaves. During World War II, we said we were fighting for freedom while we shoved Japanese Americans into internment camps. Yet in 250 years, we went from slavery to an African American president. We went from a forgotten colony to the EU’s main defense supplier. Look upon America with a critical eye, but do not forget the amazing things our ancestors have accomplished.

Transgender People Are Not a Debate

By Alex Van Auken

Should transgenderism be taught in schools? Can trans kids play on their chosen sports teams? Should youth have access to gender affirming care? These are all heated topics in US politics today, but behind all the media hype and political stances, the core reason for transgenderism being present in politics is as a scapegoat. What politicians don’t realize or choose to ignore is the very real effect this has on transgender young people.

The term transgender is used to describe people who identify outside of the gender into which they were born. Being transgender is hard in itself. According to the Trevor Project, transgender youth are two times more likely to experience anxiety and depression and are four times more likely to attempt suicide than non-transgender youth. This can be due to the stress of coming out to friends and family, being misgendered, experiencing gender dysphoria (the feeling and discomfort of being born into the wrong body), and constantly feeling “othered” by society. In addition to these challenges, having their rights debated among politicians adds another stressful component to trans teenagers that no teen –transgender or not– should have to deal with.

During close elections, politicians will sometimes reference a recent court case, news event, or political leader during their campaign to show voters how they will handle those phenomena if elected, in the hope of gaining popularity and votes. Recently, politicians have used the transgender minority to manufacture a common fear among voters, pressuring them to cast their vote out of panic and misinformation.

Often, the rights of trans youth are brought into politics in a dehumanizing and offensive light. Rather than respectfully discussing the topic with clear reasoning, politicians target transgender youth with ad hominem attacks, telling them their identities aren’t valid.

The rationale many politicians use for suppressing the rights of trans people is that they are “protecting the rights of women and girls.” That rationale is based on the false idea that people identifying as transgender are doing so provocatively out of disrespect for women. This rhetoric adds to the unnecessary fear of transgender people. Another fear is that men may pretend to be transgender to take advantage of women in women’s spaces. There is no evidence to support this as a reality, and if the politicians who make that false claim are truly concerned with protecting women, they should also be working to protect trans people because transgender women are women. The expression of one’s gender or sexuality is simply them expressing their true self and how they feel; they’re not doing it to infringe on others or to “show off.”

Continued on Page 8

Machado Does Not Deserve the Nobel Peace Prize

By Mae Paul



National Archives at College Park - Cartographic, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

It is hard for me to think of someone less deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize than its 2025 recipient, Maria

Machado of Venezuela. In 2014, she spoke before the Organization of American States, calling for the return of democracy to Venezuela, the release of political prisoners, the ending of state-sponsored suppression, and the support of international leaders to dismantle the Maduro regime.

These actions all sound wonderful until we look deeper. Machado has consistently aligned herself with far-right leaders whose actions contradict the ideals of peace she supposedly upholds. She has publicly associated herself with Javier Milei, the president of Argentina, who is embroiled in bribery scandals with his sister and closest confidant. She also vocally supports Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is currently busy attacking hospitals, schools, and refugee shelters in his genocide of Gaza. Her adoration for President Trump is so extreme that she gifted him her Peace Prize, despite the organization's announcement that the award cannot be "revoked, shared, or transferred." Her alignment with Trump should give everyone pause: What person who truly advocates for peace would be political friends with someone who is waging war on immigrants, who has incited a violent riot on the nation's Capitol, and who spent Christmas approving military attacks on boats in the Caribbean?

Though her alliances are troubling, her actions are far worse. Machado, who is supposed to be the world's biggest advocate of nonviolence and peaceful demonstrations, openly supported a US-backed coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez that ended in his kidnapping in 2002. Similarly, she thanked Trump for his military intervention this winter, saying he was the one who truly deserved the prize. America isn't the only country she's pleaded with: She even asked Netanyahu to use his "influence" on Venezuela—the same "influence" that is killing tens of thousands of sick, hungry children in Palestine.

Also in 2002, she signed the Carmona Decree, which dissolved the National Assembly and the Supreme Court and suspended the leadership of governors and mayors elected during Chávez's regime. When did democracy involve getting rid of elected legislative bodies? Since when has it meant doing away with a high court of law that brings justice?

It only gets worse. In 2014, Machado helped craft "La Salida," an opposition campaign that called for escalated protests involving guarimba: the use of barricades, arson, and street violence. Sounds peaceful, right? The people who were most affected by these protests were not the men in power but, of course, everyday citizens. Streets were blocked, buses carrying workers were attacked, public buildings (including schools) were decimated, and those who were suspected of being against La Salida were beaten or killed.

Machado also heavily supported US sanctions on her home country. These sanctions devastated the economy and caused Venezuela to lose between \$17 billion and \$31 billion in income. Naturally, oil production dropped significantly, though the industry was already struggling under corrupt control. Still, for a country whose income mostly depends on oil revenue, this was a horrible blow. With less money flooding in, Venezuelan imports dropped, creating a very limited supply of medicine, food, fuel, and other necessities in a country that was already struggling with civil unrest and a corrupt government. Whatever one's views on Maduro's rule, punishing citizens through economic warfare is not a path to peace.

These are not the actions of a peace laureate. These are the actions of someone who embraces violence, encourages foreign influence, and supports measures that cause direct harm to millions of citizens. The Nobel Peace Prize promotes non-violent campaigns to protect the rights of everyday citizens. Machado's actions do not, in any way, align with the prize's ideals. She is undeserving of this award.



President Donald Trump is gifted the Nobel Peace Prize medal awarded to Maria Corina Machado at the White House Oval Office. The White House, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Transgender People Are Not a Debate

Continued from Page 7

There is a common idea among non-transgender people that people identifying as trans will contradict their beliefs, often causing them to fear or express prejudice toward the trans community, when in reality, the majority of trans people aren't trying to undermine anyone's belief systems or make anyone uncomfortable, they're just trying to be themselves — a right everyone should be entitled to, no matter their beliefs.

Just as we may teach a child that just because they like something that another child does not, that doesn't make the other child wrong, we need to remember that all people have different opinions and all opinions are valid. Being willfully ignorant of all opinions but your own doesn't make those other opinions disappear. Because we live in a world with other people, we need to learn to co-exist and respect one another, regardless of how we identify. It is important to realize that allowing other people the space to express themselves authentically — especially those you don't agree with — doesn't undermine your values, but strengthens them by showing you're confident enough in your own beliefs that you're willing to acknowledge the beliefs of others.

Trans Rights Are Human Rights (UK protest)



Alisdare Hickson, CC BY-SA 2.0

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Politics is no exception to the respect we all deserve. Turning people against each other for political gain is not right. Transgender people deserve their rights just as all people do, and toying with these rights negatively affects the mental health and well-being of teens on a daily basis. Trans people are not a debate.

Cake Mix Cookies

By Alex Van Auken



Makes About 15 Large Cookies
Takes 30 Minutes

Ingredients

- 1 22- oz box mix for classic yellow cake
- 2 eggs
- 8 tbs (1 stick) butter, melted and cooled
- 1 tbs water
- ½ cup add-ins (chopped nuts, chocolate chips, or M&Ms)
- Optional: ½ cup powdered sugar to roll the cookie dough in

Instructions

- Melt butter in microwave for 30 seconds, then set aside to cool.
- After butter has cooled, combine cake mix, water, and butter in medium bowl with strong spatula.
- Prepare add-ins and work them into the dough. You may need to use your hands, as the dough can be very tough.
- Use a large spoon to measure scoops of dough, then roll them into cookie balls by hand.
- Optional: Spread ½ cup of powdered sugar on a plate, then roll the cookie dough balls around until they are lightly dusted.
- Place cookie dough balls 2 inches apart on a greased cookie sheet. You will need to use multiple cookie sheets, or, if you only have one, cook multiple batches on the same sheet.
- Bake cookies for 10-15 minutes at 375°F. When done, edges of the cookies should be golden brown, and center should be very soft.
- Cool the cookies on the sheet for three minutes before removing.
- Enjoy your delicious, homemade dessert!

Think: two olives and three salamis. Maybe some crackers if you are really hungry.

- **GOAT.** Acronym for “Greatest of All Time.” If you’re *goated*, you’re excellent. Really enjoy “Orange Juice” by Noah Kahan? “That song’s so *goated*,” you’d say.

- **Locked in.** Doing with full focus and effort. Going to practice that Mozart sonata for tomorrow’s performance? Tell your friends you’re *locking in* – maybe they’ll stop sending you meaningless Instagram reels.

- **Lowkey/highkey.** Subtly, or slightly. “I *lowkey* don’t like cheese.” It downplays feelings, whereas “*highkey*” emphasizes them. “I *lowkey* need to practice.” I sort of need to practice, but it’s not a big deal. Often used in a self-deprecating or ironic manner.

- **Mid.** Short for middle. Means mediocre. “This sandwich is *mid*.” It’s not very good but not too bad either.

- **Ohio.** Weird or cringe, drawn from the belief that Ohio is the land of the mundane. Yes, it’s an insult to Ohio (and maybe an insult to you, if someone uses *Ohio* on you).

- **Rizz.** Short for charisma. Someone with lots of rizz has charm and style.

- **Sigma.** A man who’s self-assured and individualistic. It can also be a reaction to something extremely good. “What the *sigma*?” you might say upon watching an Olympic ice skater.

- **Skibidi.** Generally used by Gen Alpha, this could refer to something that’s cool, or mean nothing at all. It comes from the popular YouTube series Skibidi Toilet.

- **Six Seven.** It was hard to merely exist for a while without hearing this nonsense phrase everywhere. It arises from the rap song “Doot Doot (6 7).” It has no meaning – that is the whole point. Every Gen Alpha kid was referencing 6 7 at least once a day during the summer and fall of 2025.

- **Touch grass.** This phrase is used to tell people to get back in touch with reality, unplug from their phones, or go outside. If your friend says something truly absurd, tell them they need to *touch grass*.

- **Vibing.** To “*vibe* with” something means to agree with or like it. If you’re doing it to yourself, you’re enjoying a relaxed, casual time. Really liking that couch for your office? Tell your coworkers you *vibe* with it.

I hope you’re vibing with my high-key-goated explanation of young people’s slang. While you were reading this, I was aura farming in my bed while eating my mid girl dinner and watching “Skibidi Toilet” on my lowkey tiny phone. Later, I will lock in on my economics homework because I am so cooked for tomorrow’s exam. Then I will be retiring to bed to brain-rot from cringe jokes and doomscrolling before finally falling asleep between 6 or 7 am.

A Guide to Teen Slang

by Mae Paul

Teen slang has always seemed undecipherable to those who aren’t teens, but it seems especially true now, as social media spits out new terms practically every day. Even the most knowledgeable teens have a hard time keeping up with it all. A Gen Zer, I have a tough time remembering all the cool ways to say, “You rock.” This guide is a sneak peek at how the kids talk, so next time you hear a teen say “you’re so Ohio,” you’ll know a tart reply.

- **Ate.** Someone did something particularly well, whether it is athletic, artistic, creative, or in some other category. You might say, “She *ate*,” after watching a dancer do a quadruple pirouette with perfect form.

- **Aura.** A cool, confident vibe. Youngsters use “*aura points*” to rate people. Less *aura*, you have bad traits; more *aura*, then you’re full of positive energy and good vibes. “*Aura farming*” means cultivating an appearance of great vibes and a chill demeanor.

- **Bet.** Synonym for “ok,” “sure thing,” and “will do.” Did your sister ask you to do the dishes? A shouted “*Bet!*” will let her know you’ll do them.

- **Bro.** Similar to “dude.” Often used as a reaction to a silly thing someone did. Generally, it is directed at boys and men, but not always. Did your brother just drop a plate? “*Broooo*,” you say.

- **Brain rot.** Oxford’s 2024 Word of the Year.

Happens when you spend lots of time on low-quality, trivial, meaningless content on social media that “rots” your brain. Think: YouTube shorts, Instagram reels, TikTok. Nothing intellectual.

- **Cap.** A lie or hyperbole. “No cap” means (you guessed it) it’s true. If your friend accuses you of stealing her book, you can reply “*Cap*” and point it out in her book bag. Did your teammate claim he ran five miles? “That’s *cap*,” you reply.

- **Cringe.** Embarrassing, awkward, or uncool. It can be overly try-hard, tasteless, unpleasant – anything that makes you shrink or “*cringe*” away. Did the school bully who insists she’s amazing at singing belt “America the Beautiful” at the top of her lungs during recess? That’s *cringe*.

- **Cooked.** Struggling with something or just having a hard time with life. Are there three assignments due tomorrow and a test you haven’t even studied for? You’re definitely *cooked!*

- **Doom scrolling.** Excessive social media use to read/watch negative news. Gen Z has fallen prey to this. Don’t do it!

- **Drip.** Having *drip* means you dress well. You’re fashionable, on trend, and cool. Next time you see a friend’s outfit that you really like, shout “Nice *drip!*”

- **Fr.** Short for “for real.” Used to express agreement with something, generally through text. Add some extra r’s at the end to show emphasis.

- **Girl dinner.** The odd assortment of food girls sometimes eat. Effortless and small.

Ilia Malinin Revolutionizes Figure Skating

By Lawrence Wunderlich

The Olympics tend to skyrocket little-known athletes to overnight fame, and that is what happened to 21-year-old skating star Ilia Malinin. Many four-year skating fans had never heard his name before the Olympics, but he is a legend in his sport.

Ilia trains with his Russian Olympic figure-skating parents, Tatiana Malinina and Roman Skorniakov. He began skating at age six and landed his first quad seven years later. In 2022, they coached Ilia to his first junior world championship, where he set the junior world record for highest personal best score (276.11) and remains unbeaten. That same year, he landed history's first quad axel — the sport's hardest jump — in international competition. Considered scientifically impossible, the quad version is four and a half rotations, requiring the speed of a kitchen blender in the air. At just 17, Ilia blew people's minds away by landing it and earned a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records and international fame.

Regardless of this inhuman feat and a silver medal at the US Championships, Ilia was controversially left off the 2022 Olympic team when officials chose the older, more experienced skater, Jason Brown. Jason had no podium chances and finished sixth overall in the individual men's event in Beijing. Fans were annoyed that a younger, clearly more talented skater had been bypassed. Ilia was also understandably crushed by the rejection, but this snub fueled his rise. In 2023, he started a two-year win streak, bringing home medal after medal and becoming known for his beautiful quads.

Amid his competitions, an unexpected event stunned the entire figure-skating community. On January 29, 2025, three days after Ilia defended his title at the U.S. Championships, a military helicopter crashed into a passenger plane carrying 64 people. 28 were members of the figure-skating community. None survived. Ilia knew each of them as either a close friend or an acquaintance. Deeply heartbroken, he paid tribute to them at the World Championships in an emotional gala skate that left him in tears.

Although heartbroken, Ilia rebounded and continued winning gold, making his competitors think he was unbeatable. At the Grand Prix Final in December 2025, Ilia became the first skater to successfully land seven clean quad jumps in one program, including the quad axel. Commentators Tara Lapinski and Johnny Weir said it was their sport's equivalent of landing on the moon. When he arrived in Milan for the 2026 Olympics, the media was all but convinced that Ilia would take home the gold in the individual event. Exceptionally confident, he named himself the Quad God and was determined to keep living up to his nickname.

Ilia's debut Olympic skate in the team event was the first sign of what was to come. Uncharacteristically, he finished second, over ten points behind Japan's Yuma Kagiyama. Nevertheless, the performance was crowd-pleasing, with Ilia landing the first-ever legal Olympic backflip since the stunt was banned by the International Skating Union in 1977. The next day, Ilia returned to the ice to deliver an electrifying yet, per his standards, mediocre free skate with several errors. Still, the technical superiority of his program was enough to put him in first place and secure gold for Team USA.

Despite the rocky start and the realization that the overwhelming pressure of the Olympic environment was not an easy beast to tame, the team victory positively reinstated Ilia's initial conviction that another gold was well within reach. His individual short program was a promising start. He landed every jump and delivered a clean skate that earned him a solid five-point lead.

Continued on Page 11

Ilia With His Gold Medal at the 2026 U.S. Championships



SpiritedMichelle, [CC BY 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

Well-Trained Tribune

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Guest Writer

Liam Cummings

Congratulations to the 2026 graduating seniors!

The WTT staff would like to acknowledge these graduating seniors and extend our best wishes for their future endeavors and goals.

Francis Amend: Attending Montana State University to study international business or history with a minor in international relations. Dreams of working in international business or government.

Elijah S. R. Austen: Starting an electrical apprenticeship.

Aylin Ballard: Majoring in music at Lipscomb University

Lilith Carlson: Attending Shenandoah University as an honors student with a double major in dance and chemistry. Dreams of being a pharmacist, teaching, and performing dance as a side hustle.

Gwendolyn D'Aprile: Going to college to study accounting.

Petraeus Draper: Attending West Hills Coalinga College as a business major and volleyball player. Dreams of being a professional volleyball player for international teams.

Joanna Erbaugh: Favorite part of WTMA was when class derailed, and someone said, "WTMA is not a dating website!"

Bella Haferkamp

Hannah Den Hartog: Attending Anderson University in South Carolina with a major in journalism and mass communications and a minor in music.

Grace Fletcher: Studying ornithology and dreams of being an ornithologist.

Maddie Kendig: Exploring options with professional figure skating and attending college. Dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Kaitlyn Lamb: Attending Baylor University with a double major in English and French and a creative writing minor. Dreams of working in the publishing business.

Abigail Lee: Attending Auburn University with a major in neuroscience and pre-dental. Dreams of being a dentist.

Penelope Licitra: Studying elementary education at Western Carolina University. Dreams of being an elementary school teacher.

Ada Lovelace: Attending college with a major in East Asian languages and a concentration in Japanese. Dreams of being an author.

Brian Molloy: Studying aerospace engineering at college. Dreams of designing Formula 1 cars.

Sam Naderman: Attending the University of Cincinnati to study urban development and design. Dreams of headlining a Coachella performance.

Mae Violet Paul: Attending college with a major in history. Dreams of being a journalist and commercial pilot with piano as a side hustle.

Nicolai Ross: Attending college as a liberal arts major. Dreams of starting a business with his younger brother.

Sophia Sherwood: Serving an 18-month mission with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Interested in studying nursing.

Zekariah Smith: Attending college as a business major. Dreams of being an FBI special agent.

Ilia Malinin

Continued from Page 10

Three days later, Ilia Malinin stepped out on the ice for his free skate to an ecstatic crowd. Though he felt "really confident" during his warm-up, everything changed seconds before the program began. As Ilia remembers it, "I just had so many thoughts and memories flood [in] right before I got into my starting pose, and it ... overwhelmed me." His first jump was beautifully executed, but he awkwardly popped his planned quad axel into a single. Ilia fell twice on other jumps and seemed to rush through many of his movements, an anguished look on his face. He finally buried his head in his hands once he finished. A historic upset, Ilia Malinin, the gold medal-hopeful, the same skater who hadn't lost a competition in two years, finished in 8th place.

Crestfallen as he was, Ilia hugged the gold medalist, Mikhail Shaidorov, telling him, "You deserve it." He was lauded for his immense display of sportsmanship during the worst night of his career and for his composure and grace during the media interviews, minutes after his skate. Although he had no time to process what happened, reporters asked the same insensitive questions: "What happened? Why did you choke?" Ilia responded with thoughtful answers. He admitted he was perhaps too confident and that his mistakes were all mental. "I blew it," he said. Later, Ilia opened up about how the immense pressure got to him, and how professional athletes struggle with mental health and self-worth as human beings; they are not perfect superhumans. For

the Olympic Gala, Ilia skated to rapper NF's "Fear," showing the world his internal journey. He skated with pure artistry and raw emotion and was reportedly the only skater that night to receive a standing ovation. The Olympics were not the last competition. Six weeks later, Ilia was back for the World Championships, and one question dominated headlines: Would he redeem his winning streak? The answer came quickly. On March 26, Ilia skated a near-flawless short program, gaining an over-9-point lead with a personal-best score. Two days later, he flawlessly performed the same free skate that fell apart at the Olympics, with the crowd cheering him on. He smiled with sincere joy as he became the World Champion for the third consecutive time. He told the press he was learning to skate for himself and that his ultimate goal was not to win medals but to revolutionize the sport. "I don't really care if I win or lose anymore," he said.

Ilia Malinin has taught us more than he would have had he won that individual Olympic gold medal. He taught us that we are all human, that the best of us have off days, and that we can rise above and mature. He has taught us the value of compassion and sportsmanship. The outpouring of love he received after that fateful night reminds us that there is still so much empathy in this world. As the saying goes, "there is no great loss without one small gain." For Ilia Malinin, the gain from the heartbreak was more valuable than gold.