

Student Reporter

Young Voices Shine at UNMUTED Showcase



Rachel Choi
Grade 9
Orange County School of the Arts



A second-grader shares his work on sharks, discussing how shark skin feels similar to sandpaper, and its superior eyesight, revealing his passion for sea creatures.
[Source: Woojin Choi]



At New Praise Church, elementary students are introduced to UNMUTED, where they will spend five weeks learning how to express themselves through a variety of art forms.
[Source: Woojin Choi]

On May 17th, the walls of New Praise Church pulsed with color, rhythm, and revelation. Laughter echoed down the hallways, and paint-streaked easels lined the back of the room, each canvas alive with the heartbeat of a child’s imagination. The occasion? The first-ever UNMUTED Showcase, a celebration of courage and creativity, where a group of elementary students took the stage to present original poems and paintings created during a five-week storytelling and art

workshop. As soft music played and the lights dimmed, parents, teachers, and community members filled the pews, eyes wide with anticipation. Then, one by one, students—some barely tall enough to reach the microphone—stepped forward, holding nothing but their voices and their hearts. Each stood proudly in front of the audience to recite original poetry pieces, many of which spoke about friendship, family, culture, and imagination. Alongside their

words, each student presented a painting that reflected their poem’s theme, including a diverse range from bright suns and bold brushstrokes to quiet portraits and swirling skies. “I didn’t know I was good at poems until I tried,” one second grader whispered with a shy smile, proudly clutching a painting of a rocket ship blasting through a galaxy of swirling purples and blues. “Now I want to write more!” Many of the students had never written a poem, much less

shared one publicly. But through five weeks of workshops led by local artists and youth mentors, they learned how to shape metaphors, mix paint, and speak their truths out loud. The room transformed into a gallery of youthful visions; Every piece felt like a window into a young artist’s world. By the end of the night, the church echoed with applause, high-fives, and heartfelt hugs. But what stood out most wasn’t just the talent, it was the transformation. Many of the students arrived unsure and quiet, unfamiliar with terms like “imagery” or “palette.” But by the showcase, they had become storytellers, visual artists, and confident performers. “We wanted every child to walk away knowing that their story matters,” said the founder of UNMUTED. “Watching them take the mic, share their work, and light up; that’s the heart of this project.” As the program continues to grow, UNMUTED hopes to bring more workshops and showcases to children across Orange County, California. For the kids who stood on stage that Friday, one thing is already clear: they’ve found their voice, and they’re just getting started. For more information or to get involved with future programs, visit @theunmuted_ on Instagram.

Student Reporter

Teen Blazes Through \$11M XPRIZE Wildfire Challenge



Andrew Jun
Grade 10
Valley Christian High School

XPRIZE Wildfire is a prestigious four-year, \$11 million global competition designed to incentivize the innovation of firefighting technologies that will aid in ending destructive wildfires. The ultimate goal of this competition is to improve wildfire detection and response to mitigate the growing threat of wildfires. These threats can devastate human communities and developing ecosystems, as wildfires significantly contribute to excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. XPRIZE Wildfire’s judging panel selected 30 qualified teams from 10 countries worldwide. Among these professional and college teams, Valley Christian High School stands out as the only high school team to qualify. Through this extraordinary achievement, the team, composed of 19 talented students, advanced through the Autonomous Wildfire Response Track B, earning \$25,000 in prize money. Valley’s mission is to create a fully autonomous drone system capable of detecting and extinguishing wildfires within just 10 minutes. If this project continues to grow and be successful, it could revolutionize wildfire response and reduce the damage fires inflict on the environment.



Northern California Wildfire Outbreak Causes Sky Discoloration on September 9, 2020
[Source: Author, Andrew Jun]

Wildfires are a massive contributor to air pollution, releasing great amounts of carbon monoxide and other harmful toxins into the atmosphere. They also emit particulate matter (PM2.5), which can travel hundreds of miles and severely impact respiratory health, especially in children and the elderly. These pollutants degrade air quality and

contribute to climate change. Additionally, wildfires destroy plant life that would otherwise absorb carbon dioxide, creating a damaging cycle of rising emissions and reduced natural carbon capture. The drone technology designed by Valley Christian students can help prevent thousands of tons of carbon from being released into the air by intercepting

fires early, thus directly supporting environmental conservation. The earlier a wildfire is extinguished, the less area it consumes, which helps preserve biodiversity, soil quality, and forest regeneration. Protecting forests also helps maintain clean water sources, as vegetation reduces erosion and filters rainwater before it reaches rivers and reservoirs. The team’s hard effort has recently paid off. They have been featured on numerous news platforms: KRON News, the Fire & Safety Journal, and PR Newswire. The project leader, Omkar Tasgaonkar, states, “The numerous industry connection opportunities have been invaluable to our team’s growth and understanding of existing solutions to fight wildfires, allowing us to pinpoint problems in firefighting (such as early response and active monitoring). I look forward to the future growth and success of this team in making our solution a reality, deploying it in areas with high risk of fire, and stopping fires at the earliest stage.” This team’s dedication shows how impactful student-led groups can be, inspiring other young students to take initiative and create change in their communities.

Student Reporter

Attending a UCLA Research Night



Ryan Park
Grade 10
The Science Academy STEM Magnet

Attending the UCLA Political Science Department’s Research Night gave me a glimpse into the diverse topics being explored and studied by PhD students, professors, and other professionals. Presenters covered topics such as gun violence, governmental filibusters, and environmental extraction. Getting into the event was a struggle! Since it was meant for undergraduate students attending UCLA, I had to sneak in. Luckily, I have a friend who is currently a student board member of the Political Science Department and was able to give me a chance to attend. And after back-and-forth conversations with the student department head, I was listed as one of the participants. Walking around the campus the day of the event, I got a sense of the campus’s beauty, with tall trees surrounding it. However, as I walked into the building where Research Night would be held, I felt nervous. The room was filled with older students, and my younger appearance put me out of my comfort zone. I was put at ease once I met my friend and she introduced me to the people around the room, allowing me to



All the attendees and presenters in the room are listening to a slideshow given at the beginning of the research event.
[Source: UCLA Political Science Department]

become more familiar with my environment. Once the event began, attendees were split into different groups where we were lectured by speakers and then given the opportunity to ask questions. Listening to the speakers discuss the research they have conducted over the years was really in-

triguing. Each spoke about their respective topics with so much passion that all of the groups were forced to rotate to the next. Without the rotations, our group could have spent hours discussing and asking questions with just one speaker. The most interesting topic, in my opinion, was the re-

search connecting gun violence with areas selling alcohol, offering a perspective on a controversial topic I’ve never thought of. It was also an interesting experience to hear about the external struggles of doing research. Due to the new administration, presenters expressed how much funding was being cut, temporarily pausing the progression of their research. After the event had ended, I went to each presenter asking if I could join their research group, but was sadly declined due to my lack of experience and young age. Many gave me great advice on the type of skills and internships I can work on while in high school. As a reflection of this event, I decided to make it my goal for the next few years to work on these skills and gain experience so that I can have the opportunity to join a research group as soon as I graduate from high school. All of the topics that were presented contributed towards bettering the lives of not just those in the United States, but the entirety of the world. Being able to research any of the topics presented would be such an amazing experience and something I vow to work towards.

Student Reporter

What It Really Means to be a Good Listener



Chloe Je
Grade 9
Orange County School
of the Arts



Taking a moment to pause and be present shows that you're truly engaged, not just with your words, but with your full attention. [Source: Author, Chloe Je]

In today's world, there is constant movement and distraction amid the desire to be heard. Being a good listener is a rare but valuable skill because truly listening

goes far beyond staying quiet while the other speaks. It involves being present, having empathy, and acting with a purpose. To be a good listener is to create a space

where people can feel understood and respected.

At its core, listening means giving someone your full attention without interrupting or judging. It does not entail waiting for your turn to speak or crafting an appropriate response in your head. It's about being immersed in the conversation. This can mean putting aside any potential distractions, making eye contact, and showing, through your body language, that you are actively engaged. These small gestures can signal to the speaker that what they're saying is being acknowledged, and therefore matters.

A good listener does not rush to fix, solve, or give advice. Sometimes, people just want to be heard. When jumping in with a solution, there is the risk of invalidating someone's feelings. It can often also be perceived as a way of shifting the conversation to focus on yourself. Instead, try reflecting what you hear, like: "It sounds like you're frustrated," or "That must have been really difficult for you." These responses show a healthy amount of engagement and understanding of the thoughts and emotions behind them.

Empathy is a key component in effective listening, but can

be the most difficult aspect for some, as it requires setting aside assumptions and stepping into someone else's shoes, even if only for a brief moment. You may not fully understand what someone is speaking about, but acknowledging and affirming their feelings can go a long way. And this does not just apply to serious topics, but to lighter ones as well. Building connections is the key point of effective communication and should not change whether you are the speaker or the listener in any situation with any topic.

Listening well also means being comfortable with silence. Many people will rush to fill gaps in conversation, but those pauses can foster the most honest thoughts. By giving someone room to process and speak at their own pace, you can show you're not just tolerating their voice, but are valuing it.

Being a good listener isn't always easy- it takes intention to put in effort. But by doing so, you can build strong relationships, nurture deeper understanding, and create more meaningful connections in conversation. In a world that can feel so rushed, giving someone a few minutes of your quiet presence can be an incredibly powerful gift.

Student Reporter

BookTok Reads to Binge This Summer



Grace Song
Grade 7
Lexington Junior
High School

If you're a book lover and have spent more than five minutes on TikTok or YouTube, there's a good chance you've stumbled upon BookTok or BookTube-the side of the app where people cry over books, obsess over characters, and claim certain ones will "ruin you emotionally." As summer approaches and you build your reading list, it is essential to ask: Which BookTok books are worth it?

A fast-paced, summer romance that will have you on the edge of your seat is *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, by Jenny Han. With almost a million reads on Goodreads, this book has captivated a large audience and is worth investing your time in. This book follows Belly, a girl who spends every summer in a beach house with her two brothers. However, this year everything changes. With love triangles, emotional twists, and all the summer nostalgia you could want, this story is just the beginning of a complete trilogy, plus a binge-worthy show to watch after you finish reading.

A less popular "romantasy" book (romance and fantasy), that will have you giggling at times



These BookTok reads are the perfect companions for lazy days, long nights, and everything in between this summer. [Source: Author, Grace Song]

and crying in otherthe next, is *Powerless* by Lauren Roberts. This book follows Paedyn, a powerless girl born into a world full of Elites, the so-called "super-powered" people. When Paedyn saves a prince, she finds herself in the Purging Trials, where she has to battle Elites, fight through obstacles, and fight her feelings for the prince. If you are a Hunger

Games fan and love fast-paced enemies-to-lovers romance, this book is for you.

Next, with over a million reads on Goodreads, is a fast-paced mystery, *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, by Holly Jackson. Pip, a high school senior, decides to research a closed-case murder that happened in her town two years ago. However, the deeper she

dives, the more secrets she finds. This book is incredibly addictive and easy to binge on a lazy summer day or road trip. In addition, this book is part of a trilogy, so if you enjoy it, there is more that is equally thrilling.

Lastly, there is another thrilling mystery that is less popular but just as suspenseful: *The Reappearance of Rachel Price*, also by Holly Jackson. This book follows Bel, whose mom disappeared when she was a toddler, but suddenly returns sixteen years later with a questionable story. Is she lying? Where has she been this whole time? Come with Bel as she uncovers this thrilling mystery. Perfect to binge in a day.

Whether you are a hard-core reader or picking up a book for the first time in months, these BookTok books offer something for everyone-romance, fantasy, mystery, and everything in between. Some are viral best sellers, others hidden gems, but all equally perfect for getting lost in this summer. So grab a book, settle into a cozy spot, and let yourself fall into a story you won't want to put down.

Student Reporter

The Last Few Summers: How to Spend Them Well



Eun Soo Esther Shin
Grade 11
New Covenant Academy

Most of us have dreamed of those perfect summer days. The kind where you step outside, feel the warmth on your skin, see the sun shining in a clear blue sky, and spontaneously decide to go to the beach with friends. On days like that, the sun seems to stay out longer, responsibilities feel lighter, and the most unforgettable memories are made in the smallest moments. But here's the reality. We only get a handful of summer breaks before they disappear. Once we grow up, summer becomes just another season filled with work. That's why now, while we still have the freedom, the time, and the energy that comes with being young, we students need to make every summer day count. This is a chance to do the things you might not have the time or freedom for later.

While we're still young, we should live in the small moments. Take time to have deep conversations with your friends while sitting on rooftops, the night wind blowing through your hair. Have a picnic in the park, or just lie in the grass and appreciate the quiet parts of life with nature. Say yes to new experiences and take risks, even the small ones. There are only so many moments where the weight of responsibility is light and the consequences are still manageable.

This is also the time to start capturing who you are. Make a scrapbook of your summer. Fill it with journal entries, pieces of your daily life like movie tickets, printed photos, and scraps of memories. Decorate it however you like, with colorful tape, stickers, or drawings. Create a time capsule with your friends and fill it with letters to your future self. Share your biggest worries, your goals, your favorite songs, and the things you love most about your life right now.

Use this summer to learn more about yourself. Take yourself out on solo dates to cafes, go on walks with your pet, or sit in an empty parking lot just to watch the sunrise or sunset. Think about the kind of person you want to be. Reflect on your values, your dreams, and what truly makes you happy.

Before you move on to the next chapter of life, take time to explore the place you grew up in. Visit parts of your city or town that you have never seen before. Whether you go alone or with friends, you might find something new that helps you see your hometown in a different light and makes you appreciate it even more.

You don't have to rush into growing up because that time will come soon enough. For now, you have the sun, the freedom, and a summer worth remembering. Go out there and make it yours.



Taking a walk, exploring the city I grew up in to make the most of the last summers before growing up. [Source: Author, Eun Soo Esther Shin]