

Students Stretch Their Knowledge By Participating In Senior Projects

By Susan Coney

Twice a year Newtown High School students have the opportunity to participate in an independent study course, called the Senior Project Program, allowing them to explore an area of personal interest and choose how they will present their results to an evaluation panel comprised of their peers, teachers, and members of the community. The Senior Project's mission is to provide a program dedicated to the authentic pursuits of students that generates projects and products that enhance and meet the needs of the community.

Students participating in the one semester course meet for a few group sessions and receive guidance from School to Career Coordinator Peg Ragani, and teachers Frank LaBanza, Kirsten Hardy, and Angela Pennucci. The students choose their topic of study and are matched with a mentor, familiar with the subject matter, to work with throughout the endeavor.

Eight students shared their projects in a two-night presentation, which took place in the high school lecture hall on January 18 and 19. Typically all of the students in the program are seniors, this year, however, Gavin Newton Tanner, a junior and transfer student from Joel Barlow High School, participated in the project. Ms. Ragani said that the course has been geared for seniors but that as in the case of Gavin it was wonderful to open it to students from other grades as well. Ms. Ragani said, "This is a course for self-directed learners who have the willingness to take positive risks."

Gavin wanted to participate in the program because he had just transferred to a new school and felt it might be a good opportunity to learn more about being a writer, something he has been interested in pursuing. His goal was to write a fictional, fantasy novel.

He was matched with a professor from Columbia University, who he met with periodically and emailed his work to for review. Gavin did succeed in finishing his novel, entitled *Lumour*. Commenting on his experience, he said, "I never

realized how much work it would take to do the project. Procrastination became my biggest problem. Certainly my writing skills improved, but I realized what my own limitations are."

Nicole Moore, who plans to pursue a career in nursing, came up with a simple, inexpensive test to determine the amount of fat in breast milk. Nicole had two goals in mind by developing her project: to assist concerned mothers in understanding why their babies are not gaining the appropriate amount of weight and to provide doctor's offices with a method to determine fat content in a patient's breast milk.

Nicole worked with Dr. Suzanne Campbell and an area LaLeche League, which is a breastfeeding information and support group. She gathered breast milk samples from women in the LaLeche group and used her device to test the amount of fat in the milk. Nicole provided the results of her study at the presentation and fielded questions from the audience.

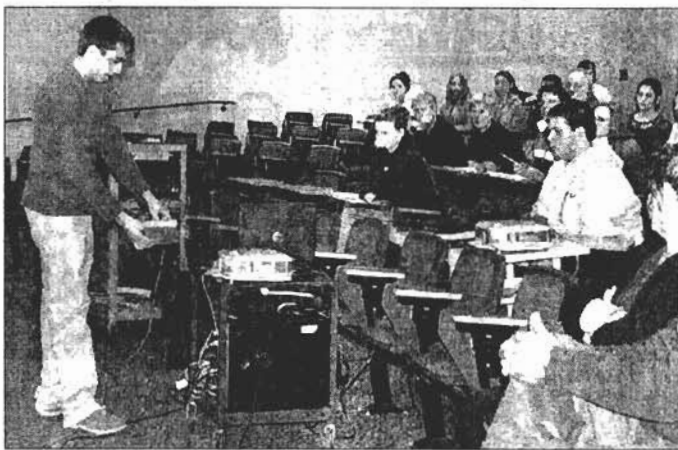
Her mentor, Dr. Campbell, praised Nicole. "She did a wonderful job. I don't think I could have stood up there and answered all those questions."

Elaine Parrott chose to write the first portion of a three-part book titled, *A Heart's Fire*, which deals with the turmoil of feelings and insecurities of a seventh grade girl attending middle school. Elaine chose her subject based on her own experiences in middle school.

She said, "I've had this idea in mind since my freshman year but was afraid to actually write it. I was afraid it wouldn't be good. The senior project encouraged me to write it. I have fallen in love with this project and it will be ongoing."

Elaine completed the first portion of her three-part book and plans to continue writing it to completion. "I learned about confidence, determination, and some of the tricks of the trade from this project," Nicole confessed. "My mentor, David Gould, helped me with editing and to develop and realize my own sense of style," she said.

An audience member asked Elaine if she feared she would



Alex Koutmos demonstrates the computer networking manual he developed for his senior project. —Bee Photos, Coney



Jonah Swartz fields questions from the evaluation panel at the end of his Senior Project presentation.

forget what it was like to be a seventh grader if she continued to complete the book while she attended college. Elaine instantly replied, "I'm going out of state next year to attend college. I've never been more than two towns away from home before. I think I will revisit those same feelings when I leave and will be able to continue my work."



Elaine Parrott presents her mentor David Gould with a certificate of thanks at the Senior Project presentation.

Elaine said she felt destined to become a writer. At the age of 3 while accompanying her mother to a bookstore, a psychic who was at the store as part of a promotional gimmick pulled Elaine's mother aside and told her, "Your daughter is going to write books someday." Elaine stated that while she didn't know if she believed in that sort of thing, she has had a

strong love of writing since she was very young.

Alex Koutmos became interested in computers during his freshman year and has taken most of the technology courses offered at the high school. Alex felt his network skills were his weak point and wanted to challenge himself to learn more in that area.

For his project Alex wrote and

designed a 40-page, user friendly networking manual. He added pictures to make the manual even more appealing. He demonstrated how his manual worked and offered to give a copy to anyone who was interested.

Alex displayed a quiet confidence throughout his presentation. When one member of the audience asked him what he thought he might be doing in 21 years, Alex quickly responded, "Hopefully I'll be running Microsoft."

Alex has been accepted into the software engineering program at the Rochester Institute of Technology and will be attending there in the fall.

Other students who presented senior projects were Jonah Swartz, Angela Visto, Caro Ann Smith, and Erica Hessel. Jonah wrote a book titled, *Does the Ends Justify the Means*. Angela researched arthritis in dogs, working with a local veterinarian. Brian Silverlieb Carol Ann wrote a personal journal titled, *The Last Good bye*, and worked with the bereavement group Healing Hearts located in Danbury. Erica Hessel worked with sixth grade students at Reed Intermediate School providing them with math games and incentives to boost their math skills.

Every student provided a Powerpoint presentation as part of his/her program and answered questions asked by the evaluation panel, who were part of the audience. The purpose of the panel is to provide feedback to the students about their project.

Superintendent of School Evan Pitkoff said, "Looking back I am always amazed at how much I've learned from these projects. I've learned everything from how to do first step dancing to the oil spill that occurred at Fairfield Hills where my office used to be."

Science teacher and program advisor Frank LaBanza said "This program celebrates the true successes of our students. They learn at a superior level in authentic settings. The students do work in their field of interest. These projects have real applications and real value, which is the unique aspect of the program."