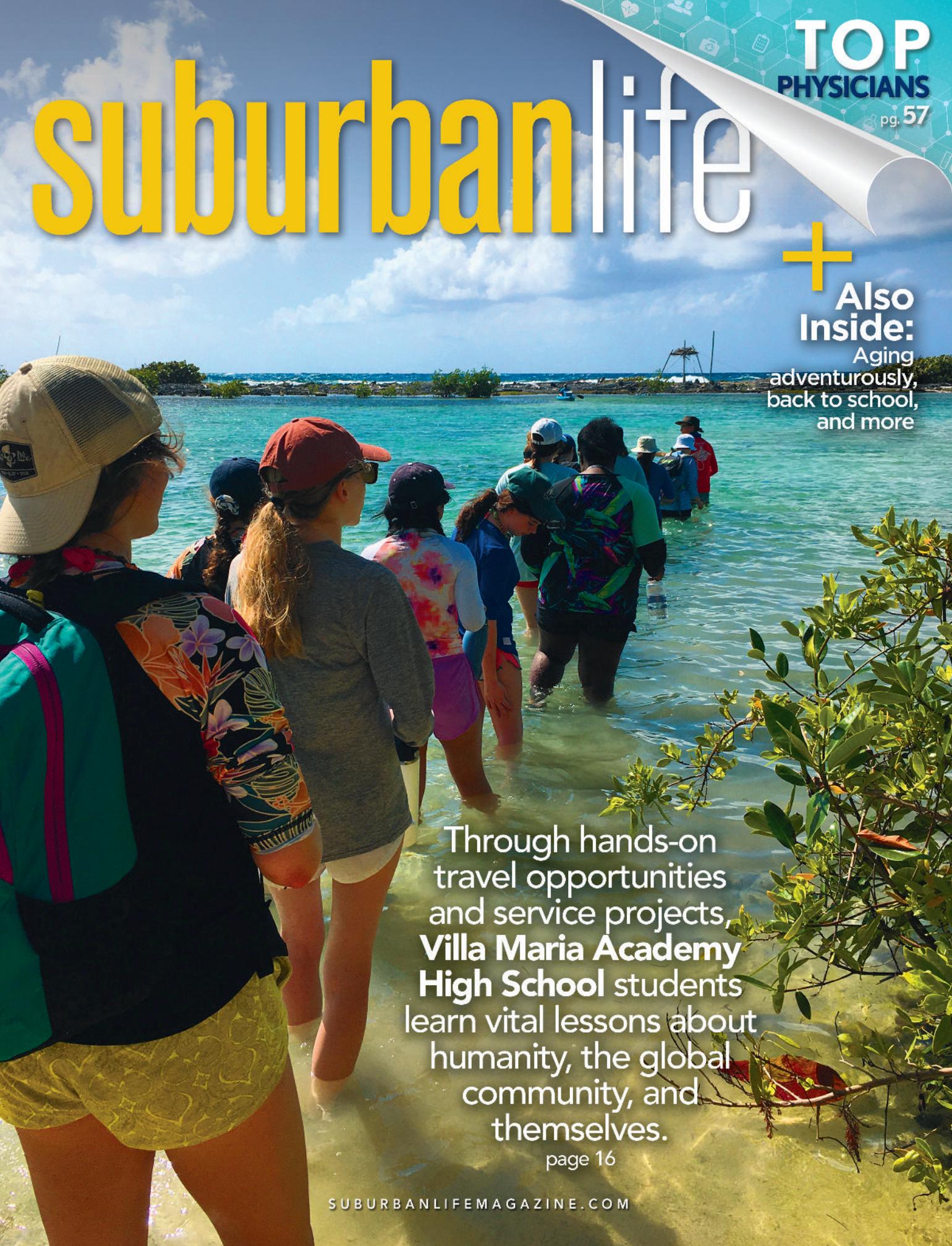


suburban life

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**Also
Inside:**
Aging
adventurously,
back to school,
and more



Through hands-on
travel opportunities
and service projects,
**Villa Maria Academy
High School** students
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humanity, the global
community, and
themselves.

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A group of Villa Maria Academy students in Belize last spring

Part of Something Greater

Through hands-on travel opportunities and service projects, **Villa Maria Academy High School** students learn vital lessons about humanity, the global community, and themselves.

LAST SPRING, as Megan Isabelle Ronan and a dozen of her classmates from Villa Maria Academy High School prepared to depart for an 11-day trip to the Central American nation of Belize, Ronan had just one concern: the parasitic botfly. Otherwise she felt nothing but nervous excitement.

“I’ve always been into biology, so when

I heard about the [Belize] trip last year, I was super excited,” says Ronan, a rising senior at Villa Maria Academy, a private, Catholic preparatory high school for girls in Malvern. “We spent time in the ocean, on the coast, and in the rainforest. I was mesmerized by the forest. It was a hands-on trip, and we got to do real science beyond the classroom.”

Ronan and her fellow students spent half the time on a small island called Tobacco Caye. They learned how to snorkel on a barrier reef, where they cataloged evidence of coral bleaching and infection, and also tested the water for the presence of microplastics. They spent the other half of their

time in the Mayan jungle, studying the flight patterns of bats, tracking turtle migration, and conducting their own research projects involving the local flora, fauna, soil, and waterways.

The botflies, by the way, turned out to be a non-issue.

Ronan returned from the experience inspired to learn more about the natural world, and also devoted to protecting it. She was fascinated by the way Belizeans used composting



Cleaning up the reef at Tobacco Caye



An unexpected visitor—a scorpion—in the rainforest

and reused materials; in fact, the things she saw there made her think about ways she could move more gently through the world. For example, she now prefers to use a reusable food container rather than buy prepackaged food that will increase the likelihood of more single-use plastic bags and containers finding their way into natural habitats.

In addition to ecological awareness, the Belize trip taught Ronan and her fellow students about the importance of service, according to Amy Keglovits, a former scientist who has been teaching science at Villa Maria Academy since 2013. Keglovits organized and led the Belize trip, as well as a prior trip to Costa Rica, through an organization called Ecology Project International (EPI).

“Any respectable science curriculum is going to talk about ecological awareness,” she says. “The girls got to do real science in Belize and Costa Rica, but science is only one part of the experience. Service is integral to Villa Maria, and the service element is baked into trips like this.”

Immersive in nature, the EPI trips also introduce students to native cultures and customs. One highlight from Belize: attending Easter Mass with congregants of a local Catholic church. Keglovits says most students came away from the 11-day experience with a broadened worldview, piqued curiosity, and valuable lessons in overcoming adversity.

“We found a scorpion in one of the girls’ shoes,” she adds with a laugh. “The accommodations are not the least bit extravagant, so the girls come back from these trips with newfound confidence, in that they can’t believe what they accomplished. Most of them have not been exposed to something like this before. By the end, the ones who were the most apprehensive are ‘all in.’

“In Tobacco Caye,” she continues, “the girls got to see the degradation of the corals and the effects of the invasive lionfish. This was concerning to them and made them think: *What is really going on with our planet? How can I be a better steward of the natural world?* When they come back to school, they become advocates.”

Sister Mary Jo Ely, IHM, a theology teacher at Villa Maria Academy, accompanied Keglovits and the students to Belize. Although she went into the experience afraid they might encounter snakes in the jungle and

moray eels in the ocean, she returned from the trip with extraordinarily fond memories.

“I was blown away by the girls’ scientific knowledge,” Sister Mary Jo recalls. “All of them came away with a greater awareness of the need to take care of the environment, and all of



The girls’ home off the coast of Belize and in the Mayan jungle



Studying macroinvertebrates by the river



Maria is rooted in the IHM charism, which is love, creative hope, and fidelity, and I remind them that they do these things instinctively.”

As for Megan Isabelle Ronan, she’s excited to begin her final year at Villa Maria Academy. She remains focused on her academic success, but she cannot help think-

ing about spring break—specifically, the next Villa Maria Academy trip. The chosen destination for 2024: Yellowstone National Park. Participating students will learn how to snowshoe, track wildlife throughout the expansive park, and learn more about one of the most complex ecosystems in the United States.

Ronan thinks Belize will be difficult to top, but she expects Yellowstone to be a highlight of

us—even the adults—stretched ourselves by doing things we would not normally do.”

Sister Mary Jo reminds her students that travel abroad is not the only way to “stretch ourselves,” undergo positive transformation, and learn lessons in God’s love. She considers herself blessed to see real-life examples on a daily basis, either through her work with campus ministry or interacting with students who are involved with different service projects out of the classroom: spending time at Camilla Hall with aging and infirm Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; visiting the Mother of Mercy House in Kensington to help those affected by poverty, substance abuse, and food insecurity; organizing clothing donations; raising funds for philanthropic causes during a Villa Maria tradition known as “Stall Day”; and establishing bonds with each other as peer ministers.

“My goal is to help them go beyond themselves and think of how they can bring God’s love to other people,” she adds. “Villa

her senior year.

“Villa is an amazing place where you can grow through service projects, by doing what you love, and by being exposed to new things out in the real world,” she says. “The things I have experienced through Villa have made me think more about what I want to do with the rest of my life. I’ve thought for a while that I might want to work in a lab and analyze data; it’s one of the main reasons I wanted to take computer science this year. I was always thinking about it, but the trip to Belize made me realize I might enjoy doing it for a career.” ■

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