

# THE HIGHLAND FLING

Art Courtesy of Derek Chen '25, Brook Xu '25

Northern Highlands Regional High School | 298 Hillside Avenue, Allendale NJ 07401 | Volume 59, Issue 01|



Governor Phil Murphy at the State of the State Address.

## NO PHONES, NO PROBLEM?

### Governor Murphy’s proposed ban on phones in school raises questions

**Abby Skripak '28**  
The debate over phone use in schools has been ongoing for years. But recently, this issue has been brought into the spotlight after New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy proposed a complete ban of cellphones in schools for students in grades K-12 in his 2025 State of the State Address. Murphy argued that phones and social media have a negative impact on the mental health of teens, and this point was backed by a significant amount of research. Despite the validity of this research, many raise questions about how effective and realistic the enforce-

ment of this ban would be. Principal Joseph Occhino expressed strong disapproval of this ban, mentioning how tough it would be to enforce. Occhino believes, “It doesn’t matter your political affiliation—anybody who says [phones should be banned], they don’t really understand how schools run and the difficulties that you have trying to enforce these types of mandates. It’s impossible.” Instead, Occhino supports the strategy that’s being used currently—phone hotels. This approach requires students to put their phones in these “phone hotels” (numbered phone holders that hang on the

wall) during class, but allows them to use their phones during lunch, passing time, and study halls. “We’re not telling you to put your phones away in a locker and you won’t see them until 2:36,” Occhino explained. “What we’re saying is that when you get to a classroom, stick them in a holder, and when you leave, take your phones and do whatever you want with them.” Vice Principal Dr. Tony LaRocca shared a similar view to Occhino, pointing out how the proposed ban would simply lead to students figuring out a way around the rules. “You’d have burner phones in the

pouches. You’d get calculator backs. You’d get cases without phones in them. I think that it would just be another obstacle for people to try to game the system,” LaRocca commented. One potential method that could be used to enforce this ban is the use of Yondr pouches, small, locking bags, which some districts have already implemented. Upon their arrival at school, students are required to put their pouches which remain in the possession of the student throughout the day, but can only be unlocked at the end of the day by tapping the pouch on an unlocking base activated at

the end of the school day. However, LaRocca openly doubts the effectiveness of this strategy. “I don’t think that locking [phones] in pouches with magnets works. Because it doesn’t. I think leaving it up to the teacher to make sure that they’re the ones managing their classrooms is the right call... If everyone’s on the same page, then the educational experience for the students remains the same,” LaRocca shared. In addition to the concerns of educators statewide...

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## NEW BEVERAGE CART

A closer look at Highlands’ newest addition

**Clair Mario '28**  
Recently, there has been a new addition to the library here at Highlands: a beverage cart. It is open from 7:00 AM to 7:35 AM on Monday through Friday, and has many items available to purchase including BAI waters, sparkling ICE, la Colombe lattes, and coffee.

Principal Occhino and Vice Principal Dr. LaRocca first came up with the idea when the library was being renovated. Occhino said, “In the initial design of the library, it was said that we wanted a part of the library to have a Starbucks-type feel. We just went back and forth and saw that other schools have a type of coffee bar, so we said let’s give it a shot, and we were able to bring it to life.”

LaRocca and Occhino also focused on including items that are unique to the beverage cart and unable to be purchased anywhere else on campus. This adds a fun and special aspect to the cart itself.

When asked about how the cart has been doing, LaRocca said, “It’s been a success; it’s starting slow, and we’re learning things as we’re going.”

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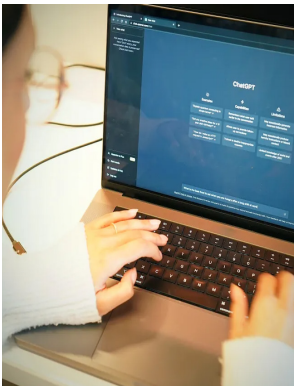
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# THE DECLINE OF SCHOOL SPIRIT

Athletic student sections have become more and more empty

Catherine Main '27

In this recent year, it has been evident that there has been a clear absence of the student body at home sporting events. This is becoming a concerning trend that hopefully will not continue to become the norm at Highlands.

In the fall, students were crowded in the stands, dressed around themes, ready to cheer on the Highlands football team. Only a few months later, the bleachers of basketball, wrestling, baseball, and lacrosse are empty with the exception of some parents and close friends. Why is there such a stark difference? Where did the fans go? Where is that electric energy cheering at Highlands?

Is it the cost of admissions to get into the sporting events as a student? Have students shifted their prior-

ities to things such as extra curricular school activities or going home? What is it about football as a season that really tugs at the heart strings of our school?

As our school begins to increase our focus on academics, extra curriculars, and tests (AP, NJSLA, SAT) there have been eliminations of school social events that are causing divides in the grades. Social events such as 90 minute lunches, homecoming, dances were all great ways of bringing the grades together. However, with them being taken away, this is causing peers to be super divided and the idea of high school is now turning from events, games, socializing now to school, college prep, and the internet.

Ironically, the school's infamous quote, "Once a Highlander, always a Highlander" seems to be the opposite of what the school pride looks like

now!

As a Northern Highlands varsity basketball player, I saw a clear difference in away games

sides big sporting events like Pastamania, there is no coverage of Northern Highlands Athletics. There are some individual

**The bleachers of basketball, wrestling, baseball and lacrosse are empty with the exception of some parents and close friends.**

versus home games. Other schools' pride, energy, and school spirit was much more apparent than ours. Teams have cheerleaders, student sections, children, and adults all cheering on the high school team. Halftime shows at other schools involved raffles, cheerleading dances, and more. As opposed to us where we have a long 10 minute halftime filled with silence.

On top of this, be-

sports that have Instagram accounts that are "not affiliated with Highlands", once in a blue moon there will be a NHEA instagram post about a big game, but other than that, regular season games are almost unheard of! Unless someone from the team mentions the game, there is no other coverage on it. To change this situation, the lowdown should broadcast a weekly schedule every Mon-

day that includes all sport events and their locations that will occur that week. Following these weekly schedules, there should be a Friday lowdown show as well that reports the games of the week! On top of this, there should be more big events like Pastamania, but for every sport! These can be organized by class counsel, clubs, administration, or team captains! For example, softball could have a game/raffle night! This would encourage people to come! On top of this, Mr. Koth offers busing to some special away games that students without their

license who may not have had a ride otherwise, can attend, but there has been a lack of participation.

All in all, students need to start coming to their fellow peers' games! Whether for 15 minutes or 2 hours, it is appreciated! I truly believe the more school spirit we have, the better our teams will perform as there will be more energy and more motivation to win!■

**Ironically, the school's infamous quote, "Once a Highlander, always a Highlander" seems to be the opposite of what the school pride is.**

## The Highland Fling

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The views of the staff do not necessarily reflect the views of the administration. The administration has the right to review and alter an issue of the newspaper for five school days after it has been given to them by the staff. In the process of prior review, the original content of the paper may be changed or deleted. Regardless, the staff of *The Highland Fling* prides itself on delivering the most relevant and accurate reporting it can.

## From the Desk of the Editors-in-Chief

Hello and welcome to the first edition from our new staff! We are so excited to serve as your editors in chief for the 2025 term! This year's staff is extremely talented and driven, something we hope reflects throughout the paper.

Last year's staff did a phenomenal job producing an award winning newspaper, but this year, we are prepared to take it to the next level. We have already begun having more in-person meetings with writers and the section editors (accompanied by bagels), and are looking to further increase the camaraderie within the club as the term progresses. One of our main goals for the paper this year is to foster an environment of teamwork and collaboration, something that is facilitated by our eager and energetic staff.

Already, we have had many new writers join the club. We are constantly on the lookout for new ideas, voices, experiences, and perspectives.

If you or anyone you know is interested in writing or taking pictures or making art for the paper, please do not hesitate to reach out! Also, we want to make the newspaper as interesting and engaging as possible, so please let us know what you want us to feature!

The process of making the paper into the version you see is far from being without flaws and bumps in the road, but with this staff's perseverance and determination, we are certain that we will be able to produce the highest quality school newspaper you have ever seen. New beginnings can be daunting, but when attacked head on with an optimistic attitude, any obstacle can be overcome. We implore you to consider this mindset with every new challenge this spring season may present and continue to work hard.

With that being said, don't forget to take time to yourself and reflect on what's happening around you. Approach every situation with the intention of learning and growing, something we will incorporate in the paper this year.

Please enjoy this product of our labor and continue to MARCH into spring with your head held high.

-Editors-in-Chief Laney McCrossin, Emily Pushnya, and Emerson Rossi

If you are interested in joining *The Highland Fling* or have any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact [fling.eic@gmail.com](mailto:fling.eic@gmail.com). If you are interested in placing an ad or subscribing, please contact the email listed above.

National Alliance on Mental Illness:  
1-800-950-6264

National Suicide Prevention Hotline:  
1-800-273-TALK (8255) [24/7 hotline]  
(Spanish) 1-888-628-9454



# GUIDANCE COUNSELOR SHORTAGE?

How are students feeling about the scheduling process with counselors?

Prisha Prajapati '27

Now that we have reached early spring, guidance counselors are calling students to their offices for their scheduling appointments. At these meetings, freshmen, sophomores, and juniors decide on what prospective courses they wish to take the following year.

As a sophomore, I had my meeting in the first few days of March and picked the best-fitting courses for me with the help of my counselor. I came prepared with a list

already had their appointments or are still awaiting them, however, some feel that the process is inefficient and does not feel personalized enough, which brings up a question among the Highlands community: should our school hire more counselors?

Many students, myself included, think that scheduling meetings are speedy and often do not take much time. Sophomore Hajin Kim says, "My scheduling appointments are really quick. I don't really ask any extra questions or anything. I just

asking questions and I do scheduling appointments,



Northern Highland's Guidance Office during Scheduling Season

not ask many either.

However, it is understandable that some students may have additional questions since picking classes can be daunting and feel like a lot at once.

We currently have 6 guidance counselors that work with students to pick their classes. On the other hand, Highlands has almost 1,300 total students, making each counselor responsible for about 216 students. This does include seniors, who do not have

but they frequently visit their counselors for college applications or any additional support they may need.

While the process may seem slow, it is important to remember that our counselors are working with over 200 students each and are here to help.

To aid out our staff, maybe it is time to hire two more counselors.

I believe that with each counselor helping out so many kids, it would be

beneficial to have another two. Not only do students visit guidance for scheduling, they make appointments for a variety of reasons.

So while counselors are working to ensure maximum efficiency with the plethora of courses offered, they are also helping students with unrelated issues, which is what makes counselors so important at every high school.

Another sophomore

when I go to make an appointment there isn't always availability for when I want to go."

The short answer is yes; students believe we should have 2 more counselors because they shape who our students are inside and outside of school.

They provide us with various opportunities that will help us in the real world.

This would take some of the load off our counselors as having eight

## Some feel that the process is inefficient and does not feel personalized enough.

of classes and electives so the meeting was seamless and quick.

Students may have

pick my classes and go."

A lot of students agree with Hajin. She brings up the subject of

## Highlands has almost 1,300 total students making each counselor responsible for about 216 students.

student, Emme Kossar believes that "adding a few more counselors would help because our counselors already have so much work to do and there's a lot of students here. Also,

of them would make each one responsible for about 163 students, a major difference from before. ■

# THE ALLURE OF TRAVEL

The growing trend and benefits of travel for students

Ava Makris '28

As the academic year progresses, there's an observable increase in student travel, with many students having desires in exploring new travel destinations. Whether it's the strong power of social media influencers or the experience of traveling with peers, these factors play a significant role in shaping travel experiences in students.

Students are drawn to traveling mainly due to the academic stress that they experience throughout the school year. Struggling in keeping up with rigorous classes, extracurriculars, and heavy workloads makes students want to explore outside of their contained academic life.

Students feel as if traveling is their resource in escaping from the stress, mainly the reason why there has been an increase in student travel.

Today, social media has entirely transformed the way students think about and choose desired vacation spots. Vacation destinations in the past to now have evolved dramatically, considering there are new recommended places

to visit that are influenced on social media.

Most days, students scroll through their feeds and happen to observe stunning vacation spots, fun adventures, and experiences.

While observing these photos, students tend to feel sad or yearn for a vacation due to missing out on fun experiences, especially during the long school year.

Students also feel "fear of missing out," also known as FOMO, due to academics becoming their first priority in preparation for the future, which becomes extremely stressful.

"Whenever I scroll through Instagram, I'm always seeing beautiful pictures of resorts and beaches. It makes me feel I'm missing out on a relaxing experience," says freshman Sophia Madasseri. "At the moment, every post I see makes me want to travel to the place to escape from the stressful academic life."

Some of the most talked about vacation destinations recently have been Aruba, Italy, and Greece according to advertised social media posts.

Social media advertising tends to overhype specific places, causing a wide variety of students to visit the most influenced

places, without considering other true beautiful places to visit. This past year, countless students have traveled specifically to Italy, while most have

## Some of the most talked about vacation destinations recently have been Aruba, Italy, and Greece According to social media posts.

Italy on their bucket list for a destination to visit in the future.

On social media, Italy is portrayed as a popular vacation destination because of its stunning beaches, perfect sunny weather, and beautiful culture.

## "Whenever I visit Italy, I feel like a different person."

- Francesca Bellapianta

Aside from Italy being a beautiful country to visit, students feel that traveling to such a stunning place allows them to escape from stress once they are on vacation, away from the negative feelings faced during the school year.

"Whenever I visit

Italy, I feel like a different person. As soon as I step off the airplane when I arrive in Italy, I feel as if all my stress has washed away," states freshman

Francesca Bellapianta. "I also feel that social media doesn't align with the true culture and scene of Italy, posts often shade the true beauty of Italy."

Many students travel with their peers during school breaks or even dur-

ing the weekend, aiming to seek adventure and new experiences to break away from academic stress. This shared journey not only strengthens students' friendships, but also allows in creating long lasting memories with friends.

Traveling with peers

includes stronger bonds within the friendship. Not only can students travel to popular destinations that everyone is talking about, they can share those experi-

ences with their friends.

When students travel with their friends, most students can relate that the trustworthy builds up within the friendship and better the memories, a stronger bond and friendship will be the outcome.

"Whether it's a road trip to a nearby city or a vacation to a popular destination, the outcome of the travel experience with friends is really what matters," says freshman Ava Varkey. "Whenever I travel with friends, I feel that there's always a new core

memory made every time."

The trend of student travel is significantly influenced by several factors such as academic stress, the impact of social media, the fear of missing out, and the experience of traveling with friends.

These reasons drive students to look for new experiences that provide a break from their academic life, allow them to create long lasting friendships, and to create core memories with friends during traveling. ■

## Students are drawn to travel mainly due to the academic stress that they experience throughout the school year.

# WOMEN’S HISTORY MONTH

What we have done and what comes next

Paula Manrique '27

Serena Williams once said “Every woman’s success should be an inspiration to another. We’re strongest when we cheer each other on.” For me, this is what Women’s History Month is all about. March is the month for us to celebrate every woman’s achievements, and the barriers women have broken down throughout all of history. Women’s History Month is a month where we remember how strong we, women, can be if we work together, and support each other, instead of breaking each other down. Women have achieved so many things, and I know we will achieve so much more in the years to come. But I believe that there is just one thing that stops many women from achieving their dreams. And it’s the lack of support we give each other, specifically, the perfect yet impossible expectations society has created on how women

**There is almost always that one person that judges her and breaks her down.**

look and act. Every time a woman achieves something great, there is almost always that one person that judges her and breaks her down. In her documentary, “Taylor Swift: Miss Americana” on Netflix, Taylor Swift talks about her struggles and how the world’s cruel criticism and expectations for women has influenced her life, forcing her to keep her true voice and opinions hidden. “Throughout my whole career, label executives would just say ‘A nice girl doesn’t force their opinions on people...I became the person everyone wanted me to be.’ This is not just a problem only celebrities face; in fact, many

women all over the world face this problem as well. Too many times, women are too scared of sharing their opinions, because if people don’t support it, they could be targeted. A large population of the world has a perfect image in their mind of how a woman should be. People have to break away from this image, because women can’t achieve their dreams if they stick to the status quo. Just think about it, every person has that one flaw that inspires them to become stronger, and that’s what makes the world a better place. Taylor Swift is not the only example of a woman affected by this

problem, in fact, this problem impacts women all over the world. Some stories have even had the power to reach millions. Millie Bobby Brown is one of them. Recently, many people were bullying her looks all over the media, saying she looks “old”. The only reason they are doing this, she says, is for the views, the likes and the followers. The fact that women and society in general has the tendency to put another person down in order to gain popularity is wrong. And in the beginning of this month, Millie Bobby Brown decided to take a stand on this hatred. “We always talk about supporting and uplifting young women, but...We have become a society where it’s so much easier to criticize than it is to pay a compliment...Let’s do better...for every young girl who deserves to grow up without fear of being torn apart for simply existing.” These were very strong words. And they showed the

world that it’s true, there is so much criticism put on women and girls who do not meet the “perfect” expectations society creates for them, and this is having terrible repercussions on every girl’s future. If we can support each other, and empower women to do what they feel is right, our world has the potential to become a much

future holds for the future generations of women and girls all throughout the world. If women and girls unite, and support each other, instead of bringing each other down, I know that this world is possible. And remember, change starts here and now. If you can help your classmates and friends be more comfortable with

**We have become a society where it’s so much easier to criticize than it is to pay a compliment.**

more accepting place. Women’s History month is a time for all women to look back at how far we have come. The comebacks we have made for all of the discrimination and judgment we’ve had throughout history. And how much the

sharing their opinions and thoughts with the world without tearing them down, this world is possible. If you can congratulate and support your friends and classmates when they achieve something great, this world is possible. ■

# CONTROVERSEY OVER THE BIBLE CLUB

The Rejected bible study club and why we don’t have it

Henry Roberts '26

Recently Junior Hudson Bloch tried to get his idea of a Bible study club signed off by the administration, only to be rejected. The idea of a Bible study club is super controversial due to the way the law about religion in schools can be interpreted and how contentious the teachings of Christianity are. This attempt to have a Bible study club at the school forces the question into our face, should we really have one? In order to better understand the aim of this potential club, I interviewed the man behind the idea. Junior Hudson Bloch claimed that, “I believe that this club will greatly benefit many students at our school because there are currently no clubs that allow students to freely discuss Catholicism/Christianity in a way that will provide insight to the others around them.

A Bible club would allow for another way to practice our religion and discuss how we feel about it. It would also show the differences in how we perceive parts of the bible and

compare those views to those of other people our age. It also could provide a sense of community and belonging for those at our school who have similar beliefs to others. It would also be open to anyone who is willing to learn more about the religion even if they do not practice it. This would allow for exploration of the other possibilities of religion and discovery of one that they can really identify with that matches their core beliefs and ideals.” The process for Bloch in getting his club passed was one with a lot of roadblocks and difficulties. He described that, “In a meeting with Dr. Larocca, he



Photo of some religious texts create a club that was just created for specific people and that “the administration would laugh at him” if he brought this idea to them. I responded and explained to him that it would not be just for specific people and that anyone is free to join and learn about our ideals and be-

**Christians aren’t in need of a place to able to those with similar interests, they have a church.**

explained that we could not

liefs. He responded that it

wouldn’t be okay because then some people would not feel represented, to which I responded that in that case, they should go make their own club.” According to Bloch, Dr. LaRocca advised that the club should be transformed into a club on the history of religion. Focusing on the real historical aspects of the stories in the Bible rather than their religious connotations. Bloch, “decided that this was not living up to the vision that I had when I started out in laying the workings for the club and so I just let the idea die. The point of a Bible club was to study the scriptures and dig into deep meanings of the testaments and explore and share our interpretations with each other.”

This event makes the question that needs to be asked very clear. Should we or can we even have a Bible study club at Highlands? In terms of being able to have the club here the situation is very unusual. Under the Supreme Court Case Engel v. Vitale schools are able to have fully student run prayers and religious clubs during non-instructional time, but the government is not allowed to push any specific religion. This is strange specifically because every club needs a teacher to supervise in order for the club to be allowed to meet, possibly meaning that the school cannot start the club even if they thought it was beneficial. I personally don’t think we should have a Bi-

ble study club at the school. This opinion is based on the fact that I don’t think that students need a club in order to voice their opinions on the Bible. Students are allowed to freely discuss the Bible whenever they want, there’s nothing about that that’s against the rules or socially unacceptable. Along with being allowed to discuss the bible in school, people are allowed to discuss the bible anywhere they want as long as it’s appropriate. School clubs act as a way for students to meet people with similar interests and do what they love with people who also love that. It’s not that there is no place for Christians at Highlands, there definitely is. Christians aren’t in need of a place to be able to meet those with similar interests, they have a church. ■

Photo courtesy of Reet Sachdev '27



# ARE COLLEGE COUNSELORS WORTH IT?

The debate over hiring private college counselors

Nick Franchi '25

Take it from a senior: college applications are no joke. I committed to my dream school, Penn State University, last month, and although the process was overwhelming, I managed to navigate it without hiring a private college counselor. But for many students, the pressure to get into their dream school has led to a rise in the number of high schoolers hiring private

I wonder: is this fair to students who can't afford the extra help? And, more importantly, does hiring a college counselor truly reflect a student's authentic self, or does it inflate their profile with the help of professionals?

I never hired a college counselor, but I did seek help with one specific aspect of the application process: my college essays. Writing has always been a passion of mine

sional essay writer to guide me through the process.

While some college counselors offer essay writing services as part of a package, I opted to cut out the middleman and choose a more affordable option. This decision was one of the most beneficial I made during my application process. The essay writer helped me understand what admissions counselors are looking for. It's not about writing a perfect academic essay, it's about telling a compelling, authentic story. With her guidance, I was able to craft essays that stood out. In fact, I had multiple admissions counselors reach out to tell me how much they loved my essays.

Without the help of my essay coach, my writing might not have had the same impact.

But the question remains: Was hiring a professional the right move? And does hiring a coach truly showcase my abilities or just polish my presenta-



Photo of the college bulletin board in the guidance hallway.

tion? For me, hiring a college counselor felt unnecessary. I had a clear direction and knew which schools I wanted to apply to. Many students like me don't feel the need for outside help because they already have the resources they need from guidance counselors, teachers, or parents.

But for others, the process might feel overwhelming, and a private counselor can offer structure. They help with everything from researching schools and general application strategies to essays and interviews.

However, hiring a college counselor is not an option for everyone. For many families, the cost is too high, which raises concerns about fairness. Shouldn't a student's potential be the main factor in college admissions, not their ability to hire a professional? It's disheartening to think that students without financial resources might not be able to compete on a level playing field.

In my opinion, whether or not a student hires a college counselor depends on their individual needs. If you have a clear idea of where you want

to go and a plan in place, a counselor might not be necessary. But if you need guidance, hiring a professional could help.

In the end, the college application process is personal. What works for one student might not work for another. For some, a college counselor is a valuable asset, while others, like me, can make it through just fine without one. But as this trend grows, it's crucial that we consider its broader implications, particularly regarding fairness and the true representation of students. ■

**If you have a clear idea of where you want to go and a plan in place, a counselor might not be necessary. But if you need guidance, hiring a professional could help.**

college counselors.

While some may argue that these counselors provide a competitive edge,

(I'm majoring in something English-related) but the college essay is a different case. So, I hired a profes-

# ALL BARK AND NO BITE: GEN Z

The discussion of Gen Z's supposed activism without the votes to show for

Ram Ragunthan '25

It has become a stereotype that the average member of Gen-Z is heavily invested in politics. There is definitely truth in this: college campuses, especially during the Israel-Hamas War, were places where protests often occurred. However, protests about Israel-Hamas were in no way of the same scale or intensity as campus protests against the Vietnam War in the '60s and '70s.

On top of that, Gen-Z doesn't seem to like voicing their dissatisfaction at the polls. In the 2024 election, voter turnout among young

**I don't think Gen-Z is any more political than the youth of previous generations; in fact, it see,s they are less politically engaged than they should be.**

people was even lower than usual, having decreased by 8% from 50% turnout in the 2020 election to 42% turnout four years later.

So, I don't think Gen-Z is any more political than the youth of previous generations; in fact,

it seems they are less politically engaged than they should be.

One major reason for youth disillusionment with modern politics is of course how divisive it is. President Trump's recent address to Congress was a stunning

display of this. Only 15 years ago was it seen as an absolute disgrace when Rep. Joe Wilson shouted "You lie!" during President Obama's speech to Congress on healthcare reform. Now, such interruptions are almost expected. In last week's speech, Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, had to interrupt President Trump to remove Rep.

Green from the chamber for his repeated shouts that Trump didn't have the mandate to enact his policies. A Speaker having to interrupt a President during a speech to Congress would've been unheard of just 10 years ago. The President definitely didn't help by repeatedly making false or misleading statements during his speech and antagonizing Congressional Democrats.

Other factors such as lack of access to polling stations make voting an unnecessary hassle, especially for young people who are working-class, who simply can't afford to take a day off from work to vote. That's why Election Day should absolutely be made a fed-

eral holiday. In addition, states with lackluster voter registration laws shouldn't be surprised when a very insignificant number of already apathetic young people show up at the polls. States need to be willing to implement more forceful laws when it comes to

tive in addressing the larger problem of disillusionment. To fully fix this problem, a new, much calmer, political climate must be brought about.

I'm not sure if I can make any suggestions at the national level. At the local level, however, one way



Photo of Gen-Z raising awareness for climate change.

to do voting even if people find them inconvenient. At the very least, voting should be made less of a hassle. As I've mentioned in previous articles, at the local level Highlands can play a very important part by setting up a polling station at the school.

However, these steps are only marginally effec-

this is for Highlands to create a club where students can share their opinions on current political events. This is a great way to introduce Highlands to the political world without all the unnecessary division and tension that normally turn them away from it.



Photo displaying the Gen-Z's toxic cancel culture.

Photo courtesy of Reet Sachdev '27

Photo courtesy of Pew Research



# NEW ARCHIVE EXPLORES 60 YEARS OF HISTORY

Inside former librarian Julie Goldberg's final archival project to preserve the rich history of Highlands

Gabriel Tejada '26

Throughout the past 60 years, we have made history that deserves to be shared. However, its history has never been compiled in one place for students to analyze, up until now.

Former Librarian Ms. Julie Goldberg made it her mission to create an archive of the history of Highlands, prior to her retirement. She went through hundreds of newspapers, from both local and national publications. Alongside this, she also collected historical documents that represent the story of our school, compiling them into one large binder.

"There were boxes of old articles about Northern Highlands, and for years she wondered what she could do with it," Principal Joseph Occhino reveals.

"She decided that this [the archive] would be a

cool thing to do before she retired, so she started putting it together."

The archive consists of 120 items surrounding the schools history. Majority of them were taken from newspapers that date back to the years surrounding the schools grand opening, on September 20, 1965. Each item is detailed in a bibliography, including a summary and keywords.

kins, "insisted that in the Space Age, a planetarium was not a luxury, but a basic necessity for teaching earth and space science."

The school was also equipped with other advanced (for the time) technological innovations. This includes closed-circuit television equipment, an FM radio station, and an advanced telephone system.

These efforts did not go

advancements. In 1966, less than a year after the school's opening, the New York Times wrote an article titled, "Jersey School Equipped for Space Age". This revealed how newly discovered and modern the school felt at the time.

Following Goldberg's retirement, Ms. Lauren Shub has taken over the library. She began to wonder how recent history could be incorporated into our school's curriculum, starting with the archive. She possessed this initiative because ultimately, Shub believes the archive is an, "amazing way to give some background on the history of our school, of our community."

Since the archive preserves and documents our early history into one collection, questions have been raised as to whether or not classes, such as Freshman Seminar and

history would be able to utilize it. This may help students to learn more and preliminary program. Ultimately, this archive is an amazing way to

**"You never want to lose the history of a building."**

*-Principal Joseph Occhino*

**The archive details how our school opened as a progressive and futuristic alternative to the traditional high-school, setting itself apart with its innovative planetarium built in the peak of the Space Age.**

According to Goldberg, our founding superintendent, Gerald F. Hop-

unnoticed, as many articles were published supporting Highlands' contemporary

about our schools history.

Occhino mentions that though he has not yet given a thought as to how the archive should be used, "you never want to lose the history of a building."

Occhino suggests that perhaps in the future, once each article is digitized, they could be used for lessons and understanding of the impacts technology had back in the 60s. This can be connected to how Highlands instigated such an astounding

keep track of our school's past. It is even more important to keep in mind as Highlands reaches its 60th anniversary as one of the leading schools. This is not only of Bergen County, but across the nation.

We are forever grateful for Mrs. Goldberg. She made this entire project her priority for a period of time before retirement. We also owe thanks to all of the volunteers that pitched in to help her sort through the documents. ■

# MURPHY'S PHONE BAN IN OUR FUTURE?

How Governor Murphy's proposed ban on phones in school could affect classroom phone policy

Abby Skripak '28

...Continued from page 1

"I don't think it would be a good idea to completely ban phones in school. We already have the phone hotels, so we can really only use our phones during passing periods and lunch. Plus, you need to be able to communicate with your parents, especially due to sports. Not having your phone would make it difficult for parents to

could be beneficial in some ways, it may also cause

problems. She mentioned how it would not be feasible when focusing on the

emergency and someone needed to talk to their parents, or if they simply want to go on their phone and

stay up to date at lunch, then they aren't able to do

tors have raised numerous questions on how effective and practical this ban would actually be.

While it does hold true that research has proven an association between phone use and poor mental health, a complete cellphone ban would bring up a multitude of new challenges. There are just too many questions and difficulties that may make this plan impossible to enforce.

As the debate continues, one question remains at the forefront—is a statewide ban truly the best solution? With strong opinions and logical points from both sides, it's clear that the role of phones in school will remain an issue that won't disappear anytime soon. ■

**"It could help people focus better, and prevent people from taking their phones to the bathroom."**

*-Freshman Lilian Panoski*

know when to pick you up, or where to find you," freshman Tami Aderemi stated.

Meanwhile, freshman Lilian Panoski pointed out how although this ban

bigger picture. "It could help people focus better, and prevent people from taking their phones to the bathroom," Panoski commented.

"But, if there was an

that."

In essence, Murphy's seemingly simple proposal of banning phones in schools has sparked a debate across the state. Both students and educa-



Yondr pouches and an opening terminal which some schools use to lock phones up. Photo Courtesy of Chloe Muller '26

# DECA DOMINATION: STUDENTS EXCEL AT STATES

Nearly 70 Highlanders came home with awards from DECA States this year

Taylor Phillips '26

This current year, DECA membership soared, reaching over 300 students. The DECA competition includes a series of rounds, starting at the regional level, and ending at the International Career Development Competition. Students will either participate in quick-thinking role plays, or give structured and well pre-prepared business presentations.

Students at Highlands prepare for competition in their business education classes, as well as outside of school. Some

highly-selective events require participants to pass a test in order to qualify.

From March 4 through 7, over 170 Highlanders attended the state competition in Atlantic City. Our school had sixty-three nationals qualifiers, eighty-eight state finalists, thirty-six top three awards, and thirty-three role play and test award winners. Regarding the business program, Principal Joseph Occhino said, "The teachers are fantastic and the students are highly motivated. There is a real keen interest in business in general."

Occhino added, "The business course selection that we offer allows students to choose an academic path associated with business. Our students are passionate about business, which makes it our biggest elective."

Vice Principal Tony LaRocca believes, "The promotion of DECA is engraved into the school," and Occhino added, "Good business teachers know how to market their program to students. DECA is probably one of the most sought after programs in the school."

Junior Rachel Shulman is a part of the group of students who will be competing at ICDC. Shulman said, "DECA States was an amazing opportunity to take my business skills that we have been learning and practicing in class, and apply them to more real world situations."

Students who made presentations spent a great deal of time preparing for the competition. "We have been working on our paper since the beginning of the school year. We're very proud of the work we did..."

Shulman, alongside her partners junior Nikki Fox and junior Grey DeLeon, placed second in their event and will continue their hard work at ICDC.

Overall, DECA states was a huge success and

this tradition will continue for our future Highlanders with a strong passion for business. ■



Two winners from this year's competition pose for a photo. Photo Courtesy of Reet Sanchdev '27



# AI: A BLESSING, CURSE, OR BOTH?

## How Northern Highlands is defining the role of AI in school

Vallerie Kalekar '28

AI is no longer something that people can associate with the future—it's here, and it's brazenly influencing everything from social media algorithms to workout plans generated by fitness apps. AI is shaping the world in ways many never predicted with the rise of AI generated images, deep fakes, personalized ads, and more.

Up and newcoming AI technology like ChatGPT—a generative chatbot that can answer just about anything—has affected almost everything around it, including school. Students have found themselves increasingly reliant on AI for help on small tasks, such as an English assignment. While AI is extremely convenient in these scenarios, how much help is too much?

Principal Joseph Occhino weighed in with his thoughts on this issue. "I believe that AI is a valu-

able tool, but just like anything else, it depends on how people use it."

Students agree with his point of view, arguing that their usage of AI can sometimes be productive, and doesn't necessarily have to lead to plagiarism.

needed to succeed in college and outside of school. AI is taking out a core part of our work and learning from our education."

Jade's perspective is one that many educators agree on. While AI can offer assistance, it could

**"AI is taking out a core part of our work and learning from our education."**

- Jade Duval '27

Freshman Maura Hefferon shared how she's been using AI to help with her understanding of her physics homework. "I use AI to help explain concepts to me when I'm stuck," she said.

For Maura, AI is a useful tool. For other students, the usage of AI is worrisome. Sophomore Jade Duval voiced a common concern. "I believe that the greatest risk of AI usage in school is that students won't develop the necessary skills

also take away students' critical thinking skills, which could prove to be detrimental in the future.

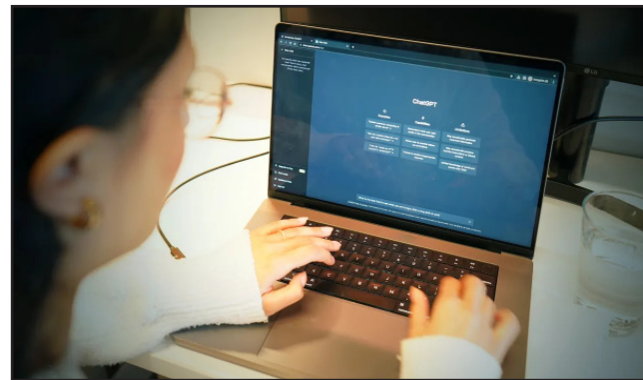
Due to the ongoing AI debate here at Northern Highlands, an AI committee was formed last summer dedicated to addressing how AI should or should not be used by students. Composed of students, teachers, and headed by Dr. LaRocca and Mr. Novak, the committee's mission is to ensure that

AI doesn't replace students' learning experiences, but instead enhances it.

The committee came up with several solutions. For starters, teachers now have full discretion to decide whether or not their students can use AI for assignments, and their decision is indicated by a new dot system on assignments in Canvas. If a red dot is present, no AI is permitted on that assignment. Conversely, if a green dot is present, students are allowed to use AI.

There's more. Northern Highlands has been maintaining its strict policy on AI usage and plagiarism. Teachers are able to use software that can detect if a student has used AI in their work.

Vice Principal Dr. Tony LaRocca is quick to point out that AI can be valuable if used responsibly. "If students are using AI as a tool to help their educational experiences, it's amazing. However, if students then



A student uses ChatGPT.

take what AI generates and represent that as their own work, that's plagiarism."

Consequently, LaRocca and Occhino both are strong in their standpoint on AI. Their goal isn't to completely remove AI from school settings, but to make sure it's used in a way that supports education.

While the debate over AI is still ongoing, one thing remains clear—AI is here to stay. The real question is whether students decide to use it with integrity, or use it as a shortcut that will only lessen their critical thinking skills and education.

As the discussion continues, Northern Highlands' approach makes way for a future where AI is a powerful ally in classrooms and not at the expense of students' educations. As Occhino shared, AI is helpful or harmful depending on those who use it.

Just like any tool, it's up to whoever wields it to decide on how it is used: responsibly or rashly. Yes, AI is here to stay, but it's how students choose to use it that will truly shape the future of learning. ■

# A SIP OF SOMETHING NEW

## A new library beverage cart gives students a refreshing start to their day

Clair Mario '28

Continued from page 1

The cart also provides students with opportunities to gain volunteer hours for the school year. LaRocca shared, "We're working with Mrs. Hayes's CAP program, students are getting volunteer hours, and we're partnering with Pomptonian for food services."

Yet this is just the start of the new beverage cart. LaRocca explained, "We're looking to expand

it, but we're not looking to do anything too big too fast because we want it to organically grow."

Many students find this beverage cart to be a beneficial addition to our school. "People that have to get to school at 7 each morning because of the buses probably don't take any food or drinks to school in the morning, so if they're just chilling out in the library it would be nice for them to get a refresher," freshman Lilian Panoski commented.

While there are many

students who think the beverage cart is a great idea, there are some students who are still trying to figure out whether or not it is useful. Freshman Tami Aderemi stated, "So far, I do not find the beverage cart beneficial, because we already have the vending machines and the main cafeteria in the morning."

Even though there is a mix of opinions throughout the student body, Dr. LaRocca and Principal Occhino hope to expand the cart and have it remain in the

future. "It will stay as long as the students are using it.

If we get a dozen to two dozen kids every morning

that's perfectly fine—we don't need a hundred students, just kids who want to come in a little early, grab a beverage and sit down and relax before school starts," Occhino shared.

New ideas aren't always perfect at first, but Dr. LaRocca and Principal Occhino are set on making this yet another fun and special addition to Northern Highlands. The beverage cart will continue to grow, and hopefully end in success. ■



The new beverage cart in the library.

# WILL SNOW DAYS SURVIVE?

## As virtual learning becomes increasingly common, will snow days disappear?

Addison Menzella '28

In 2020 after COVID-19 hit the world, virtual learning became a much more common practice. The virus forced students across the globe to use Zoom or Google Meet rather than meet in person for school. As the years have gone on since then and we've transitioned back to having school in person, a push to keep this practice of virtual learning by using it to replace snow days has begun.

Currently, this practice is not permitted by the Department of Edu-

cation. Students are required to attend school for



Snow outside on a snow day.

180 days each year, and virtual days do not count towards this minimum.

In 2022, a bill was

created regarding this issue. This bill would allow virtual learning days to count towards the 180 day requirement under certain circumstances, such as when there is bad weather.

Despite the fact that this bill was not passed, the push to replace snow days with virtual days has not disappeared. Some still strongly believe that this practice should be allowed, while others prefer the traditional snow day, sparking an ongoing debate among the public.

Freshman Vallerie Kalekar shared her thoughts on this matter,

stating, "I would absolutely hate it [if virtual days replaced snow days]. Every now and then you kind of need a mental health day from school. When you are told you have a snow day you feel an immediate sense of relief, and a virtual learning day instead would take that feeling away."

This opinion mirrors the thoughts of many others that are also against adopting this practice. Those on this side of the debate value snow days, which provide an unexpected break and allow one to relax and recharge for a day.

Luckily for Kalekar

and others that share her opinions, it looks like snow days will be here to stay. According to Principal Occhino, "Virtual learning days will never happen at Highlands because we would not be permitted to do it and snow days are something students and staff look forward to."

Occhino also shared that he thinks snow days are a good thing, especially with how rarely they come by. Additionally, he stated that he does not think the Department of Education will ever reverse this rule anywhere in the near future.

One more factor that

contributes to the argument against virtual learning is that virtual learning is not good for students. As Vice Principal Dr. LaRocca shared, "Virtual learning is not good for students' social, mental, and educational well-being".

Given the opinions of Occhino and LaRocca as well as the current stance of the Department of Education, it's safe to say that virtual learning days will not be replacing snow days any time soon. ■



# THE GOLDBLOCKS OF MATH

Missing a Pre-calculus class that is neither too easy nor too difficult

Chloé Muller‘28

The choice is easy for most Highlanders: take all the APs you possibly can, stay up long hours cramming for three tests tomorrow, sleep at three AM, come to school to be lectured about how important sleep is, and go home to do it all again.

I’ve subscribed to this cycle since freshman year, driven by the knowledge that the potential Highlands could steamroll out of me through APs and Honors classes is immense, and more importantly, that without APs, colleges will frown upon me. I feel, through peer pressure, that without a rigorous and straight-A report card, I’m not “college-worthy.”

While those are never the words that have come out of my guidance counselor’s mouth, it’s certainly the Highlands culture. I’ve seen the anxiety and stress

found the classes “equivalent” and by offering more APs, the administration

dents have to ask questions and interact with the material, making it (some-

many students about their decision to drop from AP Precalculus to CP Precal-

math with Algebra I in freshman year (as per the College Board’s website.) Most Highlanders take Geometry in their freshman year, meaning they’ll take AP or CP Precalculus in their junior year.

This is a major flaw as most juniors taking the AP Precalculus class go on to take AP Calculus AB or BC in their senior year, rendering the AP Precalculus credit useless as colleges consider the higher level class when awarding credit. As a result, students lose \$99 when they move on to AP Calculus, and while this may seem insignificant, it’s also important

many of my classmates up late at night cramming. I couldn’t imagine a full year of that stress for a credit that won’t even be valid one year in the future.

Another factor to consider is the number of schools that actually grant credits for AP Precalculus. Of the 5,819 colleges in the U.S., only 12.3% grant credit for the AP Precalculus exam, given that a student receives a 3 or higher (as per the National Center for Education Statistics and College Board.) So, if a student were to take AP Precalculus and then do a math other than AP Calculus (or no math at all) their senior

**The choice is easy for most Highlanders: take all the APs you possibly can, stay up long hours cramming for three tests tomorrow, sleep at three AM, come to school to be lectured about how important sleep is, and go home to do it all again.**

believed they were benefiting students as they could earn more college credits.

I believe, however, that this reasoning is flawed. While I can’t argue whether or not the Honors and AP Precalculus classes were equivalent in difficulty, it is safe to assume that the AP class

what) easier than a more fast-paced, rigorous class, even at an advanced level.

While most students understand that AP classes are just ultra-stretched versions of the typical college one-semester class, and therefore move far more quickly than an Honors class, it’s

culus, and every student I talked to expressed the same concern to me: “I don’t want to drop down, because I understand the material, and I think CP will be too easy. But AP just goes too fast for me.”

I know that a number of students were also concerned about moving forward with AP Precalculus as, for the first time ever, the class’s first unit was Trigonometry, which is generally agreed upon by teacher and student alike as being the hardest unit. (The change does not follow the College Board’s recommended unit progression. Schools can change sequence, but changes are not suggested.)

While I’m not sure if having an Honors class would solve this issue, it would serve as the middle ground needed by students who don’t want the speed of an AP but still want to be challenged.

Additionally, the AP Precalculus class itself doesn’t seem to have been designed for juniors at Highlands. The class was created for high school seniors, specifically those in districts where most students began high school

**I’ve spoken to many students about their decision to drop from AP Precalculus to CP Precalculus, and every student I talked to expressed the same concern to me: “I don’t want to drop down, because I understand the material, and I think CP will be too easy. But AP just goes too fast for me.”**

to consider the stress the class may put on students as an AP-level course.

Essentially, students get two years of AP stress if they choose to pursue the AP Precalculus and AP Calculus course combination. While not all students may find these classes stressful, I know firsthand that AP Precalculus had

year, there’s a large chance that the colleges they apply to won’t accept their AP Precalculus credits.

Of course, each student is different and I’m lucky to attend a school that has a wide variety of courses and tracks for students to take, but when sections of the railroad track are removed, a train can’t chug along. For the next classes of Highlands to access all the railway tracks possible, Honors Precalculus should be reintroduced to the curriculum. Not only so that students in similar situations as myself won’t have to justify to themselves why they dropped down and tell themselves they can compensate for the loss of the AP weight in their GPA by taking more APs next year, but also because every Highlander deserves to have a class that’s not too easy or not too hard. We deserve what’s just right.

**In an interview with The Fling, STEM Supervisor Mrs. Tiffany Cohen explained that the administration decided to make the switch for the 2023-24 school year after they compared their Honors curriculum to the AP curriculum. They found the classes “equivalent” and by offering more APs, the administration believed they were benefiting students as they could earn more college credits.**

this culture causes Highlanders of all grades – my junior friend regrets taking only 4 APs instead of 5; my sophomore friend is stressing out over 4 APs not fitting into next year’s schedule. Highlands culture propagates the idea, through the never-ending list of APs on the school website, that my future depends on the number of AP classes I take.

AP Precalculus, debuted by the College Board in 2023, is just another AP on the list, and its addition to the Highlands curriculum would have been fine with me if it hadn’t replaced Honors Precalculus. In an interview with The Fling, STEM Supervisor Mrs. Tiffany Cohen explained that the administration decided to make the switch for the 2023-24 school year after they compared their Honors curriculum to the AP curriculum. They

moves more quickly than the Honors does since students need to prepare for the AP exam in May.

Cohen agrees but also argues that the Honors course was far more “comprehensive” than the AP. However, I feel that having a more “comprehensive” course often leads to a better understanding from students of the concepts and material. When students don’t feel pressured to study for a final exam that determines if they “pass” the class in the eyes of colleges, they’re studying to learn the concepts.

In my experience with other AP versus Honors classes, since the Honors class is more “in-depth,” it often moves more slowly than the AP. The speed of a class is crucial to student perception of its difficulty – the slower the class, the more time stu-

also important to remember that not every student wants to take an AP class.

I’ve spoken to

**Of the 5,819 colleges in the U.S., only 12.3% grant credit for the AP Precalculus exam, given that a student receives a 3 or higher (as per the National Center for Education Statistics and College Board.) So, if a student were to take AP Precalculus and then do a math other than AP Calculus (or no math at all) their senior year, there’s a large chance that the colleges they apply to won’t accept their AP Precalculus credits.**



# A NEW LIBRARIAN WITH A NEW VISION

Our new librarian Mrs. Shub brings passion, experience, and a new vision for the library

Anisa Parvez ‘28

Our school has recently introduced a new librarian, who is eager to transform our library into a welcoming and engaging environment for all. Mrs. Shub is the new librarian for our school. She brings with her a remarkable background and such a big passion for literature, as well as a commitment to helping students in finding their just right book.

Her journey to becoming a librarian was not typical, as she spent a decade in social work. “It was rewarding and meaningful, but it didn’t bring me the joy I was looking for,” she reflected. While stepping back from social work to be with her kids, she started visiting libraries and enjoyed things like story time,

which ultimately made her realize her true passion was becoming a librarian.

Her previous career gave her valuable experience working with teenagers, particularly in outpatient mental health settings, helped shape her approach..

ing a librarian is helping students discover books that truly speak to them.

With such a big love for literature, it’s no surprise that picking a single favorite book is nearly impossible for her. Instead, she enjoys a wide range

Grocery Store. She’s also a fan of picture books, having read many with her children, and lists Hot Dog and Not Quite Normal among her favorites.

For young adult literature, she highly recommends Firekeeper’s Daughter by Angeline Boulley and Turtles All the Way Down by John Green. Historical fiction is another favorite, specifically The Jai-pur Trilogy by Alga Joshi. And recently, she’s been getting into fantasy books and is enjoying Neal Shusterman’s Scythe series. “I’m hoping to read more from that series as well,” she added enthusiastically.

Looking into the future, Mrs. Shub looks forward to getting to know all the students. “I really want to make the media center a place where ev-

ery single member of this community feels like it’s

media center,” she stated. Thus, she wants stu-

**“I want to hear from all of you what you want for the media center.”**

*Librarian Mrs. Shub*

home,” she explained. “A safe and sound space where you’re heard, the place to find that one perfect book that speaks to you, and a spot to make new friends and, ultimately, feel like part of the community.”

For the library’s future, Mrs. Shub is creating a student advisory board to gather feedback on programming, book selections and potential improvements to the space. “I want to hear from all of you what you want for the

dents to come and share their thoughts. “Come visit, say hi,” she said. “I’d love to meet you all.”

With her love for books, growth of a community, and student participation, Mrs. Shub will bring a new energy to our school library. Stop by the library and make sure to give her a warm welcome to the school.■

# CELEBRATING PI-DAY ON A FRIDAY

What’s so special about March 14th, and how does the school celebrate this mathematical day?

Dylan Fink ‘28

Pi day is a day for people who enjoy the arts of mathematics and would like to celebrate the wonders of pi, a number without patterns that never ends.

For those of you who don’t know, Pi is an irrational number that is composed of the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle. Everyone knows that Pi is the number 3.14, but they do not know much after that. That is because Pi is a number that goes on forever and does not repeat. This makes it hard to comprehend and grasp this number. That is what makes mathematicians and everyone else in

the world so curious about it. Pi is a constant number and it does not vary depending on the size of the

celebration of Pi- day, at precisely 1:59, because these are the digits of pi after 3.14, and they arranged a

**“I plan on wearing a Pi-day tshirt and celebrating with my Geometry classes.”**

*Geometry Teacher Ms. Orden*

circle (Pi-Day). It is always 3.14, no matter what.

The national holiday of Pi day began when a member of the Exploratorium staff named Larry Shaw, connected that March 14 and 3.14 were one and the same. The first annual cel-

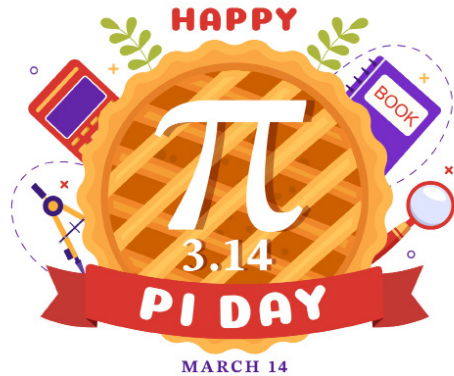
plethora of fruit pie and even some tea. This was the first of many wondrous Pi-day celebrations to come.

Pi day also happens to be Albert Einstein’s birthday which makes that whole celebration that much more important (A Slice of

Pi (π) Day History). Today the museum has a Pi shine where they held a parade and listened to music on Albert’s birthday and sang Happy Birthday to him every year on March 14.

The Highlands community also loves to celebrate Pi day in various ways. In Geometry teacher Mrs. Heber’s class, she plans to search for fun facts and possibly even do some puzzles about Pi day. She thinks that Pi- day is an ‘overall fun way of celebrating math’.

“I plan on wearing a Pi- day t-shirt and celebrating with my Geometry classes. I think it is just a fun day to celebrate math,” Geometry



teacher Ms. Orden said. and science. It is also a great excuse to eat pie”. ■

It is not just math teachers who love to celebrate Pi-day. Students also enjoy celebrating Pi-day. Freshman Jacob Thomson stated, “I am planning to celebrate Pi-day by having pie with my family after dinner. For me it is a day for people to celebrate math

# GET READY FOR THE SUNRISE OF THE REAPING

What students can expect from the new book from the popular Hunger Games series

Pragnya Raj ‘28

In June 2024, Suzanne Collins, the author of the infamous Hunger Games series, revealed that she would be working on her eagerly awaited next novel, Sunrise on the Reaping. The release date of this thrilling new novel is set for March 18, 2025.

The fifth novel, which delves further into Panem’s (the book’s setting) intricate past. The dramatic and crucial 50th annual Hunger Games, also known as the Quarter Quell, marks the conclusion of this prequel, which takes place 24 years before the events of the first novel.

The main character in this compelling story will be Haymitch Abernathy,

who has grabbed readers throughout the series. His rocky adventure while competing in the deadly Quarter Quell games will be explored in the novel.

Nelise Juarez, a freshman at Northern Highlands, shares her thoughts on Sunrise on the Reaping. She says, “I want to see how Suzanne Collins builds up this upcoming narrative and bridges the gap between the novel Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes and this new novel. I can’t wait to read about Haymitch’s perspective because we’re going to see him as the protagonist. This angle allows us to learn even more about him, and I must admit he’s one of my favorite characters from the series. Also I just wanna

say, Suzanne Collins has truly done an amazing job with world-building and creating an amazing story”.

She also says, “This novel will create more

**“I can’t wait to read about Haymitch’s perspective because we’re going to see him as the protagonist. This angle allows us to learn even more about him.”**

*Freshman Nelise Juarez*

background on how the games are. Since we have only seen one of the games so far”.

Readers are expect-

ed to discover a great deal about Haymitch’s past, including his difficulties and battles with personal issues. After his family and girlfriend are tragically killed

tween him and the complicated characters Lucy Gray and Covey? This potential connection could provide new light on Haymitch’s complex past and relationship with others.

These incidents certainly had an impact on Haymitch’s development as a character, showing us how his personality is in the first Hunger Games novel.

Finally, this novel which is written from Haymitch’s point of view will soon provide followers the chance to dive deeply into his thoughts.

Paula Manrique class of 2028 highlights that “despite being a key character, Haymitch never discusses his past experiences because they are very difficult for him.”

Paula also describes how this new story will help us understand the events that led Haymitch and why he became an alcoholic. Paula tells how she would love to learn more about the Hunger Games universe, particularly how it all started and what the characters’ futures hold.

To make sure you don’t miss out, don’t forget to place preorders for the much-awaited novel at Barnes & Noble, Target and other stores.

■



# LEPRECHAUNS, LUCK, AND A WHOLE LOT OF GREEN

What Saint Patrick's Day is really about and the different ways that students choose to celebrate it

Juliette Pasquini '28

Every year on the seventeenth of March, the world gets a little greener. People deck themselves out in leprechaun attire desperately trying to avoid being pinched by friends. If they're lucky, they might even find a pot of gold (or at least a good excuse to eat festive treats). But beyond the light-hearted tactics and leprechaun hats, what is St. Patrick's Day really about, and why is it so highly anticipated each year?

Originally, St. Patrick's Day was a religious holiday honoring Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, who is best known for spreading Christianity across the country. However the holiday has transformed into a celebration of Irish culture, particularly in the United States. The holiday is filled with music, dancing, and lots of green. One legend claims that St. Patrick used a shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity, hence the association of shamrocks with the holiday.

But how do students at our school see St. Patrick's Day? Is it just a day that gives people an excuse to wear green, or does it mean something more? When asked about what St. Patrick's Day means to her and what she likes to do to celebrate, Highlands student Maria Boicenco said, "On St. Patrick's Day I love wearing green, and every year me and my friends love going out to get St. Patrick's Day themed drinks. Sometimes we even hang out at someone's house and bake cute little cupcakes with four-leaf clovers and leprechaun hats on them, even though they always come out looking a little funny. I also love pinching my friends, even if they're wearing green because I find it really funny when they're caught off guard."

Beyond the festivities, cultural holidays like St. Patrick's Day can serve as a reminder of traditions and heritage. When asked why she thinks it's important to celebrate holidays like this, student Maura Hefferon said "...it's important to remember what it's about, and it's extremely important to remember our culture. Me and my family don't celebrate Irish traditions often, and St. Patrick's Day is a super fun way to embrace them. Even if you're not Irish, St. Patrick's Day is a yearly opportunity to create memories with your family and friends, and it's a really special holiday. The entire first half of March, I feel like I'm slowly waiting for St. Patrick's Day."

Whether St. Patrick's Day slips your mind every year or you mark your calendar to make sure that you wear an all-green outfit on March seventeenth, you've probably felt the joy of St. Patrick's Day at some point in your life. Regardless of if you spend the holiday baking cupcakes overpowered by green food dye, passing time with family and friends, or some other way to celebrate in between, make sure to watch out for any unexpected pinches. ■



# BRINGING BROADWAY MAGIC TO YOU

Production of *The Prom* musical brings many students to tears

Anya Poddar '26

As spring comes into view, this year's musical started the season off full of love and life. An incredible group of

character and performing their heart out, the students operating behind the scenes and making it possible for actors to be onstage in their respective roles, or even the pit filled with band stu-

production this year around. "Given the time we had to learn the set, it was a challenge," Junior Matt Altman stated when asked about his thoughts on the matter, "but it ended up coming to

and parents in the audience who sometimes struggle to understand the new generation."

A specific actor in the show, Junior Henry Roberts played the role of Barry Glickman, a narcissistic, flamboyantly gay Broadway actor.

Roberts thought, "I think the message of the show is really beautiful and is encapsulated with one

"It's a message of acceptance, and even if you disagree with what someone is doing, that doesn't mean you can't value them as a person."

Director Thomas Paster

everything in between. *The Prom* brought love and Mr. Paster had said, "It was a great year,



(From left to right) CJ Einhorn '26, Willow Farquhar '26, Henry Roberts '26, and Ben Sherlock '26 striking a pose.

hardworking students and teachers came together to give an audience a production to learn and laugh from.

*The Prom* is a show that, at its core, is

dents giving the songs their life.

The cast ranged from freshman students all the way to seniors, yet being part of something so spectacular brought them

gether pretty smoothly and it was really rewarding for the whole crew." Nonetheless, a 10 out of 10 from them as well.

The story of *The Prom* made the whole experience especially memorable and rewarding for the whole team, highlighting the significance of accepting those around you, and that love is love.

As highschool students in this generation, it is especially crucial to learn acceptance and empathy as well as spreading awareness of the LGBTQ+ community.

The director of the show, Mr. Paster commented, "it's a message of acceptance and even if you disagree with what someone is doing, that mean you can't value them as a person."

"It was important for a message like that to be carried out to the adults and parents in the audience who sometimes struggle to understand a new generation."

Junior Lilah Wainland

about acceptance, specifically for individuals of the LGBTQ+ community. The cast and crew took on this message by heart and delivered it beautifully with great dedication.

Every individual involved in the production enjoyed their own roles

all to mutual friendship.

They worked constantly for 3 months making the show as special as special can be.

Senior Zari Veres Royal shared, "everyone collaborated really well and were very uplifting towards each other."



The cast of *The Prom*, taking their bow after a successful show

and brought various skills to contribute.

Whether that was the cast working immensely for you to believe in a

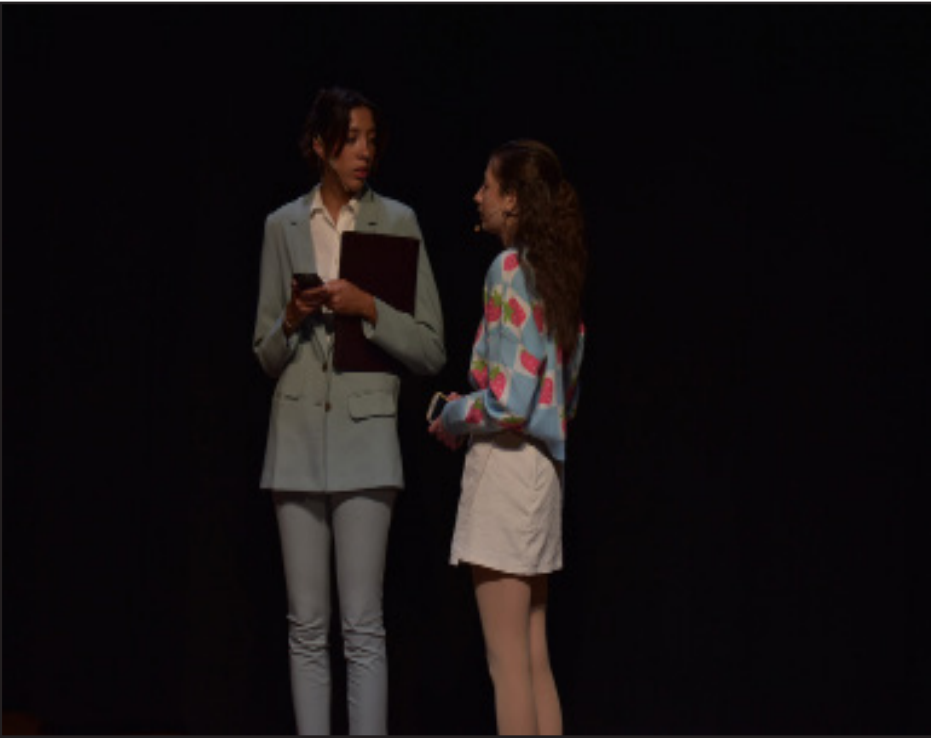
What a great way to end her last show.

On the other hand, the crew admitted to having less time to work on the

Junior Lilah Wainland agreed with his statement, adding "it was important for a message like that to be carried out to the adults



Ellie Marino '25 (left) and Ash Kim '25 (right) at the end of the big finale.



Zari Veres Royal '25 (left) and Ellie Marino '25 (right) performing an intense scene.

of the funnier songs in the show, *Love Thy Neighbor*."

If you missed the show, be sure to listen to the songs!

Roberts loved getting the opportunity to spread this message to our community.

"You should love the people around you because they are not that different from you, no matter what" adds Roberts.

The show itself took the audience on an emotional rollercoaster. Think dramatic egotistic Broadway stars, highschool prom, big dance numbers, and an awkward lesbian. The audience had been crying, laughing, and

laughter to every performance.

These hard working students got their well deserved standing ovation

I really enjoyed this year. Let us hope next year too is

a great year once again. ■

"You should love the people around you because they are not that different from you, no matter what."

Junior Henry Roberts

all 4 nights of their production. There was absolutely no better way to start the season off right than with



# VOICES STRIKES A CHORD IN WILTON

## Voices group partakes in the Resonance Acappella Festival in CT

**Madi Cirillo '26**

Highlands Voices prepares for their big performance at the Resonance Acappella Festival in Wilton, CT, where local schools come together to create one big showcase. This particular show doesn't have a competitive component like a typical competition; instead, it's a fun way for groups to come together and let their hard work shine.

Northern Highlands has been honored to participate in this showcase, and many are feeling excited. However, excitement can also come with nerves for some. During the performance, a member of Voices was unable to attend, so Lucy Roberts '27 stepped in as the only non-Voices member to fill the spot.

Roberts shared, "Even as a non-member, this past weekend was really a lot of fun! It was definitely a bit stressful having to learn the material in such a short amount of time, but everyone was so helpful."

Members of Voices have been preparing nonstop for this event, dedicating countless hours to their performance, which demonstrates the passion they have for a cappella. A cappella has opened doors to many different opportunities, from boosting college admissions to providing a home for students looking to gain a new perspective and heighten their confidence. Highlands Voices' commitment to a cappella represents the prestigious care and hard work that Highlands has provided for its students.

At NHRHS, students are given incredible opportunities to showcase their strengths and persevere through their struggles. A member of Voices, Zari Veres Royal '25, shared, "We sang *Honeymoon Avenue* by Ariana Grande, *Die With a Smile* by Bruno Mars, and *Find Me in Your Dreams* by Ace of Hearts. Our whole set consisted of three songs."

Veres Royal has been a member of both Voices and Belles for two years. Dedicating her time to this incredible program, she expressed, "As a group, we have been practicing these songs since September, and we originally learned them for our competition in January. For this showcase, we just worked on cleaning up choreography and vocals to help integrate a new member into our set."

Having such a dedicated and organized group has been extremely beneficial for the students, allowing them to create beautiful performances. Every performance requires hours of meticulous practice to achieve perfection.



Daphne Laterra '25 performing her solo.

Photo Credits: Resonance A Cappella Festival



(From left to right) Ben Sherlock '26, Paige Ellis '26, Lucy Roberts '27, and Gabe Tejeda '27.

Photo Credits: Resonance A Cappella Festival

"I definitely recommend that they practice a lot and join the choir program!" Suggested Veres Royal when asked about the program, "You get familiar with a lot of people in a cappella much quicker, and it's overall a great way to gain experience in singing."

What Veres Royal says is certainly true! If you have any interest in the performing arts, do not hesitate to take that leap!

Roberts reflected on her experience, saying, "Even though I am not personally in Voices, this experience was incredibly eye opening for other interests."

love to continue a cappella for the rest of school. It really is so much fun, and

pressed by the groups performing alongside them but, most importantly,

"I definitely recommend that they practice a lot and join the choir program!"

*Senior Zari Veres Royal*

I have met so many new people through it. It has provided an incredible opportunity for me."

Lastly, the per-

proud of themselves for having their hard work showcased on the center stage. ■

"It was definitely a bit stressful having to learn the material in such a short amount of time, but everyone was so helpful."

*Sophomore Lucy Roberts*

stead, it's a fun way for groups to come together and let their hard work shine.

Northern Highlands has been honored to participate in this showcase, and many are feeling excited.

However, excitement can also come with nerves for some.

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A cappella has opened doors to many different opportunities, from boosting college admissions to providing a home for students looking to gain a new perspective and heighten their confidence.



Highlands Voices, in a pyramid formation during their third song.

Photo Credits: Resonance A Cappella Festival



Ava Rome '26 singing during the Highlands Voices performance.

Photo Credits: Resonance A Cappella Festival

perience was incredibly eye opening for other interests"

formers proved themselves to be strong, talented, and

"As a group, we have been practicing these songs since September..."

*Senior Zari Veres Royal*

I have regarding singing in high school." Explained Roberts when asked about her experience, "I would

loyal to their team, always providing support and dedication to a cappella. They left Connecticut im-



# BUILDING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

## Interesting view into the recent Jazz Band competition

Henry Roberts '26

On March 5th, at Wayne Valley High School, the Northern Highlands Jazz Band competed in a festival. According to the director of the Jazz Band, Ms. Rehe, the festival was “part of a statewide jazz prelim festival. It’s held at five different high-schools, a different one every day, all over New Jersey. Fifty jazz bands [from] across the state take part in this festival.” To learn more about the competition juniors and Jazz Band veterans, PJ Strandes and Nikolai Gaglio were interviewed. When asked what songs they played, the two responded: “We played *A Child is Born* by Thad Jones, *Cotton-tail* by Duke Ellington, arranged by Mark Taylor, and *Honk* by Jeff Jarvis.” The two also shared their experiences of how



Jazz band students enjoying a competition.

the preparation stepped up before the competition. Gaglio explained, “We have weekly rehearsals on Tuesdays, and Ms. Rehe started implementing some sectionals as well. The trumpets would come in before rehearsal to work on the music separately, the saxophones too. We did this to improve the sections individually because we have a lot of young members. We had zero performing seniors. We lost a bunch of people to DECA so we had to step up our game [in]

the last couple of weeks.” As Gaglio mentioned, the band was missing a few members. Strandes remarked, “We lost a trombone player, a sax player, a drummer, and a trumpet player.” This was further explained by Ms. Rehe, who said, “We were missing some members due to various conflicts, so we had to move around some parts. People had to learn parts basically at the last minute in order to make sure that the ensemble sounded good. We were

missing lead parts, so the first parts were missing. But this isn’t the only group that this happens to.” Despite this setback, Ms. Rehe still commended the band’s performance, saying, “I am very happy with our performance. I think we played everything super well. We played everything as well as I would accept.” This differed from the frustration that Gaglio and Strandes felt after the competition. In Strandes’ opinion, “We did alright, it’s hard. Some of those bands are just really good.” Gaglio continued, “I was talking to Ms. Rehe about it. It’s about developing this generational ‘culture of excellence,’ she called it—trying to get people to want to be great. Our program is so new that we haven’t really developed that, so while we have people that care about the program, we don’t have

the people necessary for us to perform at the same level as these other groups,” with Strandes adding, “We have no reputation.” In terms of how the two thought the band should improve moving forward, Strandes theorized, “We need discipline. We need to be more focused, making sure that everyone is putting in the work that they need to.” Gaglio reiterated this sentiment, say-

ing, “Some members don’t care as much as the others, but I think if we can motivate each other better then we can perform better.” Despite the Jazz Band being incredibly talented and living up to the director’s expectations, their frustration is undeniable. As a Highlands community, we can support the band’s future endeavors as they begin to build a culture of excellence.■



Jazz band students practicing.

# THE NINETY-SEVENTH OSCARS IS HERE

## The awards have been given, but were they deserved?

Arsh Singh '27

The Oscars, also known as the Academy Awards, have been held annually since 1929, typically in March or April. The awards presented are given in different categories, ranging from Best Picture

trovery being claimed this year? This has to do with the nomination for various categories, as well as some of the winners. One example of this is the film that sparked the most controversy, according to some: the Spanish-language French film *Emil-*

on Rotten Tomatoes, significantly lower than other films also nominated. Another area of controversy at the Oscars, which many people from Highlands can agree with, was that the lead actresses from *Wicked*, Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande, didn’t receive awards for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress. Freshman Namira Hussain stated, “I was so surprised that neither Cynthia or Ariana didn’t get any awards. They were amazing in both [their] acting and singing skills within the movie.” Namira also added, “I mean, the movie also made so much. I feel that the profit really shows how good the movie and actresses really were when it comes to their acting and singing skills.”

The award for Best Actress went to Mikey Madison for *Anora*, a comedy-romance film by director Sean Baker. The film made significantly less than *Wicked*, both domestically and globally. Freshman Suah Evanski states, “I will be honest, I had never heard of *Anora*,

and doesn’t the fact that it made less than *Wicked* reflect on the talent of the actresses?” Suah also expressed, “Popularity sort of shows what the viewers think of the talent of the actors and actresses. More popular, the more the audience thinks that the movie contains more talent.” This situation can also be compared to what happened to last year’s Academy

monologue towards the end of the film was especially inspiring and that her performance brought forth a lot of emotion, displaying her talents. Personally, I was surprised that *Wicked*, the highest-grossing movie based on a Broadway musical, didn’t win any awards for Best Actress or Best Supporting Actress. I found that surprising given the

in previous works, most would agree that both actresses deserve significant recognition. Despite the shared disappointment in some nominations and winners at this year’s Academy Awards, we can always look forward to next year’s show and the 2025 nominations. Iconic films, actors, and actresses, and behind-the-scenes talent will



2025 oscar winner Mikey Madison with her trophy award, smiling.

to Best Actor/Actress. However, like every year, you will notice that some don’t seem to share much enthusiasm for the award winners. Some on the internet even claim they will be boycotting watching the Oscars next year. But, as we all know, the internet is the champion of over-exaggeration. So, let’s find out what made this year’s Academy Awards show so controversial. Why is there con-

ia Pérez, directed by Jacques Audiard and featuring Karla Sofia Gascón and Selena Gomez. The premise of this musical-crime film is about a Mexican lawyer who is offered a strange job to help a notorious cartel boss retire and transition into living as a woman. The movie earned thirteen nominations across various categories and won two. However, it made less than its budget and was rated 72%



Oscar winners Adrien Brody, Mikey Madison, Zoe Saldana, and Kieran Culkin photographed with awards.

Awards, where many fans were disappointed that America Ferrera didn’t win the award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Barbie*. People argued that her

movie’s popularity even before its release. While we didn’t know the talent of the main actresses beforehand, considering the talent displayed by both Erivo and Grande

continue to be showcased and recognized for their hard work. After all, that’s what these award shows are all about.■



# THE BELLES SHINE SINGING “UNWRITTEN”

## Acapella Group’s Performance at NHS Induction Ceremony

Elizabeth Ha ‘27

The National Honors Society induction ceremony is an important event in our school, recognizing students for their academic achievements and leadership.

This year, the ceremony will be even more exciting, thanks to a performance by the school’s acapella group, The Belles.

They will be singing Natasha Bedingfield’s “Unwritten”, adding extra energy and enthusiasm to the event. Under the direction of Ms. Rehe, the group has been working diligently to prepare for this special performance.

Ms. Rehe shared her thoughts on this year’s rehearsal process and its focus on balancing efficiency with enjoyment.

“Our induction ceremony prep is more fun and casual! We will be singing ‘Unwritten’, and there are many soloists throughout to share the love,” she said.

The group was assigned their parts and given learning tracks ahead of time, allowing them

group to focus on blending their voices and fine-tuning the performance during their time together.

Lucy Roberts, a student in The Belles, reflected on how this process has been unfolding for her and the group. “We are learning an arrangement of Un-

hearse together,” she said.

Roberts noted that everything is “really starting to come together,” and expressed excitement about the upcoming performance.

“I think all of the Belles are very excited to show people what we have been working on. This song is really fun to sing and perform, and it is also very well-known, so I’m sure people will enjoy listening!”

The performance will feature several soloists, giving many members the opportunity to showcase their unique voice.

The soloists don’t just add variety to the performance but also lets the group highlight individual talent while still maintaining a sense of unity.

Ms. Rehe emphasized how much the Belles value

this tradition of performing at the National Honors Society induction ceremony.

“We love the tradition of the Belles performing, and are looking forward to the evening,” she said.

The group’s dedication to their craft and the meaningful message of Unwritten—celebrating potential growth—makes this performance particularly special for both the performers and the audience.

The Belles have rehearsed tirelessly to ensure their performance will be perfect, and anticipation for the event is enormous.

The students are excited to have the opportunity to be included in this momentous ceremony and their concert will reflect not only their musical talent, but also their dedication to excellence in all

aspects of their academic lives. Their diligence will show through in their performance and make it an appropriate celebration for the National Honors Society inductees and families.

With the ceremony approaching, the Belles are excited to share the fruit of their work with the group. Their routine will be an exciting part of the evening, engaging the audience while honoring the achievements of the inductees of the National Honors Society.

The audience can expect an evening that will be truly memorable as it will be high in energy and celebration.■

**The Belles have rehearsed tirelessly to ensure their performance will be perfect...**

to practice individually before resuming their Monday rehearsals after the spring musical. This method allows the

written for the induction ceremony. I have been rehearsing my individual parts a lot at home, and then every week we re-

# ARTISTS IN THEIR NATURAL ELEMENT

## The Guitar Club and Lit Mag Coffee House was a huge hit

Henry Roberts ‘26

On Thursday, March 20, the Literary Magazine and Guitar Club hosted their annual coffee house performance. The coffee house included musical performances ranging from progressive metal to alternative folk as well as Lit mag members reading their works. On top of

the best perspective to hear about is that of the performers.

Alongside that perspective, one of the best parts of going to a concert is knowing the songs that are gonna be played. Junior Matt Altman said that he will be performing, “7 songs in total, a couple of those are with my friend Patrick Nevard (’25). We are

Henry Roberts (’26). We are doing ‘High and Dry’ by Radiohead, ‘Maine’ by Noah Kahan, and ‘Ohms’ by Deftones. It’s a very fun mix of genres.”

Some of the other songs that were performed are: “Welcome to paradise” by Green Day, “Geek USA” by The Smashing Pumpkins, “Holland 1945” by Neutral Milk Hotel, and “How to Save a Life” by The Fray.

These were performed by Junior Gabe Tejeda, alongside a myriad of other talented performers.

The best way to appreciate the Coffee House is to understand how much work has been put into the preparations for this one night of performances.

According to Guitar Club Supervisor Mr. Norell, “This year it has been better than ever. We have been

working on it alongside the Lit mag which is of course helmed by Mrs. Chiang. She’s

done a great job at that, we have had more volunteers to play and or read than we did in

**The best way to appreciate the Coffee House is to understand how much work has been put into the preparations**

been a great help in mobilizing them to the cause, and sharing the load of promoting it. Like any show, a lot of the promotions for the Coffee House is word of mouth. You’ve gotta go tell your friends and show that you’re excited about it. People are gonna want to be in that space because there is a lot happening and a lot of enthusiasm and that’s very infectious. I think that the club kids have

the two coffee houses we did last year.”

As we can see, the kids at the Guitar Club and Lit mag alongside their supervisors are working incredibly hard. But why should the average Highlander come if they’ve no connection to the clubs?

Altman believes that highlanders should come because, “It’s really fun, you get to see a bunch of people in their element when otherwise they

wouldn’t be. Music is my passion and I don’t get to do that outside of some after school clubs, Guitar Club being one of them. It’s not only music, there are also spoken word readings and it’s a really awesome thing that a lot of effort has been put into.”

The guitar club and lit mag coffee house started at 6 pm on the 20th, and hopefully, after learning about its inner workings, you didn’t want to miss out on this one or any in the future.

The fee for the Coffee House was only 5 dollars at the door for a night of beautiful performances and some delicious coffee. The people working on the Coffee House would love for all the Highlanders to come show their support.■

**... musical performances ranging from progressive metal to alternative folk ...**

all of this, there was coffee available for all of those performing and in attendance.

In order to best understand the full spectacle that the coffee house was,

performing ‘Silvera’ by Gojira, ‘You walk away’ by Filter, ‘Aerials’ by System of a Down, and ‘Give it up’ by Lincoln Park. I am doing another three songs with my friend



The varsity boys ice hockey team faced a tough loss against Ridgewood in the quarterfinals

Gabriella Ragazzo ‘26

The varsity ice hockey team had a strong and exciting season. Despite facing a tough loss in the quarterfinals, the team showed great resilience and determination throughout the year. Their hard work and skill on the ice helped them achieve an impressive record of 18 wins and 5 losses. The season started with a lot of promise and the team quickly gained recognition for their excellent teamwork and competitive spirit. One of their most memorable moments was winning the Big North Gold Cup, where they defeated Pascack Hills High School in a thrilling championship game. This victory was a testament to the talent and dedication of the players and coaches. They also had dominant wins against teams like Roxbury and Chatham, showing that they were one of the top teams in the league. Although their season ended with a heartbreaking loss in the quar-

terfinals, the players didn’t let that define their entire year. The loss was tough, but it also taught them valuable lessons about perseverance, teamwork, and how to handle pressure. Even though they didn’t go all the way to the championship, their performance throughout the season was impressive, and they showed they were a force to be reckoned with. Looking ahead, the team is more determined than ever to come back strong next season. With a solid group of players returning and the coaching staff’s guidance, the team is in a great position to make another run at the state title. The experiences from this past season, both the successes and the setbacks, will only make them more prepared for the challenges of next year. The team’s dedication, combined with the encouragement from the student body, is sure to propel them forward. With the lessons learned from this season and the drive to improve, the Highlanders are ready to make a big come-



Father and son memorable moment back in the 2025-2026 season.

In conclusion, while the boys faced a tough end to their season, they should be proud of what they accomplished. Their growth as a team, their triumphs, and the way they’ve handled challenges have set the stage for an exciting and successful future. Highlands eagerly anticipates what’s next, as the boys aim for even greater success next season. ■



Varsity boys ice hockey celebrating their accomplishment this season



Varsity boys ice hockey preparing for a home game

## BUILDING CHAMPIONS: REC BASKETBALL

A rec basketball coach is taking popularity throughout the school and social media

Gabriel Tejeda ‘26

This year, the “Heroes” have taken over Highlands’ rec basketball league, led by one of the singlehandedly most motivated, caring, and determined coaches that basketball has ever seen. Coach Phil Bicocchi, known widely on the internet as Coach Phil, has led this team to greatness. “Winners win,” Bicocchi repeats, drilling the statement into the minds of his team of victors, leading them all the way to the championships, and, by the time this article is published, perhaps to victory over the entire league. Coach Phil has an astounding 14k followers on Instagram and 8k followers on TikTok where he posts videos of his inspirational speeches, as well as appearing with celebrities like Big Justice and AJ as well as President Donald Trump and former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson. However, he is most known for his passionate pre-game speeches, endless wardrobe full of colorful suits, and ability to lead a team to greatness. His speeches have

been posted on large pages such as Barstool, garnering the views and likes of hundreds of thousands of people. Coach Phil’s behavior doesn’t go unnoticed by the team, as freshman Michael Strandes describes him as, “very caring and willing to do anything for his team,” while also noting that his actions, “help [the team] play better by always making us give 100%... there are high expectations, and if you’re not giving it your all, Phil will let you know.” It is clear that Bicocchi holds high expectations for his team of heroes as he sets an incredibly high standard for each and every player, in each and every game, during his pre-game speeches. Throughout games, Phil can be seen paying close attention to every move in order to help the boys improve. As Phil’s speeches have spread throughout Highlands and made their mark on multitudes of students, students have come to the famous Coach Phil stairwell to watch him preach to the choir that is his rec basketball team. Every single time, he brings a certain

level of energy and dedication to the game that is unparalleled. For the members of the team, all of the hard work that they’ve put in has been paying off as they’ve won game after game and been, Strandes accounts, “noticed not only around Highlands but around the whole nation.” This has sparked a unique motivation within the spirits of each boy on the team, and they’re being supported by other Highlands students who believe what Phil has to say is amazing. Ultimately, Coach Phil has left a noticeable impact on the state of our basketball program, leading his team of heroes to greatness. On the 13th of March, they won the Championship Tournament, showcasing both the boy’s skills and the determination of Phil to send his athletes to greatness. ■



Coach Phil and his team celebrate their victory



Coach Phil’s rec basketball team pose after a win



# GIRLS LACROSSE OPENS SEASON WITH PRIDE

Team brings energy and excitement as they begin their season with high hopes and strong spirits

Gabriella Ragazzo ‘26

The 2025 season for the girls varsity lacrosse team is shaping up to be an exciting one. With a mix of experienced upperclassmen and promising underclassmen, the team is poised to make a big impact this year.

Players are eager to take the field with high hopes of continuing the team’s tradition of success, and with their skill, commitment, and teamwork, the team looks ready to start strong.

This season, the team’s leadership and talent will be key to their success. The senior class has worked together for several years, building chemistry and trust that will serve them well on the field. These athletes are seasoned and ready to lead by example, helping guide the team through tough matches.

The upperclassmen know the importance of staying focused and working together as a unit, and they are prepared to bring that mindset to every game.

The younger players, though still learning

and developing their skills, bring fresh energy to the team. These underclassmen have the potential to make a big difference, and their contributions will only add to the team’s overall strength.

The combination of seasoned leadership and new talent creates a dynamic and balanced roster, giving Northern Highlands a competitive edge this season.

The team’s defense is looking strong, with players who can effectively shut down opposing attacks and make key stops when it matters most. The midfield is fast and aggressive, with athletes who can transition seamlessly from defense to offense, keeping pressure on their opponents throughout the game.

Offensively, the team is ready to be more aggressive and capitalize on scoring opportunities, relying on quick passes, solid shooting, and strategic plays to put goals on the board.

Coaching staff has also played an important role in developing the

team’s potential. Known for their dedication and expertise, the coaches focus on helping each player improve and reach their highest level of performance.

They emphasize hard work, discipline, and a commitment to the team, creating a positive environment where every athlete can thrive. Their guidance will be essential to the team’s success, and they are prepared to help the players grow both individually and as a unit.

The upcoming season holds

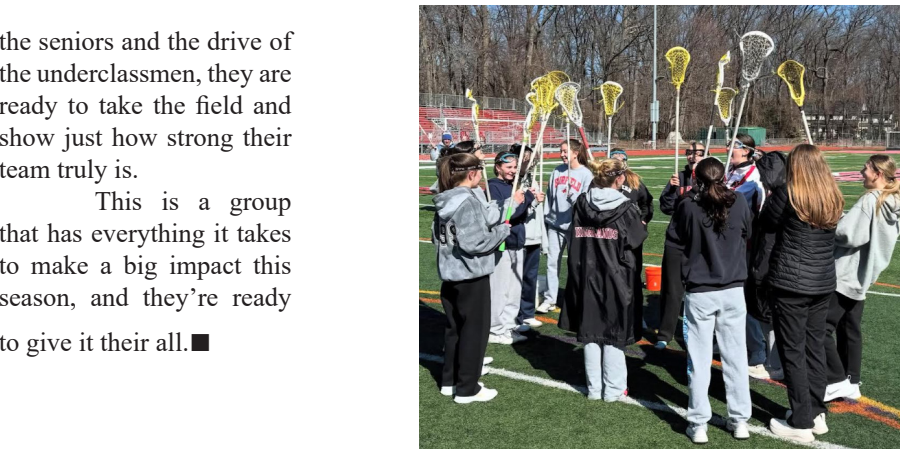
great promise for the lacrosse team. With a mix of veteran players and rising stars, the team is ready to face the challenges ahead. Their dedication, teamwork, and talent will be key to their success, and they are looking forward to building on past achievements while making their own mark in this new season.

Fans and teammates are excited to see what this talented group can accomplish in 2025. The future looks bright for the girls, and with the leadership of



Senior lacrosse players pose before their team trip

Photo creds to Girls Varsity Lacrosse Team



Girls lacrosse team huddle together during practice

Photo creds to Girls Varsity Lacrosse Team

the seniors and the drive of the underclassmen, they are ready to take the field and show just how strong their team truly is.

This is a group that has everything it takes to make a big impact this season, and they’re ready to give it their all.■

# BOYS ARE BACK IN LACROSSE SEASON

The team is ready to have an excellent season ahead and make some great memories

Eric Koo ‘26

Northern Highlands Varsity Boys Lacrosse stands out as one of the most promising and successful programs throughout the school year. Due to the number of people trying out each year, the boys lacrosse program has found new players in recent years that have widely improved all levels of the field for Highlands, going up against some of the best teams in the country.

Interested in what experienced players are looking forward to this year, we talked to current Juniors, Hudson Bacalzo, Jack O’Callaghan, Augie Ratner, and Hudson Bloch, with certain questions about this upcoming season.

When asked what feels unique about this team this year, O’Callaghan replied, “What I feel is unique about this team is that since day one from 3rd grade most of us have been playing together and we have built this bond through the years.

We also have come through a lot with injuries and some setbacks but this year we are stronger than

before.”

Similarly, Bacalzo states, “I feel our team has energy and chemistry that other teams in the state cannot compete with. We are super close together through all skill ranges. Everyone is treated fairly from freshman to senior.” The players show that they all have mutual bonds with each other, a necessity for a successful team in sports.

When asked what the main goal for this season is, Ratner explained modestly that “the main goal at the end of the season is just to beat our rivals and be better than we were at the start of the season.”

When asked about how the team trains with each other, Bloch states that “the team has been lifting together during the off season and has also been participating in winter practices and an indoor league without the coach to get ready for the season. We also spend lots of time together whether it’s in meetings or watching film and we go on team bonding trips together.”

On that same token, Bacalzo says, “The team lifts, trains, and watches film together. Doing all of

this builds team chemistry.”

Finally, we asked the players how their coach prepares them for the upcoming season. When asked, O’Callaghan replies “Our coach prepares us in many helpful ways. They put in much film time to try and make a strategy for our games. They also come up with good practice plans each day to prepare us for game day. They also will schedule film time so we can watch the other team and derive how to beat them. These all come together to help us on game day to win at any need possible.”

Ratner and Bloch both reply similarly, saying “Coach Kyle prepares us by bringing his energy to the field. Everyday he instills in us his confidence by always bringing the energy and hyping us up,” and “Our coach prepares us through thorough practices that cover all aspects of the game and really prepare us for in-game scenarios. He also makes sure that team chemistry is being built and that everybody is on the same page. He also puts a ton of effort outside of the season and does clinics and a club team for anybody

who wants to put in extra work with him,” respectively.

In all, the boys are looking for a great 2024-2025 season. Check out the boys record and stats on NJ.Com, Goodluck to the coaches and Players.■



Boys lacrosse team bonds at a golf outing

Photo creds to Boys Lacrosse Team



Boys lacrosse team decked out in school spirit

Photo creds to Boys Lacrosse Team



# PLAY BALL: THE START OF A NEW SEASON

## Baseball off to a swinging start as the season comes closer

Eric Koo '26

Northern Highlands Boys Baseball Season is right around the corner! Being one of the most successful programs during the spring that Highlands has to offer, expectations are high from both the coaches and players for this upcoming season.

The vast amount of talent that arrives in Northern Highlands has improved their team overall, and it is safe to assume that this year we can expect something big from the Highlanders.

Interested in what experienced players are looking forward to this year, we asked Varsity Junior Tyler Baelis a couple of questions about the upcoming baseball season.

When asked about what feels unique about this team this year, Baelis explains, "What I feel is unique about this team is the bond we have.

We have all been working out in the winter together and have gotten really close to each other

on all grade levels." Like stated before, with so much talent arriving in the past

has been training since the winter and we have been getting together recently

**The vast amount of talent that arrives in Northern Highlands has improved their team overall.**

couple of years, we can see how multiple grade levels have been bonding since the winter to have the best season possible.

When asked about their main goal toward the end of the season, Baelis stated, "The main goal toward the end of the season is to win the state championship. That is the goal every year and we will work toward that goal."

When asked about how the team trains together, like stated from before, Baelis states "The team

plaining the trip the baseball team takes yearly.

Baelis, who has already gone to Florida already with Highlands, explains "We leave for our Florida trip in a few weeks and that should be really fun as I will be with all of my teammates and we will be having fun in disney and playing a lot of baseball."

In all, the boys are looking for a great 2024-2025 season.

The boys baseball team is very excited about

the first few weeks. Some seniors we have playing this year are Evan Radoncic, Charlie Goebbert, Ryan Sica, Dan Duker, Jake Gartman, Stephen Martinez, Alec Putrino, Zach Braunstein, Ethan Levine, and Ryan Lalime.

We all hope these boys have a great season since this will be their last horrah before leaving Northern Highlands baseball. The baseball team is coached by Paul Albarello. Last year the leaders

home runs as a sophomore. They are hoping to have a better run this year then compared to ladt year. We wish them the best of luck this season and suggest you come to one of their games and show your support.

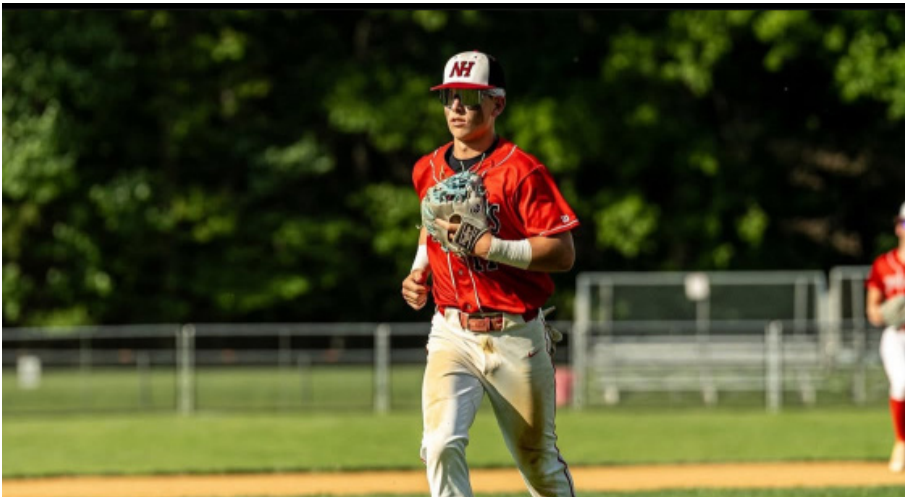
The season is just kicking off and we hope it starts on a good swing with the boys playing their first game away at Pascack Hills on March thirty first. We hope the northern highlands students can come out and show their support for their team durig the season.

Good luck to our baseball team and good luck to the seniors continuing their journey. ■

**The boys baseball team is very excited about their upcoming season and to show off their skills.**

their upcoming season and to show off their skills they have learned throughout the practice they have had

in home runs was Charlie Goebbert with twelve home runs as a junior and Jake Wagner with twenty three



Varsity baseball Jake Wagner jogging off the field



Varsity baseball player number nine getting ready to take a swing



Varsity baseball players hugging coaches and talking with them and teammates after a game



# STARTING OFF WITH A BANG

## How the softball team is gearing up for the season

Samantha O’Connell ‘26

The softball team has been starting up this season over the past few weeks and we are very excited to see the girls in action. The girls softball team is coached by Maria LaBarbiera with seniors playing their last year like Sophia Mamunes, Sophia Sowlakis, Ciara Murry, and Giavanna Rhein. We wish them all the best at college next year. Also our returning sophomores and juniors like Elisa Valdez, Keira Bross, Emme Kossar, Talya Balabanian, and Samantha Shuster.

We are very excited to see how everything goes for the girls this year. Last year our home run leaders were Emme Kosar with twenty seven home runs and Ciara Murry with twenty two home runs. Emme was a freshman at the time and Ciara was a junior. Both were the leading scorers last year in home runs. This year they

hope to go all the way and win as many games as possible. The softball team is getting the ball rolling with practices and continuous training to have them be the best they can. The girls had a rough season last year but are looking to shape things up and improve this year during practice and games. The first game they have this year is an away game against Demerest on March thirty first. They have about a week and a half until they make their

opening game. Their first home game will be against Old Tappan on April second. The girls would love the support in their home or away games. We wish them all the best of luck to start their season. We can’t wait to see all of the returning players and what they can do with the team this year. The hard work put into each of the practices and games are what really showcase what these athletes compete for. They all have a passion for playing

softball and it shows in their work ethic.

love and the passion they have for softball.

hoping next year there will be more involvement in the softball team and more rising athletes can showcase what they can do on the field.■

**The hardest part of playing a sport is the commitment and games, these girls are showing what they love.**

They have had a unfortunate shortage of players that are committed to playing softball so this group of girls is exactly like what you would want in a team. The athletes are passionate and love playing softball as a sport, activity, or something they want to do in college. The hardest part of playing a sport is the commitment and by coming to practices and games, these girls are showing what they

We wish all of our players good luck in the upcoming games and urge students to come out and show support to our teams. Good luck also to the Seniors as this will be their last year competing and playing with us at Northern Highlands. The seniors in every batch that leave and play their last round of sports always feel like they have to prove something and leave their part behind. Here’s to

**The hard work put into each of the practices and games are what really showcase what these athletes compete for.**



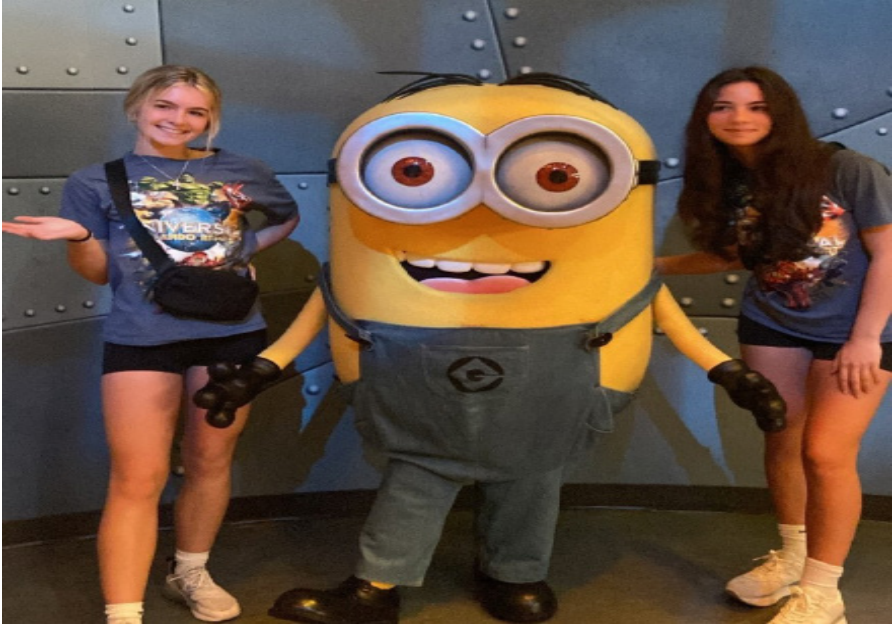
Varsity softball players group photo before their game starts.



Ciara Murry pitching during a game



Softball team poses with each other before heading out to the field



Ciara Murray and Sophia Mamunes posing on their trip to Florida