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# LOCALLY GROWN



When it's time for  
**SENIOR PROJECT,**  
many Shaker High students  
tap into the talent in their  
own back yard.

BY DIANA SIMEON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLINE HELLER

The college acceptances have arrived. Ohio Graduation Tests, Advanced Placement exams, and International Baccalaureate assessments are winding down. By early May, it's all over but the shouting for Shaker seniors.

What better way to combat the last stages of senioritis than to spend a month outside the classroom pursuing a passion or learning about a career? That's just what most Shaker seniors elect to do each spring, through the school's long-standing Senior Project program.

"The goal is that Senior Project should teach you something that you didn't know before," explains Shaker High science teacher James Schmidt, who also serves as an advisor for the program. "That could be a specific skill or how some process works or what it's like to pursue a particular career."

Senior Project also involves learning how to plan ahead (starting with a declaration of interest in November), how to prepare a viable proposal, how to research community resources and secure a sponsor, and how to summarize the experience at a capstone exhibition. In sum, it's a life lesson in designing one's

own learning and making it happen. (See Sidebar, Anatomy of a Successful Senior Project.)

Each student is paired with a project sponsor, typically a professional in the area the student plans to explore. "Our sponsors are truly amazing. We have some great people who have volunteered their time for these students," says Schmidt. While plenty of students look to Cleveland and beyond for their Senior Projects, many also find opportunities with sponsors right here in Shaker Heights. No surprise, really, given the thousands of motivated Northeast Ohio professionals who call Shaker home, not to mention a growing business base in the City itself.

"Our city is rich with intellectual capital," says Dr. Charles Modlin, a surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic, who sponsored two students this spring. "And many of us want to translate that intellectual capital to our students."

Here's an up-close look at some locally grown Senior Projects, their sponsors, and the graduating seniors who experienced them.

## "Our city is rich with intellectual capital"



Lisa Hamilton, owner of Olivia Marie Designs, advises Dayzia Gadson about the design options for a client's invitation.

## ● Dayzia Gadson

**SPONSOR: Lisa Hamilton,  
Owner, Olivia Marie Designs**

Dayzia Gadson has always loved art, so when it came to picking a Senior Project, a creative experience was at the top of her list. When her advisor recommended she work with Lisa Hamilton, owner of Shaker-based Olivia Marie Designs, Gadson jumped at the opportunity.

Olivia Marie specializes in custom-designed stationery, invitations, and gifts for all occasions, from weddings to bar and bat mitzvahs and most everything in between. Hamilton started the business in 2006, after years of making stationery for her own friends and family. "Everyone loved it, so it turned into a full-fledged business," explains Hamilton, who's also a Shaker Schools parent.

For Gadson, now a freshman at Hampton University, it was a fast-paced lesson in what it takes to make a go of a small business. "I really got to see how the business runs," she says.

That included meeting with clients and suppliers, even stepping in to help with production. Says Hamilton: "There is so much more to a business than just the creative side, and I think Dayzia got to experience that."

Working with Hamilton also got Gadson pondering how to turn her own art into a business. At Shaker High, Gadson took every jewelry-making class offered. Last spring, one of her works was featured in the High School's literary and arts magazine, *Semanteme*.

"When I saw those classes as a freshman, I remember thinking, 'I want to do that,'" recalls Gadson. "Senior Project has really encouraged me to think about having my own business one day."



Although Yuxuan Fan (right) intends to study medicine at college, not education, she found her experience working alongside Lomond Elementary Mandarin teacher Juanjuan Ran to be immensely rewarding.

## ● Yuxuan Fan

**SPONSOR: Juanjuan Ran,  
Chinese teacher, Lomond School**

For Yuxuan Fan, Senior Project was a chance to learn more about the language she'd grown up with.

When Fan was four years old, she immigrated to Cleveland from China, first to the Shaker Square area and then to Shaker Heights. "We continued to speak Chinese because my parents pretended they couldn't speak English when they were at home," explains Fan. As a result, Fan is fluent in Mandarin Chinese.

Still, the idea for a Senior Project that involved her native tongue never occurred to Fan. "I was actually really confused about what to do for Senior Project," she recalls. "Then my mom reminded me that Shaker has a Chinese language program, so I figured I would help a Chinese teacher."

She reached out to Juanjuan Ran, a teacher at Lomond Elementary School, who was happy to have Yuxuan's assistance. "She helped me have more time to work with students one on one," says Ran.

For Fan, working with Ran and the first-through-fourth grade students at Lomond was rewarding. For one, her Chinese improved. "Since I only speak Chinese at home, I only know my parents' dialect," says Fan. "Juanjuan helped my pronunciation and also taught me more words and some idioms."

But Fan, who's now enrolled in Case Western Reserve University's Pre-Professional Scholars Program – which guarantees a spot at the medical school after graduation – says she also got some unexpected career training.

"Working with elementary school students will help when it comes to dealing with some of my future patients," Fan notes with a smile, then adds: "But the best part is that the kids all liked me. When they went up to hug Ms. Ran, they also hugged me."

## • Eric Hall

**SPONSOR: Sarah Cech, Natural Resources Manager, The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes**

Even though Eric Hall had studied environmental issues during his senior year at Shaker High, he wasn't prepared for how difficult it would be to actually fix a real-world environmental problem.

But a few hours into the first day of his Senior Project at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, Hall was getting the picture. "We were pulling irises in the marsh. It's probably the hardest weed to pull. You have to use a shovel to dig down to the end of the roots. It's hard work and you're in the marsh, where it's wet, cold, and muddy."

The iris, in this case, was the yellow flag iris, a plant that is lovely to behold, but doesn't belong anywhere near the Nature Center's one-acre marsh. "It's an invasive species from Europe," explains Sarah Cech, who sponsored Hall and oversees the Nature Center's Stewardship Department. "It doesn't have a natural competitor here, so it's able to take over."

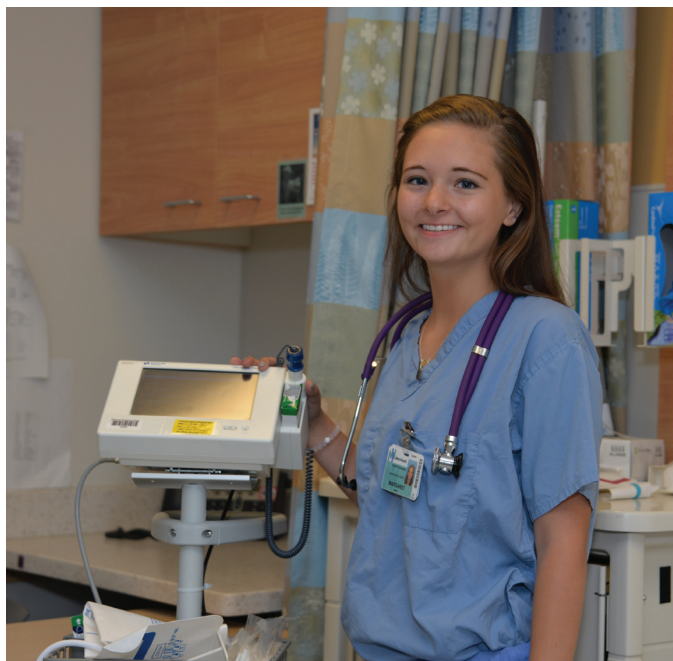
When invasive species take over an ecosystem, the native species suffer, including birds and animals. "That's where Eric and the other students come in," says Cech.

Hall spent much of the month with a team of students working on the Nature Center's ongoing marsh restoration efforts. The goal is to return the marsh to its original state by removing invasives, like the yellow flag iris and narrow-leaved cattails, while also planting natives, such as swamp milkweed and bristly sedge.

"We were taking the bad stuff out and putting the good stuff in," notes Hall, now at the University of Cincinnati. "I would never have thought I'd be planting flowers, but it was a great experience."



Sarah Cech, natural resources manager for the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, gives Eric Hall some hands-on instruction in removing the invasive yellow flag iris so that native species can thrive.



Maggie Nace learned firsthand that there was much more to plastic surgery than cosmetic improvements when she worked in the trauma clinic alongside Dr. Daniel Medalie, Assistant Professor of Plastic Surgery at MetroHealth Medical Center.

## • Maggie Nace

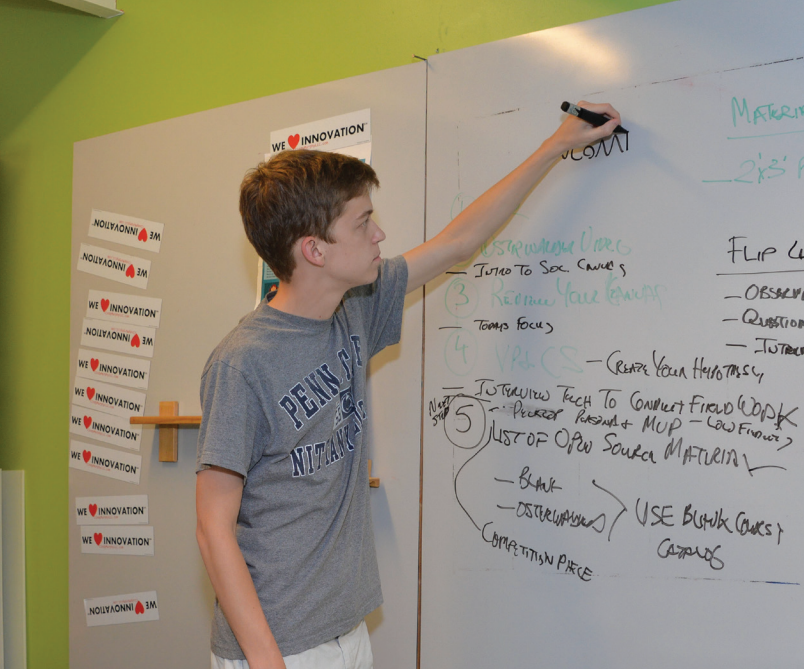
**SPONSOR: Dr. Daniel Medalie, Assistant Professor of Plastic Surgery, MetroHealth Medical Center**

Like most high school students, Maggie Nace didn't know much about the medical profession, especially surgery, before starting her Senior Project last spring. "All I had to go off of was what I saw on television," recalls Nace. "That's so dramatic."

So the month she spent working with plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Daniel Medalie and his colleagues at MetroHealth Medical Center challenged her preconceptions. "It was an amazing experience," sums up Nace, now a student at the University of Kentucky.

During her project, Nace had the opportunity to see up close that there's a lot more to plastic surgery than she expected. "The students were in the operating room and watching live surgery, but also in clinic seeing patients," explains Medalie, himself the parent of two newly minted Shaker graduates. "The clinic they were in was one of our trauma clinics. They would go to the trauma clinic once a week and work not just with me, but also with my interns and residents and other surgeons."

Nace, who plans to continue exploring a career in medicine, recalls one case in particular. "A four-year-old boy had his foot run over by a lawnmower," she says. "The surgeon went in and reconstructed his foot. What really hit me was the doctors were able to give him a little piece of his life back."



At Shaker LaunchHouse, Dylan Straffon was able to build upon his graphic design and multimedia coursework at Shaker by helping to build a website for the first hardware accelerator in the state of Ohio.

## • Dylan Straffon

**SPONSOR: Dar Caldwell, Director of Entrepreneurship, Shaker LaunchHouse**

When Dylan Straffon arrived at LaunchHouse for his Senior Project, he certainly didn't expect he'd be building a website for the first hardware accelerator in the state of Ohio. But that's exactly what happened.

"At first, I started with projects that were less important," explains Straffon, who's now at Pennsylvania State University. That included making graphics and other web-related activities, a task he was well prepared for thanks to three years of electives in graphics and digital multimedia at Shaker High.

Then Straffon and fellow Shaker senior Josh Jacobs were asked to review the websites of 10 other hardware accelerators around the country. A hardware accelerator provides early-stage funding for technology start-ups focused on hardware (robotics, for example). The LaunchHouse Accelerator program incorporated early-stage hardware start-ups this fall for the first time, thanks to a grant from Ohio's Third Frontier ONEFUND.

"We made a presentation and they said, 'You do this for us,'" says Straffon, who ended up staying on at LaunchHouse after graduation to finish the project. "It was a lot of work to get it up and functioning, so I wanted to come back and keep working on it."

Working with Shaker alum Michael Feigenbaum at Lucy's Sweet Surrender bakery, Dominique Owens and Courtney Maxwell not only learned the secret to making the perfect strudel, but to running a successful small business. "At least we didn't make them get up at 5 am," joked Feigenbaum.

## • Dominique Owens and Courtney Maxwell

**SPONSOR: Michael Feigenbaum, Owner, Lucy's Sweet Surrender Bakery**

For Dominique Owens and Courtney Maxwell, a Senior Project at Lucy's Sweet Surrender, the popular Hungarian-style bakery in the heart of Shaker Heights, seemed like a great way to spend the last month of high school. Both enjoyed baking and the two friends looked forward to sampling all the goodies.

But Owens and Maxwell got a taste of much more than the delectable house-made strudels and other pastries available at Lucy's Sweet Surrender. "There is so much more to running a bakery than I thought," says Owens, a student at Case Western Reserve University.

For starters, it was a lot of hard physical work. "The first day was intense. It was hot and we were making strudel all day," Owens recalls. Strudel is a particularly difficult pastry to make, as the dough requires special handling, explains Lucy's owner Michael Feigenbaum (SHHS '72).

"Then there was the day when I had to wash all the dishes," adds Maxwell. "I would think I was done and then they'd bring me more dishes!"

"At least we didn't make them get up at five o'clock in the morning," jokes Feigenbaum. "But this is a labor-intensive business and they did everything from washing dishes and sweeping the floor to assisting with the cakes and pastries."

For Dominique and Courtney, that real-world experience was more than worth it. "It was great to get out of the school environment and see what it's like to work as an employee," explains Owens. Notes Maxwell, now at Miami University of Ohio, "I hadn't had a job before, so I'd never had that experience."

And not to worry, Owens and Maxwell got their fair share of pastries too, including favorites like croissant with strawberry and cheese filling, Hungarian-style doughnuts, and bacon biscuits. "They are wonderful, especially when they are warm right out of the oven," says Owens. "Everyone should buy stuff there."





Maggie Steinberg became hooked on science after taking AP Biology at Shaker. She was able to pursue that passion by shadowing Dr. Charles Modlin, Kidney Transplant Surgeon at The Cleveland Clinic. In return, Steinberg helped Modlin improve his outreach to minority patients via social media.

## • Maggie Steinberg

**SPONSOR: Dr. Charles Modlin, Kidney Transplant Surgeon and Director of the Minority Men's Health Center, Cleveland Clinic**

Blame it on Shaker High's AP Biology class. "After I took that class, I became really interested in science," says Maggie Steinberg, now a freshman at Haverford College.

So, when it came time to decide on a Senior Project last fall, the opportunity to explore the medical profession, specifically surgery, seemed like just the ticket. "I wanted to be hands-on," Steinberg says.

That led her to Dr. Charles Modlin, a Shaker resident and kidney transplant surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic. "I got to be with him every day through his daily routine," explains Steinberg. That included the operating room.

"I watched a whole kidney transplant, which was about five hours, and then I got to be in the post-op meetings with that patient. It was amazing to see how much the surgery improved the patient's life," recalls Steinberg.

But for Modlin, who's also a Shaker Schools parent, the High School's Senior Project is a two-way street. "I learn from the students, too," he explains. In particular, Modlin turned to Steinberg for help with social media.

More than a decade ago, Modlin founded the Minority Men's Health Center at the Clinic's Glickman Urological & Kidney Institute to help address the ongoing health-care disparities affecting minority males. "A lot of times it's difficult for health-care providers to reach our minority populations," explains Modlin. "Maggie was able to help me use social media to get information out about my program."



Making a one-hour movie about the history of Rome turned out to be harder work than anticipated, but the result was worth the effort. Teacher Nora Murphy plans to use the film to help educate her Latin students this year. The film crew, from left: Zach Hofstetter, Colin Yule, Zane Eisen, and Ezra Zigmond.

## • Zane Eisen, Zach Hofstetter, Colin Yule, and Ezra Zigmond

**SPONSOR: Nora Murphy, Latin teacher, Shaker High**

Remember what Julius Caesar so famously said? "We came. We saw. We made a movie."

Well, maybe those weren't the Roman general's exact words. But that is just what Zane Eisen, Zach Hofstetter, Ezra Zigmond, and Colin Yule did for their collaborative Senior Project. They made a movie. In Latin. And it covers about 700 years of Roman history.

"We got the idea from a TED Talk," explains Zigmond. "There's a school in California and their curriculum – students write and film movies in Latin – is basically this project," says Yule.

While movies are generally not encouraged for Senior Project, the fact that this one would serve as curriculum material for the High School's lower-level Latin classes won it the green light, explains Nora Murphy, who teaches Latin at the High School.

"I anticipate using this in my Latin 2, 3, and maybe 4 classes," she says, adding that an understanding of Roman history is crucial when it comes to learning Latin. "Once we get out of second-year Latin, our students are reading historical documents written by real people," she explains. "So, as we're learning that history, we will watch those parts of the movie."

The four seniors had studied Latin for six years, starting at Shaker Heights Middle School. But turning the history of Rome into a movie -- the students covered the founding of Rome through the assassination of Julius Caesar in just over one hour -- was still tougher than they anticipated.

"The history of Rome is filled with assassinations," says Yule, who's now at the University of Michigan. "So we tried to lighten it up a bit."

That included, at times, importing touches of contemporary culture: "Certain characters wear costumes, but for a while we just wore normal street clothes because the Romans weren't in togas yet," notes Hofstetter, now at Loyola University Maryland. The Roman general Sulla also wore a suit. "He was the first person to march with an army into Rome, so we wanted him to seem a little bit less like an average everyday Roman and a little more powerful," Yule says.

Then there was the movie-making process itself. "The start was hard," says Eisen, now at The University of Chicago. "We thought we'd be able to do a lot more than we did. It ended up taking two days just to film the first scene, but we got better as the project moved on."

And, finally, the fact that the movie was entirely in Latin also presented hurdles. The script was written in English, then translated into Latin. "So much of English is idiomatic that it's hard to keep the meaning without translating it literally, because Latin has its own set of idioms," explains Zigmond, now at Harvard University. "There are some things you say in English all the time which you wouldn't ever say that way in Latin."

The success of the Senior Project program at Shaker hinges upon the wide range of experiences students can explore, whether from Shaker-based organizations or other sponsors in the Northeast Ohio region.

"We are always interested in pairing students with great local business opportunities and mentors," says James Schmidt. To explore a possible Senior Project opportunity within your business or organization, please contact Schmidt at [seniorproject@shaker.org](mailto:seniorproject@shaker.org) or fill out a sponsor contact form at [shaker.org/volunteer](http://shaker.org/volunteer). **SL**

## ANATOMY OF A SUCCESSFUL SENIOR PROJECT

In order to participate in a Senior Project -- as the majority of Shaker seniors do -- students must be in good academic standing, with no grades below a C for classes that are required for graduation. The planning process is thoughtful and deliberate, and begins in the fall of senior year.

**September:** Students attend a senior advisory meeting to learn about the Senior Project program parameters and to begin thinking of possible fields of interest for their projects.

**November:** Students fill out a proposal form for a specific project or indicate a field of interest.

The three Senior Project faculty advisors -- science teacher Megan Dora, art teacher Karen DeMauro, and science teacher James Schmidt -- review all of the project proposals to

ensure they are on target. They also help match students with an available mentor, business, or organization in their field of interest.

**December:** Final project descriptions are due.

**January:** Parents must sign off on the students' proposals.

**February:** Completed sponsor agreements are due.

**March:** Students submit detailed project overviews.

**May/June:** Students leave the High School the second week of May to begin their projects, where they must work an average of six hours per day, Monday through Friday, until the end of the academic year.

All students are required to keep a daily journal detailing what they have learned that day, what unique events occurred, and what their next steps will be.

The Senior Project experience culminates with an evening showcase at the High School where the students present their projects (science-fair style). Volunteers evaluate each project to assess whether the project was successfully completed.

To explore a possible Senior Project opportunity within your business or organization, please contact Schmidt at [seniorproject@shaker.org](mailto:seniorproject@shaker.org) or fill out a contact form at [shaker.org/volunteer](http://shaker.org/volunteer).

