

Student Reporter

POCO: Making an Impact in Ethiopia



Tae Lee
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Members of Ethiopia's MCM Medical Center gathered to promote free medical services. [Source: Author, Tae Lee]

This upcoming summer, the student-led extracurricular group POCO, Power Of Choosing Out, will take a big step beyond the learning curriculum and into the global community. POCO is a service-focused club dedicated to helping students make choices that assist our communities. Throughout the year, members participate in outreach projects, volunteer at youth programs, and raise funds for upcoming events. With a mission centered on service, empowerment, and awareness, POCO is preparing for one of its most ambitious projects yet: a hands-on humanitarian experience that will broaden students' perspectives on helping local areas in Ethiopia that are in need. For many participants, this will be their first time

traveling abroad for service work, making the experience original and eye-catching. The highlight of the trip will center on visiting medical centers that operate with limited resources. Many hospitals and clinics in Ethiopia face obstacles such as shortages of crucial equipment, overcrowding, and restricted access to modern medical technology. Members of POCO will work together with healthcare workers and volunteers to understand the extent of these issues and offer their support. Throughout the visit, students will tour hospitals, learn from doctors and nurses, and assist with organizing supplies and distributing donated materials. Not only will this be helpful to the local community,

but it will also provide students with an opportunity to explore possible healthcare professions. One of the most exciting aspects of the trip will be POCO's collaboration with MCM Medical College. Students will meet healthcare professionals, exchange stories about educational experiences, and participate in workshops, fostering interactions that will build meaningful connections and shared values among young people. In addition to visiting medical establishments, members will spend time in a foreign area, exploring local neighborhoods to recognize the social and economic challenges that residents face daily. Acclimating to communities will help us learn about the struggle for clean water, basic supplies,

and educational resources. These firsthand experiences will give students a deeper appreciation for global inequality and a clearer sense of how to contribute to positive change. Beyond the educational outreach, the trip will also encourage students to reflect on cultural understanding and citizenship. POCO members will have chances to learn about Ethiopia's history and observe the differences from their hometowns. By participating in community activities, students can build a genuine connection with residents and feel present outside of their own environment. To prepare for this journey, POCO has been organizing fundraising events, supply drives, and informational meetings to ensure students have equal opportunities to apply for the trip and understand its significance. These preparations also strengthen teamwork amongst the group while reminding members that meaningful service requires responsibility and compassion. In the months leading up to the summer, students will continue learning about Ethiopia's background, challenges, and community needs so that they can arrive informed and ready to assist. POCO hopes this experience will inspire long-term involvement in service work and expects students to continue choosing paths that promote awareness, kindness, and positive change across communities.

Student Reporter

More Than Sound: How Music Shapes Student Minds



Jason Lee
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Listening to background music has become a common strategy for students to help manage stress and maintain focus while studying. [Source: Author, Jason Lee]



Students rehearse as part of a larger ensemble, strengthening cognitive ability and building collaboration through a coordinated practice. [Source: Michael Mao]

Many students put on music without thinking much of it, whether it be on the bus, while doing homework, or when relaxing. What seems like a simple background habit often plays a larger role in how students manage stress, focus their attention, and stay productive. For some students, listening to music is a way to regulate emotions. After long school days filled with assignments, tests, and responsibilities, music can provide a moment of peace. "Listening to music helps me calm down and refocus when I'm getting overwhelmed by my workload," said a junior at Northwood High School, Derek Um. Music also influences concentration and general productivity. Though silence works for some, eight out of ten students whom I surveyed at my school found that having quiet background music, such as classical or lo-fi, helped them block out distractions and maintain their focus over long periods of studying. In these cases, music becomes a beneficial supplement that supports their attention. Beyond just listening to mu-

sic, another way students engage the brain is through active playing, usually through a school program or an extracurricular honor orchestra. When a musician plays in an ensemble, they must read sheet music, keep time with the band, play the correct notes and rhythms, and coordinate with other players to stay in tune. This requires the brain to process many different streams of information simultaneously, such as visual notation and motor

actions. In jazz bands, students must actively improvise their music during solos and keep up with the changing chords during the song, making it a difficult exercise that strengthens the brain's ability to multitask, switch focus, and maintain accuracy in their timing. As a member of my school's music program, I find that most of my close friends have come from bonds made within my ensemble. Rehearsing together throughout the school year, practicing,

and performing together creates shared experiences that will naturally bring students closer. For example, many high-school honor ensembles like the All-State Honor Band have retreats, where members will go on a trip with each other to practice and perform. This sense of camaraderie, built through constant exposure to each other nearly every day, highlights another major benefit of playing music and its role in creating connections and friendships between students. Overall, music plays a meaningful role in student life, in more ways than one. Listening to music provides an easy way for students to engage with their work more productively for everyday tasks like studying, while playing music encourages discipline, influences camaraderie between students, and promotes long-term mental health and development. Together, these experiences show that music is much more than just entertainment: it's a versatile tool that supports mental health, cognitive focus, and helps students navigate the academic demands that their standards might require.

Student Reporter

Uni's Spirit Week Lifts School Spirit for the New Semester



Irene Kim
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The second week after Winter Break, University Laboratory High School (Uni) had its second Spirit Week of the school year. The first one, happening in the fall semester, leads up to Uni's Homecoming dance — Uni doesn't have a football team, so the week aligns with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Homecoming game. The second one is kick-started with the annual Spirit Assembly, with student council-sponsored events throughout the week of the assembly. It's a time to lift school spirit for the new semester. The Spirit Assembly is an annual Uni tradition where those in different grades compete in a variety of games, ranging from musical chairs and tug-of-war to obstacle courses and dance-offs. But when a senior pulled out a giant Uno reverse card during musical chairs this year, first-year students soon realized that the assembly was designed for the senior grade to win. Underneath the innocent face of the whole school competition, the yearly tradition is a way for the seniors to celebrate their final year of high school. The seniors this year devised creative ways to "win" each game. For example, the two senior dance-off competitors started by dancing an ordinary ballet choreography. But suddenly the music was interrupted by static noises — "technical difficulties," announced by the executive student council president, a senior herself — and instead of the classical music that had been playing, a familiar tune of "Cotton Eye Joe" began instead. Seniors who were watching from the sides ran onto the stage to join the two dancers, and the dance-off ended as a whole-grade line dance. The tug-of-war, limited to 10 students from each grade, had at least 20 extra seniors helping out their team, easily defeating the others. And as the whistle blew to signal the start of the three-legged race, one of the two senior competitors princess-carried the other to run the lap. Throughout the assembly, underclassmen playfully booed the senior grade for their tricks as the seniors cheered each other on.



Uni's Japanese teacher, a representative of the faculty team for the Spirit Assembly's obstacle course, "limbo" backwards. [Source: Author, Irene Kim]

There were also dress-up days for each day of Spirit Week. Starting with class colors to raise spirit for the Assembly on Monday, the rest of the week had the themes: twin day, formal day, quarter zip, and matcha day — a new theme

added this year — and the classic pajama day. Throughout the week, students and faculty showed up in dazzling dresses, cups of iced matcha lattes, and Snuggles (blanket hoodies), adding to school spirit.

Student Reporter

Visit to the Aquarium of the Pacific



Jisu Wi
Grade 9
New Covenant Academy



A group of fish swimming together in a large glass tank shows their peaceful lifestyle at the Aquarium of the Pacific. [Source: Author, Jisu Wi]

Recently, I visited the Aquarium of the Pacific for a school field trip. The aquarium was divided into sections, or areas- the three biggest being Southern California

and Baja, the Tropical Pacific, and the Northern Pacific. The Southern California and Baja section was mainly focused on sharks and kelp forest fish, while the

Tropical Pacific section had colorful fish and corals. The Northern Pacific section included sea otters and sea lions. Some areas of the aquarium even included touch tanks where visitors could actually handle the creatures. The tanks hosted an assortment of sea stars and sting rays. In addition to touching the creatures, feeding some specific creatures was allowed as well.

The section I found most interesting at the aquarium was the Blue Cavern. It features a glass tank where there are a lot of types of fish, sharks, and corals. I found it interesting and even surprising that the sea creatures got along. I thought the big species would attack the smaller ones, so seeing them exist so peacefully was unexpected. I was especially awed by the sharks since it was my first time seeing them in-person. After exploring this area, I got the chance to feed the birds. It was my first time feeding an animal and seeing birds this close, so it was a new experience. Among all of the animals, my favorite one was the otter. The otters swimming through the water and their fur getting wet was very cute.

I want to highlight two specific programs that are available at the Aquarium of the Pacific. The first is a video presented by the aquarium in the movie theater. The

video highlighted marine life and people's interactions with the sea creatures in the ocean. The next program was a squid dissection. As a school, we had the opportunity to actually dissect the squid ourselves. During that time, the educators explained to us how we are supposed to dissect the squid, as well as the function of each part that we were dissecting. It was a unique experience since people usually don't have this opportunity. Even if some people have experienced it, many don't have the opportunity to learn it as in-depth as we were able to.

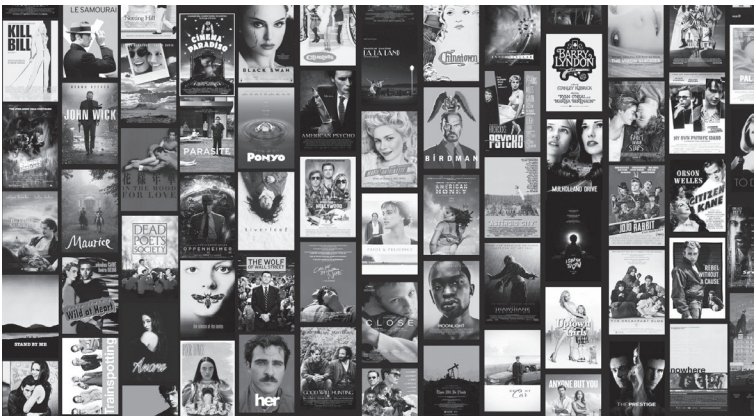
My experience at the aquarium was much more meaningful and interesting than I expected. This aquarium helps those who aren't as interested in marine life, or don't know much about it, learn while also providing exposure to it. Even if you're already familiar with some specific species, you can learn more about them at the Aquarium of the Pacific. Even if animals are the same species, their colors, looks, shapes, and names are all different. I suggest you visit this aquarium and learn unexpected facts about marine life, just like I did. It is a really fun experience, and there are many things to watch. You'll find yourself waiting in anticipation for each following exhibit!

Student Reporter

2027 Award Season Predictions: The Films to Watch



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Throughout the years, many movies that have graced the screen have collected great awards. What awaits us in 2026? [Source: Author, Yale Lee]

With the 2026 award season underway, attention is already beginning to shift towards the race for the 2027 season and the films expected to shape it. Many huge franchises, such as the Avengers, Dune, and Star Wars, are set to release new installments throughout the year, while projects from renowned filmmakers and actors, including The Odyssey, "Wuthering Heights", and The Drama, are also projected to release this year. Even though most of the top contenders for the race haven't even hit the theaters yet, the early buzz, excitement, and release strategies offer clues to which films could emerge as the possible front-runners.

Taking this into account, the following films stand out as early contenders, each bringing a mix of high expectations, enthusiasm, and award season potential.

The most anticipated and the star of the 2026 film season is The Odyssey, releasing on July 17th. The Oscar-winning director Christopher Nolan's adaptation of the classic Greek epic The Odyssey has been met with immense anticipation from movie lovers, critics, and

the general public. The movie's star-studded cast includes actors like Matt Damon as the protagonist Odysseus and Anne Hathaway as Penelope. The ensemble cast of Tom Holland, Robert Pattinson, and Zendaya has also created a large stir for the film. In addition to it being the most recent and direct adaptation of Homer's epic, the film is predicted to be met with strong critical acclaim and recognition, positioning it as one of the top contenders for the 2027 award season.

Another top contender of the season is Dune: Part Three, set to release on December 18th. The third volume of Denis Villeneuve's Dune, one of the most renowned modern sci-fi stories, is set to return as one of 2026's most anticipated blockbusters. With its main cast of Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya, and Florence Pugh all returning, new cast members like Anya Taylor-Joy and Robert Pattinson are also reported to have joined the project. With the previous two volumes of Dune

receiving high praise during their respective award seasons, Part One receiving 10 Academy Award nominations and Part Two receiving 6, Part Three is also projected to secure multiple nominations and awards during its own award season.

Lastly, another film with a high possibility of competing in the 2027 award season's race is Wuthering Heights, releasing on February 13th. The modern revamp of Emily Brönte's classic novel Wuthering Heights by the up-and-coming director Emerald Fennell, starring Margot Robbie and Jacob Elordi, will be the first major film to release as the 2026 award season wraps. Although at first the movie didn't receive the best reception, with many criticizing the casting for not matching the novel's descriptions of the characters and alterations made to the story, it's still expected to perform well during the award season.

Although the season is only starting, it is exciting to think of all the upcoming theatrical releases that will not only wow us, but may make part of cinema history.

Student Reporter

Surprisingly Finding Calm in Numbers



Linda Li
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Crean Lutheran High School

To be honest, math has never been my favorite subject-at least not before high school. I had an ambivalent relationship with it: I envied peers who seemed naturally good at it, while I was reluctant even to pick up a pencil and solve a problem.

This negative opinion of math changed during my freshman year, which also marked my first year studying abroad. This also meant that the only person I could truly rely on was myself. That experience pushed me to explore unfamiliar situations, and the most valuable lesson that I learned was taking responsibility for my academic performance. As one could imagine, the journey was filled with both laughter and tears. There were nights when everyone had fallen asleep, and I gazed melancholically at the moon, quietly celebrating my loved ones' birthdays on my own. On other nights, I teared up inside, as I feared that expressing my emotions aloud would disturb my roommate's peaceful slumber. Over time, however, I discovered an unexpected "soothing balm" for these moments of loneliness and heartaching pain-opening a math problem set.

At first glance, this coping mechanism might seem counter-intuitive: solving math problems requires focus, patience, and effort, all of which may feel out of reach during burnouts. Yet this is exactly why it works. Math compels me to set aside my emotions and concentrate solely on the present. As I approached the problem, the voyage toward the destination-in this case, the solution- became a refuge. Not only did it awaken the logical part of myself, but it also taught me not to give up. The most empowering moment came when my fragile self had realized that I had finally reached a solution. It affirmed my capability in embracing and dealing with challenges, which ultimately reconstructed my shattered heart.

Through implementing the technique repeatedly, I developed not only emotional resilience but also skills such as resolving unexpected problems and adopting a more logical mindset. This became the root of my growing interest in math, and I gradually came to understand why it plays such an indispensable role in many people's lives. At this point in my life, with college admissions



This became my asylum during difficult times: a classroom where I chose to solve math problems and release my emotions. [Source: Author, Linda Li]

only a year away, it constantly reminds me of my experience of struggling through a problem and eventually arriving at a flow state. Solving math problems helps me remain resilient and motivated during failure, and it has changed how I view discomfort in the learning process. Through sharing this experience, I hope

to encourage students who may not consider math or other STEM subjects their favorites to reconsider their relationship with them. For me, math has become more than numbers on pages-it has become a steady and quiet encouragement during moments when I needed grounding the most.