

# Student Talents Emerge In Their Senior Projects

By Larissa Lytwyn

Most students pursue their first internship experiences in college.

At Newtown High School, however, seniors can choose to explore a field of interest through the Senior Project program.

"Senior Projects can cover any subject, from writing and music to business and enterprise, technology, law or the military," said Peggy Ragani, director of the school's Career Center.

Any senior is eligible to participate in the semester-long program, provided the student has a clear idea of which career path he or she wishes to explore.

Ms Ragani visits juniors in their classes each spring to discuss the opportunity with them. Juniors interested in participating begin outlining a proposal before the end of the school year. They complete the project the following fall.

During the summer, Ms Ragani and her Career Center staff meet with area businesses and professionals to coordinate mentorships with the students.

This past fall, eight seniors completed their projects, which included a screenplay, published prose, a 100-page novella, a custom designed military recruitment pamphlet, a handbag entrepreneurship, a domestic violence education curriculum, a documentary on Islam, and a report on substance abuse laws and ordinances in Connecticut.

"The students have a lot of support each step of the way," said Ms Ragani.

First, the seniors are mandated to attend five classes relating to career goals and mentorship, as well as a "troubleshooting" session in which students can voice their challenges and concerns.

In addition to the troubleshooting session, Ms Ragani

said, the students are in consistent contact with the program's three high school faculty advisors, Frank LaBanca, Kirsten Hardy, and Angela Pennucci.

"The students also can be in touch with each other and their mentors and faculty members through a Senior Project forum accessible through the school's website," said Ms Ragani.

Throughout the process, students have the opportunity to meet and interact with their mentors.

"We had some particularly amazing mentors this year," said Ms Ragani, "including two local attorneys, one a prosecutor, the other a public defender, as well as an area military official, local screenwriter, teachers, and even a representative from Charter Community Vision 21."

Carl Berquist, 18, recently joined the National Guard. "I wanted to do a project that would relate to my experience in the army training," he said.

This fall, working with Sgt Scott Farrell, he designed a recruitment brochure touting the benefits of joining the US Armed Forces.

"One of the big reasons I joined was because it would help me be able to go to college," he said. "I don't think I was a minority in having that aspect be a deciding factor. There are a lot of young individuals who find the armed forces appealing because it will give them the opportunity to continue their education."

Carl's brochure details the multiple programs the Army offers, from the National Guard to the Marines and Air Force.

In addition, Carl said, the National Guard training he has experienced so far has helped him become more disciplined.

"I am more structured now, more organized in how I man-



Megan LaFlamme and Amelia Schwartz are two of eight Newtown High School students who recently concluded their senior projects. Megan launched her own line of designer bags and scarves, Needle Hook Works, while Amelia penned a collection of short stories, essays and poetry entitled *Musings, Scattered Thoughts and Times of a Teenager in High School*. —Bee Photo, Lytwyn

age my time," he said.

After graduating from Newtown High School this May, he will likely be deployed to Iraq.

"I feel as prepared [to go to Iraq] as I can," he said. "My job is to serve where I am needed."

Following his tour of Iraq, Carl said he would like to pursue a career in law enforcement.

"Law enforcement has always been where my interests lie," he said. "I think the Army will be very helpful for me to get there."

Megan LaFlamme, 17, also believes that her Senior Project will help her go in the direction she would like to pursue. business.

Megan recently parlayed her design and knitting skills into her own business, Needle Hook Works.

"My mother taught me how to sew and knit when I was around 10, and I've been doing it ever since," Megan said. "I love making bags and other items, and I thought it would be a good idea to earn academic credit doing it through the Senior Project."

Megan specializes in bags of various colors, sizes, and styles, as well as seasonally in-tune scarves. Prices range from \$25 to \$100.

"At first, I began selling the bags and scarves to my friends,

or friends and coworkers of my parents," said Megan. "To expand it into a business, I launched my own website and began attending craft fairs around Connecticut and New York."

Megan's pieces are currently available at the Brookfield Arts Center and the Washington Art Association.

Her work has also been featured in the Ridgefield High School Gift Fair, Craft and Gift Fair of Chappaqua, N.Y., and Woman's Club of Greenwich's annual Holiday Boutique.

Megan has always been the youngest artisan featured.

"I'm naturally somewhat reserved," said Megan, "so the craft fairs were an excellent opportunity to go out and 'sell' myself."

She also enjoyed speaking with other vendors. "All the fellow vendors I met were really nice," she said. "They gave me tips and helped me feel more comfortable. The entire process was a great experience!"

In addition, area artists and designers Janet Kemp, Brett Olbrys, and John Longacre mentored Megan this fall.

"Through my mentorships, I've learned how to best 'sell' myself through my website and the craft fairs," Megan said. "The Senior Project experience really helped me push this hobby to a whole new level."

Aspiring writer Amelia Schwartz also felt like her Senior Project, in which she published a 40 page compilation of her drawings, poems, and short stories, brought her craft to a stronger place.

"It was really exciting, but at the same time kind of nerve-wracking, to do the project," said Amelia. "I really bared my soul."

Amelia titled her piece *Musings, Scattered Thoughts and Times of a Teenager in High School*.

"The writings and art cover my entire high school experience, from some of the difficulties of my social life to problems communicating with my family," she said.

Writing *Musings*, she said, helped her communicate better with her family.

"It was really great to get everything out," she said, "I think it was therapeutic."

Amelia's art is deeply influenced by anime, which Amelia describes in *Musings* as "Japanese cartoons that can be watched in Japanese with English subtitles or translated into English."

Her love of graphic novels and cartoons inspired her to begin creating her own cartoon characters, including Damien, whom she calls her muse.

In *Musings*, Amelia writes, "When I finally set my pencil down, I took a good look at him. I felt satisfaction with my work, but I also felt something else. Something deep, something spiritual — I can't really describe it."

Later, she gave Damien "a personality and a past."

"With this boy I had made, a flood of ideas entered me," Amelia writes in *Musings*. "I began writing with him as the main focus — short stories, prompts, and even poems."



Megan LaFlamme's entrepreneurial start-up, Hook Needle Works, features knit scarves and handbags running from \$25 to \$100. —photo courtesy Hook Needle Works

Amelia's writings also reflect on her self-image and personal philosophies ("Be yourself"), as well as her experiences with her family.

"My Family" talks about her journey in taking karate lessons at Mike Porco's Academy of Karate in Sandy Hook. She is now training to become a certified karate instructor and currently is an assistant teacher.

Also featured is her college application essay to the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in Adams.

Recently, Amelia found out that she was accepted to the school.

"I'm really excited," she said. "It's a perfect fit for me — small and intimate."

The Senior Project Night gives the students the opportunity to showcase what they have accomplished," said Ms Ragani. "It's a very proud moment for the student, and often, for their families, too."

For more information on the Senior Project, contact Ms Ragani at the NHS Career

center. She plans to major in creative writing. "I can't imagine doing anything else," she said.

Ms Ragani praised the group for being "uniquely self-directed."

"Everyone had a very clear idea of what they wanted to do," she noted.

The program recently culmi-