



MSAB CHRONICLES

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**The Minnesota State Academies
empowers every student to
achieve, care and thrive
in an ever-changing world.
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On the Cover:



MSAB Chronicles cover photo: MSAB students playing the steel pan drums during the Winter Program.

MSAD Companion cover photo: MSAD students performing The Tortoise and the Hare during the Winter Program.

Table of Contents

MSAB Chronicles

- 2 MSA Board of Directors**
- 3 Spotlight: Arianna Hansen**
- 4 Spotlight: Academy Plus**
- 8 Caribbean Holiday**
- 10 Desserts in the Dark**
- 11 Artist Study**

MSAB Chronicles and The Companion are publications of the Minnesota State Academies, and are published twice during the school year. The purpose of our publications is to share news and updates with parents, students, staff, alumni, and community stakeholders.

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MSA Board of Directors

The MSA Board is the governing body for the Minnesota State Academies, overseeing two campuses - the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf and the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, both of which are located in Faribault. Our board is composed of seven voting members. Voting members are appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the senate. Members of the board are selected based on criteria established by state statutes. In addition, the vice chairs of the MSAB and MSAD Site Councils serve as ex-officio members of the Board. For more information, visit www.msa.state.mn.us.



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Spotlight: Arianna's Story

Bravery

By Arianna Hansen, MSAB 9th grader

In fourth grade, I felt like a regular kid. I played dodgeball in gym, I wrote with a pencil, I didn't use a cane. I would ride my bike in town. I never worried about running into things or tripping. I wasn't worried about going to new places. I was just a regular kid.

One time when I had to be brave, was when I had to go through brain surgery. I was having major headaches. I had braces, so my parents and I thought that was the cause. My headaches got so bad and intense that I was running into things. At that point, my parents took me to Mayo to have an MRI. Unfortunately, my braces were not the problem. My tumor was growing and I had to have brain surgery to live. I was not nervous or afraid. I said to my parents right before the surgery "I got this."

When I woke up, everything was dark and blurry. I asked for a mirror because I wanted to see what my hair looked like. But I couldn't see my hair because I was blind. I was in the hospital for over a month. I remember saying to my mom, "It's a dark world." But I was around kids who had it even harder. I remember a mother crying because her child had passed away. Yes, I am blind but I am alive.

Life did not get easier. A few months later, my tumor grew again. I started chemo on February 17, 2016. Chemo was brutal. I had it every Friday for a year and 3 months. My chemotherapy treatments ended in April 2017. I've had some big challenges in my life I've had to go through. Although I wouldn't choose to have them, I believe I'm a stronger person from them.

For most of my 6th-grade year, I could not attend school on Friday because of my chemotherapy. I remember when I had chemo for the very last time, it felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders and my heart. When I got in the car with my mom, the song "Fight Song" was playing: "like a small boat on the ocean, sending big waves into motion, like how a single arc can make a heart open, I might only have one match, but I can make an explosion and all those things I didn't say wrecking



Photo caption: Arianna Hansen.

balls inside my brain, I was screaming loud tonight, can you hear my voice, this is my fight song, this is my fight song, take back my life song." THIS IS MY FIGHT.

In the summer of 2017, I was finished with chemo and it was incredible! I reflect on the last two years: my brain surgery, becoming blind, and chemotherapy. It felt so good to have a summer free from worries.

It was that summer that I went to MSAB summer camp and met other kids who are blind like me. I also met a girl there that also had a brain tumor. In 2017, I started attending MSAB and have learned how to read Braille and was awarded the 2019 Braille award. I have also joined the goalball team and have really enjoyed that because I thought when I lost my vision, I would not be able to play sports again.

The gratitude I feel for my teachers at MSAB is great. They have helped me grow and become more confident in myself and my abilities and be blind in a visual world.

Spotlight: Academy Plus Students

Editor's note: These essays were written by students in our Academy Plus Program (also known as the A+ Program). The A+ Program provides educational opportunities and experiences designed to increase transition skills for our students aged 18-21.

Zahra Abdi

I was born in Djibouti on 01-01-1999. When I was 11, I lost my vision. Before that I used to go to school, but after I lost my vision, I could not go to school because there was not a school for the blind or for students with any disabilities. After I became blind, I lost all my friends except 2 girls.

At that time, it was really hard to go outside or go to celebrations. If I went outside some people would say hopeless words that broke my heart, like you cannot do anything and you lost your future dream, which made me feel sad.

I stayed home every day, except when I had an appointment. I always listened to the radio and helped my mom clean the house. This made me happy and comfortable. When my neighbors saw me cleaning the house, they asked me a lot of questions. For example, how can you clean the house when you can't see? One day I was helping my mom hold one of my twin sisters and they said to my mom do not let her to do work. My mom said even if she is blind that doesn't mean she cannot do anything. After that I felt very upset, but I always tried to ignore what people were saying to me.

After 5 years, we came to America. The first state we went to was Massachusetts. We lived there for 6 months and then we moved to Minnesota in the summer of 2015. I attended South High School in Minneapolis. I was very excited to learn. I met new teachers and new students. I didn't know English, but they had an interpreter to help me the first year.

Then I started to learn braille and how to use a cane. It was very hard to learn braille right away, but after I picked up on it, it became easier for me.

One thing that surprised me was when my braille teacher told me that even though I am blind, I could get a job and even as a braille teacher. She told me that some blind people are working at a bank and some are teachers. She



Photo caption: Zahra Abdi.

gave me some examples about what blind people can do and said I can learn any job I want to.

She encouraged me to be comfortable with myself. Then I started to believe that I can do anything, and I can be independent if I work hard. I was at that school for 4 years, then we moved to Rochester in 2018.

I started school at MSAB in January 2019. I met different teachers and students. They welcomed me and I got to continue my education. The difference between my old school and MSAB is that all the students at MSAB are blind. At my old school, I had someone to walk with me to my all classes and help me write down what on the board as the other students in my class could see. But MSAB is a school for the blind and I am doing my work independently except when I need help. I am a shy person and I don't really ask questions. My teachers tell me to advocate for myself.

The first month I went to MSAB, it was very hard to say I needed help or ask questions; but now I feel comfortable and more independent. I have learned a lot of new things like cooking and work skills. I need to continue learning these skills to be as independent as I can. This is my last year at MSAB. My hope is to work hard until I reach my goals. After I leave MSAB, I would like to attend Blind Inc., in Minneapolis, to continue to work on my independent living skills. Then I would like to go to college.



Photo caption: Josh Peterson.

Josh Peterson

My story starts back when I was five. I was diagnosed with a brain tumor, which affected my eyesight. I went through rigorous chemotherapy treatments that kept me out of much of my early elementary school years. The first round of chemotherapy wreaked havoc to the tumor and brought it down to a stable point. However, the satisfactory results did not come without battle scars. The side effects of my treatment blew me up like a balloon and left me sick as a dog for a couple of days following each treatment.

Even with being faced with adversity at an early age, I did not let my medical situation rob me completely of the innocence of early childhood. I mustered up every bit of strength to make it to school, participate in organized sports, hang out with friends, and travel. I became known as Mr. Smiley. Growing up in and around hospitals along with the other unique situations that made me stand out from my peers forced me to mature at a much faster rate.

My hunger to absorb all the information for my surroundings grew as I was immersed in new areas of the medical fields. All of which culminated in me determining I wanted to either be a lawyer, neurosurgeon, in the front runner aerospace engineer. What would be better than designing stuff to blow up for a living!

I underwent treatment on and off for the next eight years up until my story took a turn for the worse. When I was in the seventh grade, my brain tumor bled and had induced a stroke. When I got myself out of a coma I awoke to a new reality; I had been blinded and paralyzed from the head down on my left side.

I spent the rest of the summer in the hospital having physical and occupational therapies and continued them on outpatient basis Monday-Friday for three years. I got to the point where I became my own PT and drill sergeant right from the start.

Even with my traumatic experience, I was determined to get back to school and that is what I did -- making it back for the start of my eighth grade year. I was determined not to let my disabilities stand in my way. I had made it that far. I was not going to let the attributes of the “poor me” mindset pull me down. Yes, my day-to-day activities had been altered, but it did not stop me from continuing to follow my passions of hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, tubing, water extreme sports like parasailing and white water rafting.

I have since graduated from high school, where I took AP classes all the while continuing on with my determination to rehab my body, volunteering on a weekly basis, and keeping up with friends. I have got my left side of my body back to a point of being useful, at least most of the time. It may have taken two months to learn how to walk again and another few to run.

As much as I would've liked to of jumped right into my post-secondary education, I finally decided to take a chill pill and postpone my pursuit of education to focus more on independent living. That's how I ended up at MSAB. Here I plan to focus on assistive technology and refining my cooking abilities.

Soon I hope to start knocking some general college courses out of the way at the local community college as to open up yet another door in my tumultuous journey. Yeah so, this is a sneak peek of my life so far.

Spotlight: Academy Plus Students

Pablo Contreras

I am one of many students at The Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. We all have a purpose for being here, and have our own stories to tell what brought us here. I'd like to share mine.

I was born in Mexico. My mom had me 6 months into her pregnancy. I was born premature, but that was not the cause of my blindness if that's what you were thinking. My mom says that I was in an incubator for 3 months and was then able-to go home.

I had a pretty normal life up until I was about 1 year old. Then I started to have some stomach problems and had to go to the doctor. Now, here's where it gets very interesting. There was a kid that had pneumonia or something like that and couldn't breathe. So we walked in and everything was cool. Somehow they ended up mixing us up and we both got the wrong treatment. He got my stomach treatment, and I got put on oxygen when I didn't even need it.

My eyes popped or something like that. My right eye is smaller than my left. It's almost as if this was all a movie, or at least that's what it feels like to me. The doctor who performed the operation thought that taking my corneas out would be the best option. Obviously that wasn't the best option, and I actually found out that my left eye could've been saved. But I would have had very bad vision in my right eye.

After that all went down, my mom decided to make a change. She eventually moved over here to the United States so that she could give me a better life and better opportunities. I grew up over here and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

At the school district that I attended for my entire elementary/middle school/high school career, I was their first blind student. They had no idea what to do with me or how to even teach me. I was basically the one who taught them how to handle a blind student. They did some investigating and found the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind.



Photo caption: Pablo Contreras.

For most of my school years, I had an instructor from over here at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. She worked with me up until my sophomore year of high school. So that's how I got acquainted with the Academy. I had a vision teacher from here as well and she'd come to my school and would work with me on an one on one basis.

When it got to be my junior year, I started thinking about what I wanted to do after high school. I attended many programs during the summers after that. For example, a summer transition program in the Twin Cities. Then recently, The LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Duluth, Minnesota.

I came to MSAB because I felt it was my best option and what I was most comfortable with. I get to work at my own speed and learn as I go. MSAB has always been a place that I've liked and wanted to come to during the school year. Their summer programs are always fun and way different, but I just like the vibe that MSAB gives off. It's like one big family. Everyone knows each other and it's just great here.



Photo caption: Ashley Wester.

Ashley Wester

My name is Ashley Wester, and this is my story of how I came to the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind.

I was homeschooled from 9/6/2005 to 9/30/2017.

Here are some activities that I like to do: I like to knit and do weaving, I like to play with LEGOs, I like doing crafts, and I like math.

Mom and Dad were looking for a transition program for me and we were working with the Lakeville transition program. The Lakeville program mentioned that I qualified for the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind transition program, and Mom and Dad decided that I would go to the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, so that I could ride there and back with my sister, Anna, and my brother, Abram.

This is my third year here at MSAB. During my first year, I went to the River Bend Nature Center for an off campus job through the work program, and I helped clean the turtle tank.

During my second year, I went to Walgreens for an off campus job through the work program, and I helped stock shelves.

This year (my third year at MSAB), I started working

at Glass Garden Beads through the work program. I got offered a job at Glass Garden Beads only after two times working there. I am now employed by Glass Garden Beads. I work there from 10:30 am to 2:30 pm every Tuesday.

We do job experiences through the work program to help us get prepared for when we get jobs out in the real world after we leave the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. I was excited because Suzanne Klumb, owner of Glass Garden Beads, offered me a part time job in Faribault, MN! I measure out beads for the preparation of the kits to make bracelets. If you try your best, you will succeed.



Photo caption: The Academy Plus House, where students can experience living in a home-like environment to learn independent living skills.

A Caribbean Holiday

Steel Pan Drums

by Pablo Contreras, Academy Plus student

This past December, all the students at MSAB, including myself, got the wonderful opportunity of learning how to play in my opinion, one of the most unique instruments out there. I will admit, at first I was a bit nervous. Especially after my first time ever feeling one and producing sound out of one. I was struggling to play something as simple as Mary had a Little Lamb.

I really have to give it to Jeremy Kunkel. I'm not sure how much experience he had working with the blind and visually impaired in the past, either way that doesn't really matter. What I do know is he did a great job. I'm sure the first day or two were a bit stressful for him just as they were for the rest of us.

We only had about three weeks of practice and not everyone was there as a group all the time. We were learning how to play "Home for the Holidays" which was in my opinion, the hardest thing I've ever learned. It felt so good when I was finally getting the hang of it though, and even after the Christmas program I didn't want to stop playing.

I could really tell that everyone in the school had fun. I loved hearing all the other groups play their hearts out. Especially some of the people on those bass drums, oh man I could feel the boom on my stomach.

The thing that I liked most about learning an instrument like this is how it was fun and at the same time pretty challenging. That was by far one of the best experiences I've had with any instrument. Not only that but when played the right way, that is one of the most beautiful sounding instruments I've ever heard. It makes me want to go to an island and start dancing.

This past winter program was a success. I hope to see Jeremy and his awesome assistants again. I'm sure all the students can agree with me when I say, bring them back anytime.

Keep Dreaming

By Jeremy Kunkel, Pan Outreach Director

Keep dreaming. The rewards of facing and overcoming adversity are greater than those from attempting the commonplace and mundane. That's the greatest lesson I took away from my time at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind.

It's been a few months since bringing steel drums into MSAB. Just like anyone's first day of school, there was significant apprehension and nervousness. How will the students be able to participate, regardless of age and ability? How will all of these steel drums (pans) fit in the gym? What songs can we program for the performance? These are all questions we'd answer at every other school, but this was not every other school. There was one more question I hadn't asked before: What have I gotten myself into?

All one can do is begin. You start working with the students and solving problems. You start asking staff for suggestions and developing strategies. You learn the students' names and recognize their strengths. Before long, the apprehension becomes determination and you teach music, and the students teach you right back. They teach you how to be flexible, how to innovate, how to recognize progress, and how to appreciate moments.

As we approached the winter program dates, apprehension was replaced with pride. As the audience began to take their seats, the finality of the moment set in. All the work was done, and I knew the audience was about to see something special.

To all of the students at MSAB, you're amazing. Plain and simple. You've made me and the Pan Outreach program better through your hard work, acceptance, and joy. My dream has been to create an educational program through music that's accessible and available to anyone. Thank you for helping me to realize it. I look forward to returning to MSAB someday to do it all over again...only better!



Photo caption: MSAB student Isabella introduces a segment of the program.



Photo caption: MSAB students perform on the pan steel drums.



Photo caption: MSAB students in the left hand choir section.



Photo caption: MSAB student Grace smiles with a fellow performer.



Photo caption: MSAB students in the right hand choir section.



Photo caption: MSAB music therapist Jennifer Pelletier huddles with student Abie.

Desserts in the Dark



Photo caption: MSAB families and friends participating in the Desserts in Dark fundraiser for the International Studies Club.

By Jennifer Pelletier, MSAB Music Therapist

Thank you to everyone who participated in our “Desserts in the Dark” fundraiser for the International Studies Club! It was our first time planning something like this, as the ISC is a new club this year. With the hopes to fundraise for a spring trip to Paris, France, the event was a sold-out success and a very student-lead activity for students to plan. How did it come about?

One of our students had the idea, modeled after the “Dining in the Dark” events that many other organizations hold. We decided that a focus around desserts would be a bit more manageable, though it still meant a lot of work securing donations, volunteers, and a venue. Participants would be blindfolded while exploring pastries/desserts, pouring coffee and water, and decorating a sugar cookie with frosting and sprinkles.

In our ISC meetings, we talked about what students hoped participants would learn. What should they experience? What should they reflect upon? How much

help and guidance should participants have in the process? Students wrote speeches to reflect the purpose of the evening, the activities that would occur, and what message students wanted to get across regarding blindness/visual impairment.

Thanks to generous businesses in the community (including Faribault, Northfield, and St. Paul), we had plenty of desserts that were served by gracious volunteers. We had a beautiful venue at St. Mary’s Middle School that worked perfectly for our needs. The participants worked together, laughed, and chattered while they ate, with ISC students offering direction along the way. Guests included staff from MSAB, Shattuck-St. Mary’s, and FHS. They included BVI professionals from the Twin Cities and other areas. It was wonderful to have a diverse group of guests coming together to support our students and learn more about visual impairment. As one student, Josh, said in his closing remarks, “We’re just like everyone else. We just do things in a different way!”

Artist Study

By Faith Kern, 8th grader; Grace Merxbauer, 9th grader; and Anna Wester, 7th grader.

Our classes (Mr. Lechtenberg and Ms. Akemann) have been studying a new artist every month. First, we learned about the artists and their styles of art. Then we tried to make their style of art.

We have studied Georges Seurat (pointillism) and Piet Mondrian (abstract art). We displayed our pieces of work in the North Street West bulletin board at MSAB. Our art study has been interesting and fun! We hope to visit the Art Institute in the spring!

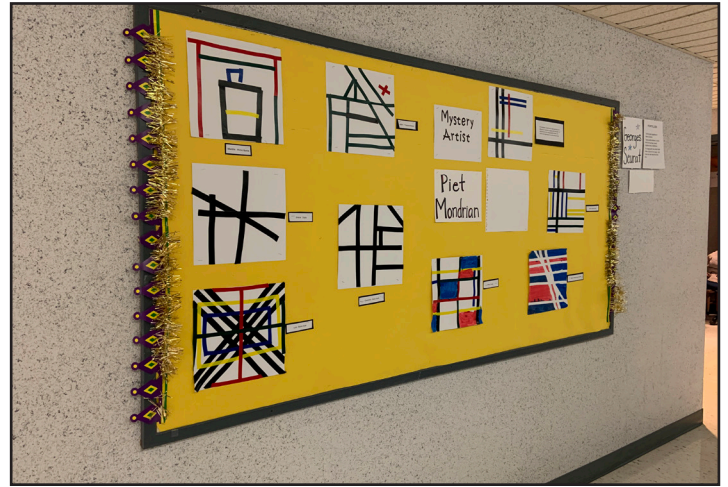


Photo caption: MSAB students' artwork displayed on a bulletin board in the hallway.

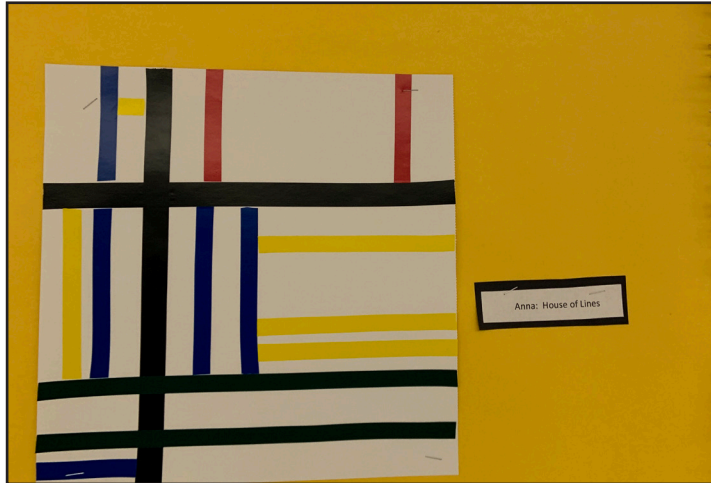


Photo caption: "House of Lines," by Anna Wester.



Photo caption: "Stained Glass Window," by Faith Kern.

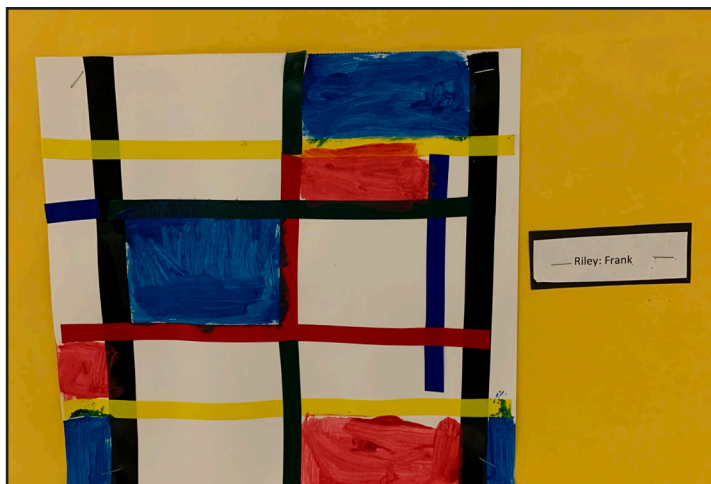


Photo caption: "Frank," by Riley Spinler.

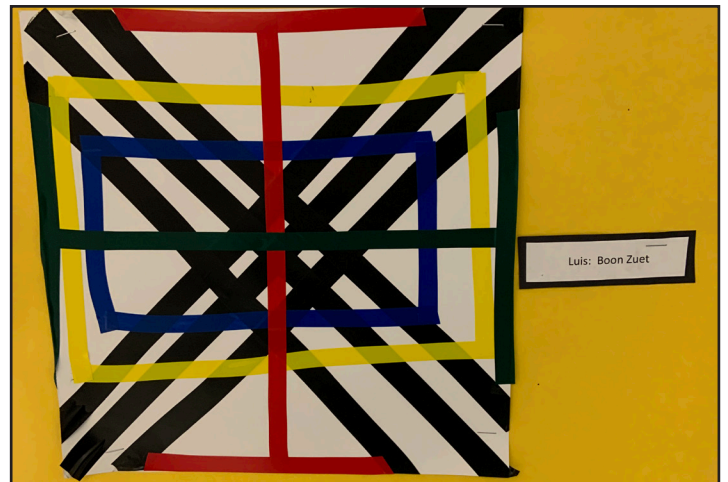


Photo caption: "Boon Zuet," by Luis Constanza-Lopez.