



# LASA LIBERATOR

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## Johnston Archives Freeze Time

**MEGAN GEROLD** | editor emeritus  
**ETHAN STERN** | managing and copy editor

In between the shuffling feet of LASA students, decorated classrooms, and raptor traditions, lies the history of a school characterized by a community of strength, desegregation, and longheld pride. Amid all of this is an effort to preserve the multifaceted aspects of Johnston High School.

In 1960, Johnston opened its doors to the East Austin community — a community that has been primarily Black and Hispanic ever since Austin’s 1928 Master Plan

effectively segregated the city — and for years, it was a school that provided vocational programs to its students. When the Supreme Court of the United States ordered that separate was not equal in *Brown v. Board*, Austin did not immediately rise to desegregate their schools. It wasn’t until 1980, after Austin had been told to desegregate their schools, that Johnston was chosen as a school for White students to be bussed to, forming a student body of 2,100 and a community vastly different from years before.

Elizabeth Switek is the LASA librarian, and she has been working with alumni, staff, and students to ensure that the history of Johnston does not disappear. For the past three years, she has cultivated the Johnston Archives: a collection of both oral and physical history. After Johnston was closed in 2008, the campus became home to Eastside Memorial Early College High School. When LASA came on to the campus in 2021, there were materials left in the back room of the library that contained a variety of memorabilia from the Johnston years.

“Nothing happened that first year,” Switek said. “And then, probably in the 2nd year, Pauline Garza reached out to Ms. Koerth as they were getting ready they were getting ready for their 50th reunion. And so she started through that year, she and some of the other ladies started to come in and go through the archives.”

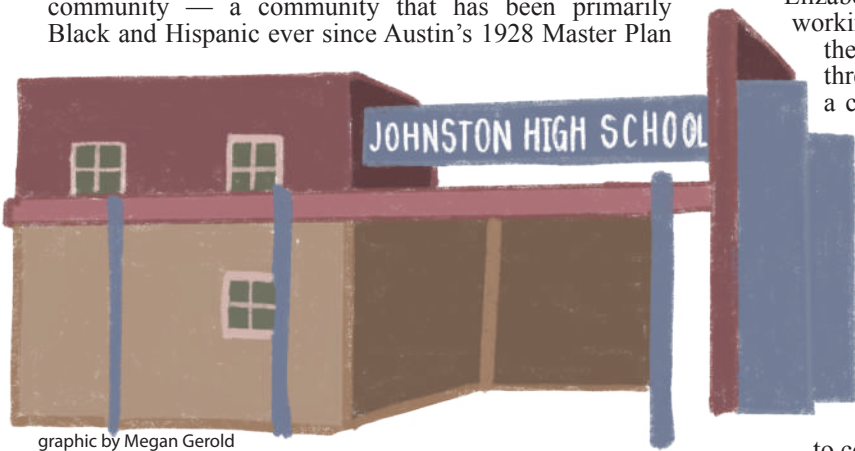
Switek and other members of the LASA community have worked to digitize what was left behind. The physical archives contain yearbooks, scrapbooks, announcement video tapes, trophies, newspapers, and school spirit emblems. Pauline Garza is a member of the Johnston Class of 1978, and for her, the Johnston archives are an important preservation of their history.

“It’s like a time capsule for us,” Garza said. “Seniors, you know, they can’t get out anymore and come and research. I think it’s great for them to be able to see it from their computer.”



photos by Ethan Stern

see **JOHNSTON** page 10



graphic by Megan Gerold

### what’s news

photo by Lily Antony



see **RAPTOR RUNDOWN** page 17

photo by Ellington Tough



see **PROPOSITIONAL** page 5



see **BEST VIEWS** lasaliberator.com

photo by Georgia Fink

## Trump Tries UT



graphic by Megan Gerold

**JACK ZIPFEL** | staff writer

A potential agreement between the University of Texas at Austin (UT) and the Trump administration has sparked concern among alumni, students, and community members who say the deal threatens academic independence. The compact has ignited debate about political influence and free expression on campus.

The proposal, known as the Compact for Academic Excellence, offers financial incentives in exchange for adopting restrictive policies that critics say could reshape classroom content, limit international enrollment, and impose political oversight on higher education. Several UT professors declined to comment due to fear for their positions.

UT alumnus Nevin Kamath, who has been active in advocacy efforts like the protest movement Stand for Campus

Freedom, stated that the compact represents an unacceptable political intrusion into campus life.

“Don’t sign the compact, because Trump’s not somebody you want to do business with,” Kamath said.

Kamath explained that the controversy extends beyond financial considerations, emphasizing what he views as ideological coercion from the federal government. He believes the compact functions as a tool to pressure universities into adopting specific political positions, particularly regarding speech and academic content.

“I think it’s imposing an ideological litmus test on the entire higher education ecosystem by Trump and his corrupt, incompetent, and vengeful cabal,” Kamath said. “I think the money is the coercive instrument that is being used to bait or threaten UT into compliance.”

see **UT** page 6

## Behind the Sound

*Inside ACL’s Auditory Landscape*

**GEORGIA FINK** | entertainment editor

On the big stages of Austin City Limits, artists have many pieces of their music, from their voice and guitars to drums and bass that come together to form their signature sounds. Behind the scenes, or in big tents in front of the stage, audio technicians are key to making sure that all these vastly different pieces come together in just the right way to make an amazing sound for the audience.

Austin City Limits (ACL) has two main stages and six other smaller ones, each with its own group of sound people to ensure smooth performances. They do a sound check at each stage once every

day, mix the audio for both the speakers and monitors throughout the performances, and fix the multitude of problems that arise throughout the day. Ben Foster, an employee of Big House Sound and live audio engineer on the BMI stage, described all of the planning that goes into getting ready for the festival.

“There’s a lot of email advances depending on what artists might need,” Foster said. “We all have a particular stage package for our stages, and then, if there’s any extra gear that artists might need, they would sort that out in advance through email.”

see **BEHIND** page 12



graphic by Megan Gerold

## Rise, Fall, Rise Again

*Journalism Cycles Throughout History*

**SADIE SARRAT** | club contributor

Traditional journalism and reporting have long played a role in the American democratic system. In recent years, however, the industry has rapidly evolved alongside society.

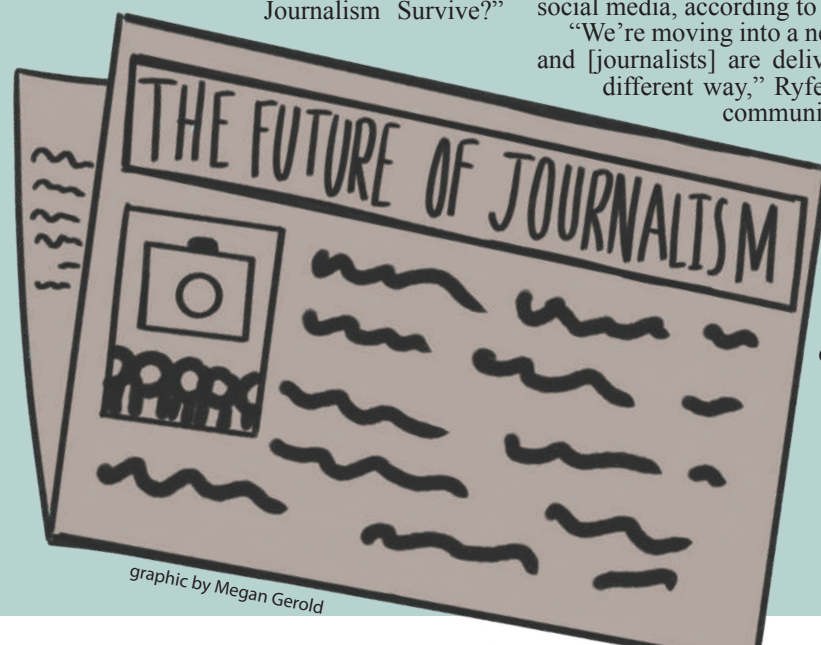
David Ryfe, director of the School of Journalism and Media at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), has studied the changing journalism industry and its role in America for more than 20 years. He has written two books on the subject: “Can Journalism Survive?”

and “Journalism and the Public.” Through his published work and his recent seminar at UT’s Luchtime Lecture series, Ryfe shared his insights about journalism’s history, the current issues surrounding the industry, and how it may evolve in future years.

Ryfe defined the role of a journalist as a storyteller who informs the public. However, as the industry is changing, these roles should expand to connecting with the public in new ways to keep up with society and the rise of social media, according to Ryfe.

“We’re moving into a new era of citizenship, and [journalists] are delivering expertise in a different way,” Ryfe said. “It may mean community organizing or not writing news stories. It may mean they are going to be like Socrates and hang out at the local coffee shop and answer people’s questions.”

see **RISE** page 6



graphic by Megan Gerold

# editorial Holiday Decorations: When is it too Early?

**Staff Stance:** Every grading period the LASA Liberator staff present their opinion on an important current issue in the form of an editorial written by Commentary. The opinions in the piece below represent those of the staff as a collective, not of each individual member.

TINGYU CAO | commentary editors  
ARIANA RODRIGUEZ

As the holiday season approaches, there tends to be an unbreakable urge to shop and decorate. Stores are filled with the most magical, festive decorations. Shopping and decorating are tightly related. To justify our purchase, stores make us think, "Wow, this would be wonderful in my home!" This influx of decoration shopping and purchasing generally means an increased eagerness to begin decorating. Thus, a question arises: when is it too early to start decorating? When should stores begin selling decorations for each winter holiday?

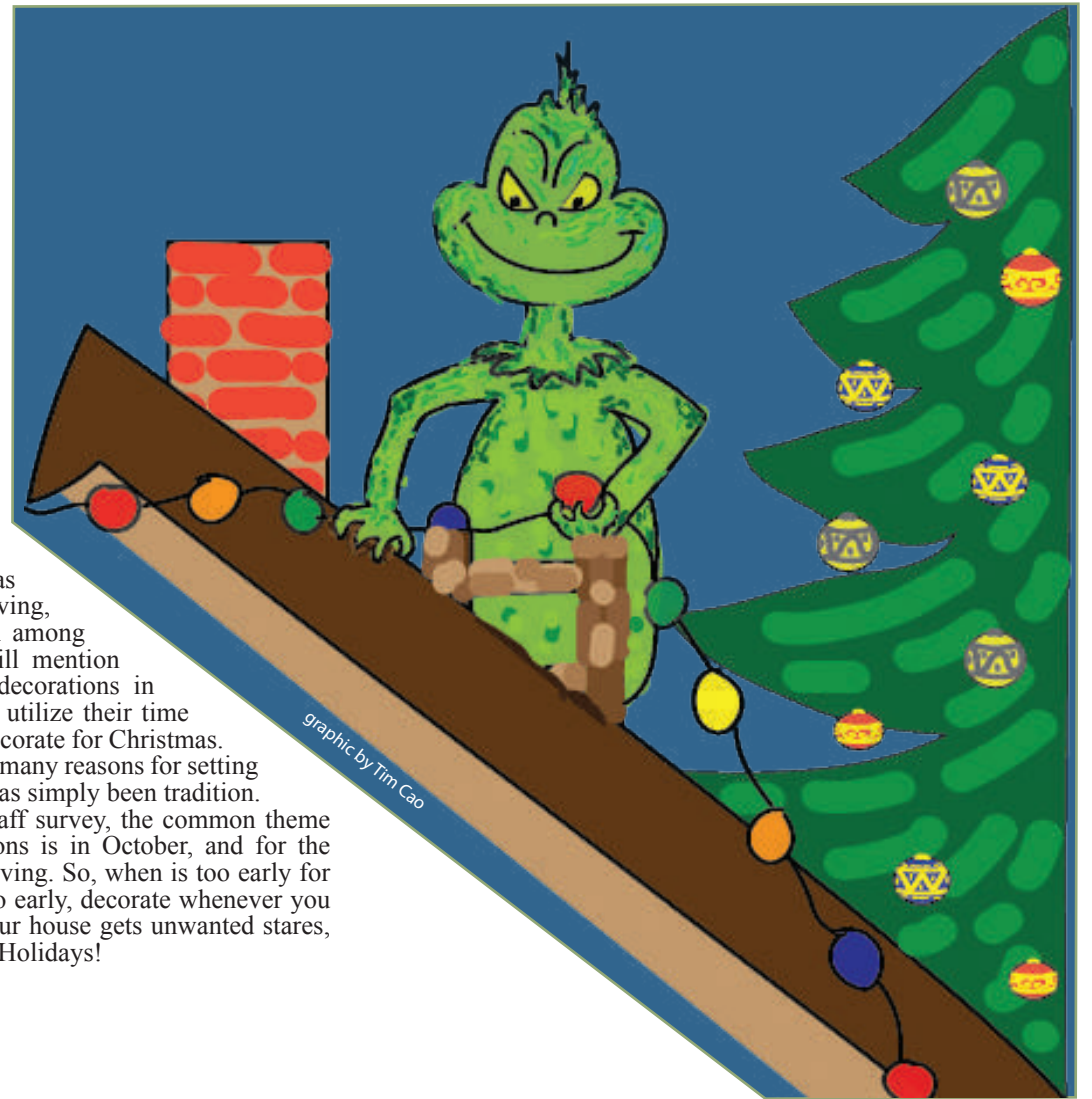
According to the LASA Liberator staff, the major concern when decorating for the winter holidays is time. Spectacular decoration requires time to set up. Specifically for Halloween, students find themselves too busy to plan for and set up decorations, as it happens around the middle of the first semester, so they usually have to utilize their free time during weekends or other holidays to decorate. Stores should therefore follow that decoration schedule. Our staff thinks that Halloween decorations should begin appearing in stores as early as late August, ideally around September. There would be enough time just as the spooky season rolls in along the fall, and they wouldn't want to be bothered with anything relating to Halloween during the summer.

Similarly to how stores treat Halloween, the stores should also implement the same strategy for the winter holidays. Since the Winter holidays require even more time to set up, many think that stores should begin advertising for winter decorations earlier, around October; however, it was mentioned that mostly they begin decorating after Halloween. There is also the strong belief against having winter decorations take over the shelves so completely in late October that there are no more Halloween decorations; some families prefer to set up for Halloween later.

Every family treats decorations differently, but among our staff body there are a few common consensuses for Halloween decorations. Halloween decorations go up in October. Most families will not put the decorations up any later than two weeks into October, as some families participate in holiday decoration competitions. Conversely, the most common problems for Halloween arise with the issue of carved pumpkins. Carved pumpkins are the centerpieces

of Halloween decorations for most, and people have very specific ideas on when they should set them up. In October, people slowly put up the decorations during their free time, like during weekends, but the pumpkins are restricted to later. The pumpkins are vulnerable to both decay and animals; sometimes, squirrels get into them. As a result, most families choose to finish their decorations with them, and some even specifically prevent the squirrels by applying spices to the pumpkins beforehand.

On the other hand, the winter holidays are a little different for everyone. Holidays like Christmas, Hanukkah, and Diwali are all celebrated in the winter. A plurality believes that Christmas should be kept until after Thanksgiving, as that is a long-standing tradition among some families; however, others still mention that they set up their Christmas decorations in November anyway. Some say they utilize their time during the Thanksgiving break to decorate for Christmas. According to our staff, there are not many reasons for setting up decorations in such an order: it has simply been tradition. As we have concluded from our staff survey, the common theme for setting up Halloween decorations is in October, and for the winter holidays, it is after Thanksgiving. So, when is too early for decorating? Honestly, it is never too early, decorate whenever you want. Just understand that when your house gets unwanted stares, maybe it has been too early. Happy Holidays!



## Raptor Chatter

When is too early to decorate for holidays?



photo by Ethan Stern

**Evan Ault**  
Freshman

"It's too early the day after Halloween. The day after Thanksgiving is a fair day."



photo by Ethan Stern

**Brian Manning Lorino**  
Sophomore

"I've seen people put it up as early as November 1st, and I think that is objectively wrong. I think you have to wait till at least after Thanksgiving."



photo by Ethan Stern

**Kate Wright**  
Junior

"For Christmas, before November 1st, outrageous. For Halloween, before October 1st, also outrageous."



photo by Ethan Stern

**Eva de Leon**  
Senior

"I think it's never too early to put up holiday decorations."

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**If you are interested in writing for the paper and becoming a club contributor then be sure to stop by Room 701 to find out more!**

## LASA LIBERATOR

### Editorial Policy

Responsibilities of a free student press: Serving as the primary communication link within the Liberal Arts and Science Academy and between the school and the local community, this newspaper accepts the responsibilities inherent in being a free press. The LASA Liberator staff strive to produce a professional-quality publication that follows the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. The objective is to print the news in a fair and objective manner with the utmost regard for integrity.

#### Editorial Content:

1. The students on The LASA Liberator staff will print articles which have been researched to the best of their ability to obtain the most complete available information.
2. The information will be presented in a truthful and fair manner.
3. When personal commentary is given it will be in good taste on issues that have been researched, analyzed and where expert opinion has been sought.
4. All commentary will be clearly labeled as such.
5. No material which is obscene, libelous or that will cause an immaterial and substantial disruption of the school day, according to accepted legal definitions, will be printed.

#### The Editorial Boards and its Functions:

The LASA Liberator staff will be governed by an editorial board composed of the following individuals: lead editors and commentary editors.

#### The Editorial board will:

1. Determine the content of the publication (with input from other staff members)
2. Stress the editorial policy
3. Ensure the accuracy of the publication
4. Address inappropriate behavior on the part of the staff
5. Dispense disciplinary action to staff members
6. Change or add policy as necessary

#### Viewpoints:

Printed material which contains the opinion of a staff member or a contributing writer will be labeled as such. These views are not intended to reflect the view of the administration of Liberal Arts and Science Academy nor the School Board of the Austin Independent School District. Viewpoints will be given in two areas in the newspaper.

Editorials: These will be determined by the staff consensus. The editorial will be unsigned and will represent the majority viewpoint of the staff.

Commentary: Commentary articles represent the viewpoint of one member of the staff, and are signed as such. These articles do not represent the opinions of the entire staff.

Letters to the Editor: Letters to the Editor are accepted for topics of general interest to the readership of the newspaper. Letters must be submitted typed or neatly printed in ink and must have the signature of the writer and the writer's grade level. Editors reserve the right to determine which issue the letter will be published in, with every effort made to print the letter as soon as possible. The editors also reserve the right to edit the letter for grammar, length and repetition. No letters which are obscene or libelous will be published.

Non-Staff Contributors: Bylined contributions are welcome.

Correction of Errors: The staff makes every effort to print accurate information. In the case of substantial errors, a written correction will be made in the following issue of the newspaper.

Sources: In general, no anonymous sources will be used in reporting. Sources from within the school, as well as those not connected with the school, will be used. Under no circumstances will gifts, including coupons, etc., be accepted by the staff members from sources or advertisers.

Note: The LASA Liberator will attempt to publish a range of opinions within reason.

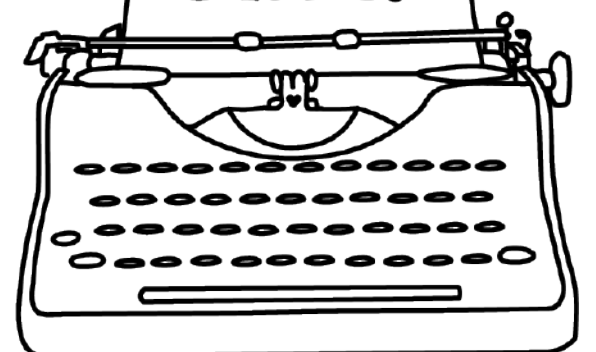
## Vol. 52 Ed. 2.5

This new issue is a corrected and improved reprint of an edition originally published on December 15, 2025.

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LETTER TO THE  
EDITOR  
2025-2026



**Commentary Disclaimer:** Commentary is committed to sharing a variety of views through journalistic expression. The articles we publish may put forth ideas and arguments that are not representative of everyone that is a part of the newspaper, or The LASA Liberator as a whole.

# Video Tours Killed the Museum Star

## Why Prerecorded Museum Video Exhibitions Fail to Engage Visitors

**KEILA RODRIGUEZ-FLORES** | staff writer

In recent years, it has become common to have video exhibits in museums as a form of art; these videos include different works from multiple artists. The videos in exhibits tend to have many visitors waiting around a wall or behind a curtain just to see a film playing. Once you enter, you have to watch the full length, or else you'll miss a part of the art. A problem arises because not everyone has time to watch a video, or they are on a time limit and still want to take a look at other art in the museum. These exhibits have to change their way of presenting this type of art, or stop presenting it completely. Videos in exhibits do not attract much attention, including to people like me. They do not compare to physical art or art that you can interact with. Additionally, individuals find that it is difficult to time the beginning of a video, leading to some gaps in the story if not fully watched.

Highlighting how one particular museum implements both video and physical arts, Herald-Tribune mentions how the Sarasota Art Museum has both videos and visual art, allowing visitors to enjoy both. Some of their videos show the cycle of organic time made by Janet Biggs and Peter Campus. Janet Biggs explains how she aims to showcase the art of nature and its impact on climate change. Peter Campus showcases his art through a time-lapse of various locations around the world. Both of them collaborated on a piece of art for over a year. Their art consists of two screens, with one on the right and the other on the left, both showing their art combined. Marty Fugate says that, as a reviewer for films, a graphic designer, and someone known for experience in producing films himself and doing voiceovers, professional producers aim for strong, simple images, and the videos made by collaborated artists Janet and Peter do not achieve that criterion. They mention that the video does include strong images, but it is unsatisfying how the images continue to constantly change and require you to pay heavy attention to the video, along with the message included.

Art projected through a video catches less attention from people in museums and galleries. People do not always stop to watch a piece of art projected through technology. ResearchGate.net performed a study on how many people would stop by to see a video. 45 videos in different museums averaged an attraction

rate of 0.70. Even though these numbers are low, it can be increased by having a better environment, for example, adding comfortable seating, providing food, or increasing the space inside, but this can be challenging knowing that even though a video attracts more viewers, it does not mean they will always be willing to stay due to their urge of wanting to move on to the next exhibit element. These results have been improved to an amount over .50 by motivating the audience to stay longer by adding messages in videos that indicate the viewer to stay, but this still does not mean they stayed the full time watching the video.



Graphic by Tita Gonzalez

rate of 32%, meaning only one third of visitors stopped and were willing to watch. This study shows that videos in museums are not effective at capturing visitors' attention and have a lower attraction rate, considering that an attraction rate of more than 60% is an exceptional amount, which is about double the amount of 32%. The 45 videos also averaged a holding power of 0.39, which meant the number of people who watched were there for less than half of the video's length. The amount of holding power from these

A study was conducted to identify how museum videos can be engaging during COVID. NIH.gov, also known as the National Institutes of Health, mentioned that a science museum established by the government, named "Science Center", had 197 exhibits with a variety of educational programs and cultural events for youths. When the pandemic started, the museum started including all its resources online on platforms like YouTube. The study included many visitors and their responses to this new way of presenting information, but the responses were not particularly positive. One of the Science Center educators talked about how the early version of the YouTube videos was not interesting even to her. Another research was done in a renowned museum with a virtual reality experience and a physical traditional experience. The virtual experience still had fewer visitors, and the physical experience was more engaging and tended to attract more visitors.

Even though videos in museums seem to not have a big audience compared to physical museums, it does not mean that there is no space for improvement like having improved seating, having a better quality during their videos shown, or even shortening their videos to have visitors stay longer or maybe the full time. However, this still does not mean it is still better than being able to look at the details of a historical or expressive piece of art in person.

# APs Demand Burnout

**VIOLET ZITKOVIC** | staff writer

Every LASA student is required to take at least eight AP classes by the end of high school. When factoring in languages and the math requirement for every year, that value tends to rise to nine or ten. Students are not required to take the exams, of course, but given they'll already be preparing for them the whole year—and that they'll be exempt from one of their finals if they do—almost all end up doing so anyway. The consequence is that upwards of \$800 goes into the pockets of the College Board for every single one of the about 400 students present in any LASA yearly class, totaling to \$320,000 per graduating class after their four years. Could that money not be used more effectively? Could it be that LASA's endless pursuit of AP courses is actually doing more harm than good? A large question that many Advanced Placement (AP) students have is what that money is going towards. On the surface, it seems to allow students to receive college credits or improve their probability of acceptance into colleges, which taking and passing the exams does affect. But a lot of U.S. colleges don't take AP exams for full credit or placement, especially a lot of more prestigious colleges. Foreign colleges are even more stringent: Oxford, for example, requires three or four 5s in subjects related to your major. On top of the increasing pass rates of AP exams—some have upwards of 80% getting a 3 or above, as reported by the College Board—it's pretty clear that each one of them doesn't hold as much weight as it seems, especially for AP classes in fields that students aren't even interested in or planning to go to college for. In reality, that money mostly serves to coat the College Board's already immense profits. Despite being nominally a nonprofit, they still have over a billion and a half dollars in revenue, mostly caught up in various investments. The cost of AP exams has been ever increasing, too; 20 years ago, it was almost 20 dollars lower as tracked by TotalRegistration. Especially in the humanities, the tests don't even provide the testing of thought they say they do. They mostly gauge ability to follow rubrics and write formulaic essays in short amounts of time. For more complex, multifaceted topics such as history or English, it's simply not possible to accurately showcase a deep grasp of them within such a short time. And this is a big shame, because the actual things being taught in those classes are interesting and useful. But they still fall to the wayside when placed under the heel of the AP Exam. So we are currently beholden to an expensive, stressful, and not even all that

useful system. This should not continue, and from what I've heard throughout my time at the school, not many students want it to. A solution to this problem wouldn't come easily. Having both AP English Language and AP English Literature required is not necessary, given that a lot of colleges don't even accept two AP English credits, making them merely serve as an additional stressor in the two hardest years of high school. The ability to take a choice of English classes—perhaps a situation with a couple of different English IV's, focusing on different types of literature, alongside the district requirements—could be a lot less stressful and more interesting. Social Studies can go a similar way. There are a wealth of year-long and semester-long electives that often don't even make the cut because students don't have a chance to do them. Meanwhile, this would result in added slots in testing rooms due to students not having to take some of the APs they don't want to take. This means that more students can have the opportunity to self-study for tests that either they don't have room for in their schedule, already have the required knowledge for from previous classes, or that LASA doesn't even offer. LASA doesn't allow students that aren't seniors to take AP exams that they're not in a class for right now. For many students setting their sights on higher-echelon or foreign colleges, having these exams done before their senior year is a near-necessity. LASA is known for its intense rigor when it comes to academics. But pure difficulty doesn't always equal rigor, and AP classes often are difficult in ways divorced from the difficulty of the actual content. LASA does a great job with its non-AP college-level class. Two of my favorite subjects this year are Organic Chemistry and Linear Algebra, and despite being a lot less stressful than, say, AP Lang or APUSH, I feel that I've learned a lot more from them. There are other ways to get college credit that aren't just APs, also, such as dual-credit or ACC courses. LASA already does some integration of these into its courses, such as through the Biotechnology internship and the ACC U.S. History, Government, and Economics courses. Incorporating this into more subjects is purely a matter of expanding an existing system. The state of education in the U.S. is currently quite rocky. Even if the College Board won't change to fit the times, perhaps we still can. LASA prides itself on being a place where bright students can succeed and excel in the disciplines of their own choosing. But holding on to structures that only increase stress and cost while better options for helping students are out there isn't the way to do so.

# Lost in College Majors

**ELIOT DONMOYER** | staff writer

Do you remember that cliché of asking elementary schoolers what they want to be when they grow up? They answer with jobs like supermodel, doctor, or even giraffe. It was all pretend back then, yet now, we are being asked the same question: What do you want to major in in college? Except, now there is the expectation that we have a realistic answer with a plan. And my answer to that question is "How the heck should I know?" Asking a seventeen-year-old what they want to be is just as ridiculous as asking an eight-year-old. So if, like me, you are not certain about what you want to major in, you should consider applying as undeclared. This argument does not apply to you if you already have a clear career in mind, especially if it is something that will take a long time, like being a doctor or an engineer. This argument is for people who don't have a clear college or career plan. According to the New York Times, in 2013, only 27% of college graduates had jobs related to their major. It's difficult to decide how to spend your life. People can change majors, find themselves with jobs completely unrelated to their major, or have a midlife crisis and decide to become a giraffe. By going into college undeclared, you can explore a wide variety of fields during your freshman and sophomore years, so you can decide your major with confidence. Similarly, during the first two years at LASA, we were required to take four signature classes in distinct fields. Through that exposure,

we found our strengths and weaknesses. Some colleges, Harvard included, require students to be undeclared for their first two years for the purpose of academic exploration, and most colleges have general curriculum requirements that make sure you can keep getting the credits you need while exploring various interests. Some reasonable concerns about starting undeclared are that it will affect admission chances and will extend your time in college, thus increasing an already burdensome cost. To these concerns, I cannot offer catch-all assurances. Some colleges, such as the University of Toledo with its QUEST program, offer great support for being undeclared. At others, like Harvard, being undeclared is mandatory. Conversely, some majors require all four years of classes, like most engineering majors. So when considering a college, do research to see if they have programs to assist undeclared students to graduate on time. Also, ask admissions counselors if applying undeclared will hurt your chances. If it does, then definitely consider choosing a major instead. In the same fashion you would apply for safeties and reaches, you can apply for a particular major in some places and undeclared in others. High schoolers have their entire lives ahead of them. And that's, ideally, a lot of time, so avoid pigeonholing yourself if you have no clue what you want to be when you grow up. There's no shame in not knowing.



graphic by Ariana Rodriguez

# Scientific Hoaxes Put Millions of Americans at Risk

ELINA SARKAR | staff writer

The earth is flat, climate change is a hoax, COVID-19 was made up, the moon landing was faked, and every person in power is an interdimensional shape-shifting lizard. All false—right? Shockingly, for millions of Americans, the answer would be no, and according to the Guardian, almost 12 million people believe in the last theory. Although it seems to be an increasingly unpopular opinion, evidence-based science is crucial for our future.

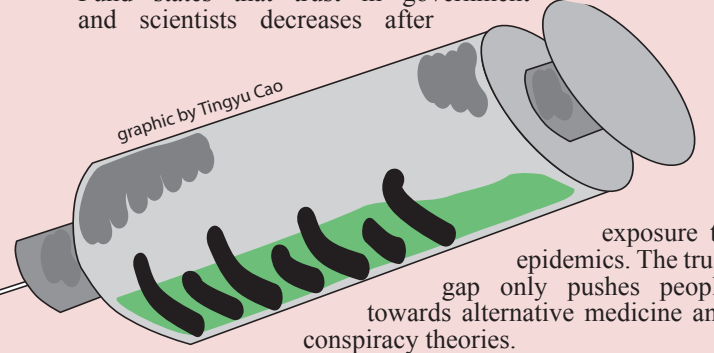
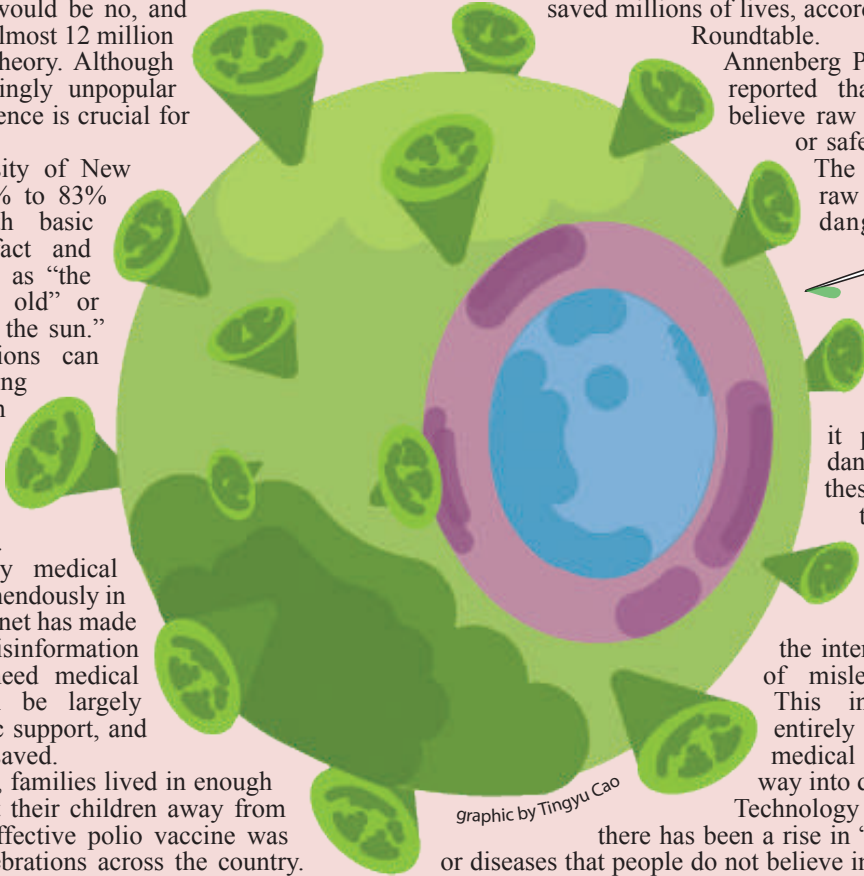
According to a University of New Hampshire study, only 53% to 83% of Americans agree with basic statements of scientific fact and common knowledge, such as “the Earth is billions of years old” or “the Earth revolves around the sun.” These simple misconceptions can easily evolve into something more harmful. Pew Research determined in 2021 that 22% of US adults have very little confidence that medical scientists act in the best interest of the public. Views of science—notably medical science—have changed tremendously in the past 100 years. The internet has made it easier than ever for misinformation to spread. Yet, we still need medical advancements, which can be largely propelled forward by public support, and this is reflected in the lives saved.

In the early 20th century, families lived in enough fear of polio that they kept their children away from public spaces. When the effective polio vaccine was announced, there were celebrations across the country. In 2025, when the dangers of polio seem so far-fetched,

childhood vaccination rates have dropped, and polio has been found in the wastewater of developed nations. Because of a lack of belief in childhood vaccinations, we are seeing almost-eradicated diseases reemerge.

Another notable yet denied advancement in human health is milk pasteurization. This innovation has saved millions of lives, according to Philanthropy Roundtable. However, the Annenberg Public Policy Center reported that 24% of people believe raw milk is just as safe or safer than regular milk. The CDC reports that raw milk is full of dangerous

pandemic, people are spending much more time looking at fake health content on social media. The International Monetary Fund states that trust in government and scientists decreases after



bacteria and also spreads the bird flu. Medical denial is not just a personal danger—it places everyone in danger. Denials like these are fueled by two crucial things: the internet and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social media and the internet at large are full of misleading information. This information, though entirely false, leaks into medical science and finds its way into doctors’ offices. MIT Technology Review reports that there has been a rise in “contested illnesses” or diseases that people do not believe in. They attribute this directly to social media. Moreover, because of the COVID-19

exposure to epidemics. The trust gap only pushes people towards alternative medicine and conspiracy theories.

The true tragedy is that our world is on the precipice of overwhelmingly beneficial scientific discoveries. The fastest vaccine on record before 2020 took four years to develop. The COVID vaccine took less than 12 months. We see life-changing research into stem cells that could treat cancer, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, and even regenerate limbs. We are on the verge of being able to genetically modify children’s DNA to prevent disease. The World Health Organization reports that immunizations have saved over 154 million lives in the last fifty years. Penicillin has saved somewhere between 80 to 100 million lives alone. Because of medical rejection, funding has stalled across the NIH, with research halted on crucial mRNA vaccines for diseases like COVID-19 and bird flu. Because we have stopped believing in medicine, critical research goes undiscovered.

Throughout human history, medical advancements have been universally celebrated. The consensus has always been to respect those educated in medicine and follow their advice. As we cease to do so, we see lives lost. Instead of donning our tinfoil hats, we should all think more logically about our health. Modern medicine is not a belief system; it is a science. By refusing to follow it, we only put ourselves, those we love, and the global community in danger.

# The Case for Government Ban on Smoking, Vaping

Evidence from Cancer, Environmental Risks Support Eliminating Cigarettes Entirely

PHOENIX GEROME | staff writer

Smoking is a common activity in the U.S. and across the world, despite the vast risks when it comes to smoking, many of which are cancerous. However, even with these known risks, the government still isn’t willing to ban smoking completely.

There are two forms of smoking: first-hand smoking and second-hand smoking. First-hand smoking is the direct inhalation of the smoke from either a cigarette or an e-cigarette. Second-hand smoke is breathed in the smoke either puffed out from the smoker or the smoke emitted from the cigarette. Both of these are terrible for your body and health. Even inhaling smoke from someone else has the possibility of causing lung cancer. Approximately 23.6% of adults currently smoke as of 2025. In the U.S., first-hand smoking causes approximately 20% of all cancers and 30% of all cancer deaths. About 480,000 people die each year in the U.S. due to smoking, including 41,000 deaths from secondhand smoke. Unfortunately, these deaths are preventable, only if cigarettes are banned.

In addition, the use of e-cigarettes, also known as vapes, is just as bad. While vapes have fewer chemicals than traditional cigarettes, they still bring disastrous health effects such as inflammation and irritation of the lungs. Among U.S. middle and high school students, only about 5.9% reported using e-cigarettes, which is roughly over 1 million students. However, adults’ usage of e-cigarettes sprang from 4.5% in 2019 to 6.5% in 2023. Vapes, like cigarettes, also have nicotine, which is a highly addictive stimulant that makes you want to keep smoking. According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, nicotine raises your blood pressure and spikes your adrenaline, which increases your heart rate and the possibility of

having a heart potential risks health issues. occurs is fires. their cigarette, major risk. In explode and overcharging, temperatures,

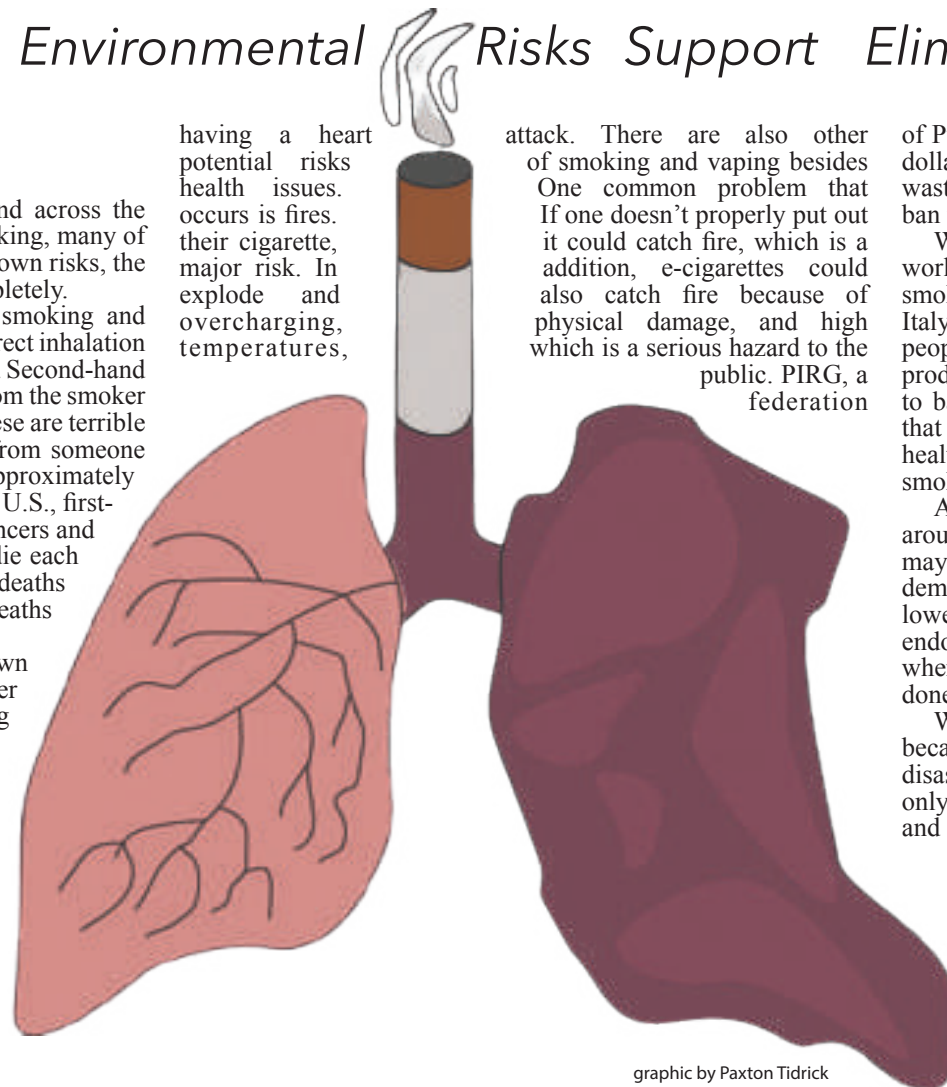
attack. There are also other of smoking and vaping besides One common problem that If one doesn’t properly put out it could catch fire, which is a addition, e-cigarettes could also catch fire because of physical damage, and high which is a serious hazard to the public. PIRG, a federation

of Public Interest Research Groups, reports that over 95 million dollars are being spent each year because of e-cigarette fires in waste facilities, which again, could be prevented if authorities ban the production of e-vapes and cigarettes.

While smoking continues to pose serious risks around the world, over 70 countries have taken strong steps forward to ban smoking. Some of which include Germany, Canada, Japan, and Italy. And some countries, such as the Maldives, have restricted people born after Jan. 1, 2007, from accessing or smoking tobacco products completely. The country of Paraguay is the first country to ban smoking in all public areas completely. Some benefits that these countries will get now are better public health, lower healthcare spending, and cleaner public areas, all from banning smoking.

Although smoking is terrible for your health and the people around you, some studies show that smoking and nicotine may prevent or improve Parkinson’s disease and Alzheimer’s dementia, according to PubMed. In addition, smokers have a lower risk of developing diseases such as ulcerative colitis, endometrial cancer, and possibly cognitive impairment. But, when it comes to cigarette smoking, there is more harm being done than good, including the damage being done to other people.

We should be concerned about the global issue of smoking because it not only damages your health, but can also spark other disastrous effects, such as fires. The government should ban not only traditional cigarettes, but also vapes, to help prevent deaths and other diseases at the cost of smoking.



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# Easy Street: How the Neighborhood is Replacing the City

JACK ZIPFEL | staff writer

As Austin seeks ways to house a growing population, the idea of 15-minute neighborhoods where daily needs can be reached on foot or by bike is gaining traction. However, residents and city planners affirmed that this promise of walkability clashes with legal, economic, and social realities.

15-minute neighborhoods cluster groceries, parks, healthcare, schools, and workplaces within a short walk or bike ride of homes. Advocates argue the model reduces car dependency and supports local businesses, while critics warn of displacement and zoning barriers. Locally, Austin communities such as Mueller and The Grove serve as embodiments of those ideas. Lorene Wallace, a long time resident of Mueller, shared how the design influences daily life and creates certain trade offs.

"We have a beautiful lake park and walking trails that connect most of the parks," Wallace said. "Because of the nearby Dell Children's Medical Center, there are also medical offices and dentists within walking distance."

Jorge Rousselin, an urban design manager with the City of Austin, said historic land use patterns still limit mixed use development, a type of urban planning that combines different uses such as residential and commercial. He pointed to zoning patterns established after World War II that separated uses and favored car based design.

"...It has to do with the pattern of development that has happened across the entire nation post-World War II," Rousselin said. "What we essentially did was create these single-family-only districts that really didn't accommodate a variety of land uses."

According to Rousselin, minimum parking requirements, setbacks resulting from existing layouts, and separated land uses institutionalized the need to drive. His comments suggest that there are structural changes the city would need to pursue if it hopes to implement large-scale walkability.

"You had residential neighborhoods in one area and commercial uses in another area, and people had no option but to drive to these destinations," Rousselin said. "Until we are able to reform zoning laws to allow more diverse housing types and smaller retail footprints, it's difficult for small, walkable storefronts to thrive."

The Grove, a more recent planned community in Austin

that opened in 2018, offers parks and local retail, but residents still note gaps. Erin Ellis, a resident of the Grove, said the



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

neighborhood's arrangement has been a significant factor in her family's lifestyle.

"It's really changed our daily routine," Ellis said. "We try to walk or bike for most things and already walk to our school every single day with our kids."

Ellis also described how amenities such as pocket parks, trails, and new markets have improved convenience. To her, the development can be walkable internally but still depend on cars for trips outside of the neighborhood.

"It really feels like urban living because we used to live in London and enjoyed walking everywhere to get what we needed," Ellis said. "When The [Grove] Market went in, the whole neighborhood absolutely was rejoicing because it's been a game changer."

Ellis highlighted small but consequential absences, most notably a coffee shop, that shape how residents use—or don't use—public space. She remarked that walkability is not only about distance, but the mix of services that make walking more practical.

"They are definitely missing a coffee shop and everyone on our Grove Facebook page talks about it," Ellis said. "We would all be in there socializing and working if one came."

City planners also point out that the future of walkable neighborhoods depends not only on zoning but on whether small businesses can survive in the areas intended to support them. Rousselin said economic barriers often prevent the amenities residents expect from taking root.

"You have to have a collaboration of the private sector, and you have to incentivize development," Rousselin said. "You have to have people coming to these places, customers, and a diversity of ways to get there."

Rousselin added that walkable districts require more than sidewalks and housing variety. They depend on policies that make it feasible for corner stores, cafes, and small retailers to open and stay afloat.

"Maybe partner through tax abatements or reinvestment tools to support an area, because one of the impediments is zoning that doesn't allow smaller footprints of retail," Rousselin said. "Until zoning laws change, private businesses will keep struggling to even consider a 15-minute neighborhood."

## Propositional Election Results are in, Q Fails

### 17 Constitutional Amendments Pass in Texas as Local Austin Statute is Declined

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor  
CLEMENTINE DAVIS | staff writers  
PILAR DETTMER  
ANDREW DRUMMOND

Texas voters took to the polls to weigh in on everything from city ordinances to their state's constitution. With voter turnout hovering at around 20%, residents approved a plethora of constitutional amendments in the recently held propositional election. In Austin, they rejected Proposition Q, which would have raised property taxes to pay for homelessness reduction and park maintenance.

Held on Nov. 4, 2025, the election offered 17 new amendments to the Texas State Constitution, most of which were tax breaks, but also included funding for Texas State Technical College, dementia research, and water infrastructure. Several of those tax breaks adjusted the ability of Texas school districts to levy taxes.

Attorney and politician Robin Lerner says that constitutional amendments should be extremely broad, allowing opportunities to write laws with specifics beneath them. Amendments like these, which are detailed and explicit, are unusual to her.

"There's a lot that I feel is just inappropriate for a constitution," Lerner said. "I've worked on democracies around the world, and you don't write tax law into a constitution."

Some Texans harbor worries for the new amendments, despite every proposal passing with at least 54% approval, with some reaching into the high 80s. Josue Garcia, a history and geography teacher at LASA, found that the amendments largely reflected the politics surrounding the issues.

"There are concerns with equity of the amendments passed," Garcia said, "future strain on the already tight state budget, how sustainable some of these amendments will be, and if there was ideological overreach."

Lerner believes that the impact many of these amendments will have on education is negative. She stated that while some of these may effectively benefit low income or elderly people, they are taking immense funding away from Texan public schools. Homestead exemptions automatically set aside part of a property's value from being taxable to pay for public schools, which is what Propositions 11 and 13 accomplish by increasing the amount of a home's value that can't be considered for tax towards public schools from \$100,000 to \$140,000. Many Texans will pay less in property taxes under the new legislation, especially seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities, who typically get larger exemptions.

"It is challenging to fund our schools when there are these exemptions that are made that are coming out of the school pot of money," Lerner said. "In this case you have a couple of homestead exemptions... which is hard because we all have to

pay for schools in order for schools to really thrive."

After amendments pass the Senate and House of the Texas Legislature, they go to a popular vote, with a simple majority determining the fate of the propositions. Jeremy Mazur is the Director of Infrastructure and Natural Resources Policy at Texas 2036, a nonpartisan public policy organization.

"The last constitutional amendment election we had was in 2023," Mazur said. "It's not unusual to see a handful of proposed amendments to the proposed amendments to the constitution every few years."

Although political splits have been a focus at the Texas Legislature in recent years, Mazur explained that they rarely come up in successful constitutional amendments. Because changes to the governing document need two-thirds approval to pass, divides are rare, and a bottleneck narrows hundreds of propositions into around a dozen viable ones.

"When you look at the constitutional amendment election results we didn't necessarily see Republicans being more for or against anything, but that all the propositions passed, and largely passed with pretty good margins," Mazur said. "Sometimes they don't make it through the legislative process. They may be introduced or just never heard, or they may pass one chamber but never be considered in another chamber."

Proposition 15 focuses on parental rights, ensuring that parents, not schools, will be the primary decision makers for children regarding matters such as the name the child goes by and what medications school nurses can administer. Lerner suggested that part of the legislature's motivation in passing the amendment was to give parents more say into their children's gender identities, which have drawn controversy in the state before, with a similar bill forbidding teachers from calling students by their preferred names or pronouns.

"Your legal guardian... already has the right to make health choices for you," Lerner said. "She already has a lot of things that she is responsible for. Now, they're saying she has the right to make decisions for you."

Lerner argues that Amendment 15 is taking the social responsibility that parents have for their children and rephrasing it as a right, which would apply to minors up to 18 years old. As parents gain authority, children may lose it.

"I feel like Texas has always had a strong sense of self and passing this amount of amendments shows the impact that organized efforts to pass these amendments, which does influence voter outcomes, has," Garcia said. "It also showcases strong ideological connections in Texas and again how influential organized efforts to inform voters are."

Kavya Gupta, a LASA junior who participates in Youth and Government (YAG), found the passage of all 17 amendments signaled content with the government and its direction.

"The very fact that all 17 of the new amendments were passed really shows that Texans wholeheartedly support these changes," Gupta said. "Especially in regards to taxes, protection of property and larger-scale investments of water infrastructure, and even research, which I wasn't expecting originally."

Proposition 16 also reaffirms an existing law, adding extra language to the constitution stating that non-citizens cannot vote in local elections. In the U.S., one of the requirements for voting in a federal election is being a citizen of the U.S., and Texas itself forbids non-citizens from voting in its local elections.

"The fact that it's saying that is driven by a cultural fear, and is a cultural statement rather than a legal one," Lerner said. "It's to put a marker down that it's almost okay to be on the lookout for people that might not be citizens, and that there could be something to be afraid of."

To address declining water sources, Proposition 4 codified the establishment of a statewide water fund intended to support long term projects to bolster Texas' strained water systems. Democratic State Representative from Austin Vikki Goodwin said that the amendment gives the state a crucial tool for addressing aging infrastructure and rising drought risk and water scarcity through the purple pipe system, which reclaims used water for irrigation.

"It's very critical that we have money dedicated to working on water projects, whether it is new water projects or fixing leaky



POLL JUMP An Austin resident leaves the Terrazas Branch of Austin Public Library after casting her ballot. More than 160,000 Austinites voted regarding Prop Q in the November 4 election. photo by Ellington Tough

pipes or putting some effort behind reuse," Goodwin said. "At the Capitol, once we plug into the county's purple water pipes, we'll save 45 million gallons of water a year."

Concern about Texas' dwindling water supply had been growing for years, according to Mazur, and this amendment became necessary as its population increased. The drought-prone state's water usage has increased alongside its population, inciting concern for the future availability of water.

"There were a lot of different starts to try to address Texas' long-term water infrastructure funding," Mazur said. "What Proposition 4 does is it dedicates \$1 billion of state sales tax revenues per year to the Texas Water Fund. And those monies can be used for different types of water projects, such as water supply projects, building new reservoirs, groundwater wells and salvation projects, or fixing aging drinking water and wastewater systems."

City of Austin Council Member Natasha Harper-Madison voiced support for voters' decision against the implementation of Prop Q's 20% uptick in the local property tax rate. The proposition failed by an almost 30% margin, a marked difference from 2024's Prop A, a move to raise property taxes to fund schools, which passed.

"With the passage of the budget in August 2025, the city identified a number of priorities, including the need to maintain current levels of funding and services," Harper-Madison said. "Residents spoke loudly and clearly in the recent election and decided that raising property taxes was not the right approach."

The change would have funded public safety, emergency response, homelessness initiatives, affordable housing, parks and climate programs, which now will be reduced. It was a topic of scrutiny as groups formed to combat or support the ballot measure.

"At this time, no official budget cuts have been made, though some have been proposed that could impact emergency services, the arts, public parks, and other programs," Harper-Madison said. "What exactly will be cut remains to be determined, as the Council will begin deliberations this week and potentially into the following week."

With Texas taking about 20% of Austin ISD's tax collections through recapture to support schools in other parts of the state, city leaders say Austin is still confronting significant financial strain. Despite those pressures, Harper-Madison argues that the city must continue meeting its core responsibilities.

"Even without additional funds from Proposition Q, and in the face of reductions in federal funding that have impacted state and local economies across the nation, Austin remains legally and morally obligated to meet the needs of its residents," Harper-Madison said. "The city will continue to be steadfast in working toward that goal."



BUILDING UP RAPPORTS Police vehicles surround the Texas Capitol during a recent protest. Decisions by the legislature have proven popular with voters despite demonstrations expressing dissent. photo by Ellington Tough

# Gen-Z Protests Topple Regimes

AVERY HERSH | staff writer

The generation born between 1997 and 2012, commonly known as Gen Z, have been protesting around the world, gaining momentum as they topple governments and change their countries. In places like Nepal, Peru, Madagascar, and more, Gen Z have been risking their lives to stand up against their governments and the wealthy elite.

Jason Brownlee is a professor at the University of Texas who researches and teaches the comparative politics of democracy. He stated that history's youth are typically on the frontlines of movements for change and equality.

"Youth tends to be a fixture of protest movements and popular revolutions, from 1789 France to 1979 Iran and 1989 Eastern Europe," Brownlee said. "If there was a major uprising anywhere in the world during the next decade, we would expect this cohort to be front and center."

Part of this pattern may be due to youth psychology. Isaac Braman-Ray, the co-chair of LASA's Young Democratic Socialists of America chapter, believes that they are more likely to lean left ideologically than older people, who tend conservative.

"People get more conservative as they age," Braman-Ray said. "We're gonna be the ones impacted by these decisions that people way older than us are making, and aren't gonna impact them. So they're making decisions that are potentially going to hurt us a lot, and aren't gonna hurt them in the short term."

In Sept. 2025, Gen Z succeeded in ousting the prime minister of Nepal, Sharma Oli. They elected a new interim prime minister, Sushila Karki, through the messaging app Discord. Nobel Prasad, a member of Gen Z in Nepal who attended these protests, stated that the key factors motivating the protests were inequality and corruption within the country.

"The building up factors—there were a lot—but some of them were corruption, seeing the rapid inequality where the richest

people in Nepal were actually living a very different life from the rest, the 99% of the population," Prasad said. "The richest people were able to go on vacation. They were in Europe, they were posting their designer bags, whereas the common person in Nepal didn't even have proper roads."

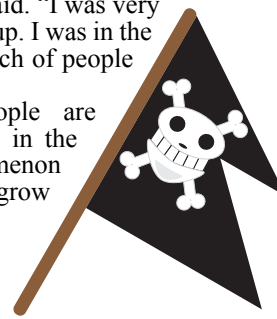
In Madagascar, Gen Z protests were triggered by outages and poverty around the country. In Peru, crime and corruption sparked outrage. Brownlee stated the wave of worldwide unrest all largely share common ground in their grievances.

"The protests have targeted a range of governments that had fallen out of favor with large portions of the public," Brownlee said. "The protests appear fueled by concerns about leaders acting with impunity and not honoring their responsibility as public servants. Those issues could resonate with young people around the world, including in the Global North."

Thousands of people have been injured in the protests around the world, and some have been killed. Violence was used by governments to try and silence their people, and also used by the people to try and make their voices heard, according to Prasad, who talked about his experience protesting and his emotions after the fact.

"My personal reaction after seeing everything that happened in my country: I was first of all very sad because of the deaths, and I was also very proud," Prasad said. "I was very proud of my generation for standing up. I was in the front lines. It was crazy. I saw a bunch of people being shot. It was insane."

In many other countries, people are continuing to fight for change, like in the US and Sudan. It is likely this phenomenon will not stop but only continue to grow with each generation.



graphic by Ellington Tough

## THE LINE

### Global News

#### AWS Outage

An Amazon Web Services (AWS) outage downed thousands of websites on Oct. 20. For a few hours, Snapchat, Reddit, Duolingo, Canvas, and other major sites the platform hosts fell dark. This was due to an issue in its automated database system for a datacenter region covering the eastern United States disconnected AWS from its customers. The lapse shined a light on the internet's reliance on a small number of providers. Since then, Amazon has been beefing up their servers.

#### Trump Puts Pressure on Venezuela

President Trump has been mounting a military campaign against the regime of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth ordered a second lethal strike on boats suspected of carrying drugs through the Caribbean. As tensions escalate, Trump is increasing pressure on the divisive socialist leader, having demanded that Maduro step down after he claimed a dubious election victory in the oil state's 2024 election.

### National News

#### It's Not Making Cents

The United States mint printed its last penny this past November. After 232 years of inflation, the cost of producing the mostly copper coins outweighed their purchasing power, prompting President Trump to announce the end of their printing, although the Treasury Department estimates 300 billion pennies are still in circulation. The mint also set up an online auction for the last several pennies printed, which are going in the tens of thousands of dollars, even more than the approximately four cents each penny cost the agency to make.

#### Additional Epstein Files Released

6 years after his death, Jeffrey Epstein's crimes continue to make headlines. After Trump promised to release files pertaining to his associates during his presidential campaign, Congress pushed for the documents, including thousands of emails to royalty, politicians and millionaires, to be released. The files offered insight into the private world of the elite, including the billionaire sex offender's lasting interest in pulling Trump into his sphere.

### State News

#### Some Rights More Equal Than Others

Texas Governor Greg Abbott branded the Council on American-Islamic Relations a terrorist organization this November. The Washington-based group states that its mission is to promote civil rights for American Muslims and mutual understanding between them and their non-Muslim peers. CAIR directors Corey Saylor and Imran Ghani wrote an editorial in the Austin American-Statesman against the decision, criticizing Abbott for targeting Muslims and inciting paranoia. They pointed to another investigation he directed into informal Shariah courts he accused of trying to practice official law.

#### Camp Mystic Sued

After an initial outpouring of sympathy for the stricken organization, favor has turned against Camp Mystic in light of recent discoveries and decisions. The families of 18 of the 27 children who died in the July floods filed four separate lawsuits, accusing the summer camp of negligence. The camp also chose to reopen in 2026, as other organizations like the Kerr County Marathon canceled their events for the year, prompting online vitriol.

### Local News

#### Road Bumps for Musk's Robotaxis

After promises Elon Musk made of Tesla launching self-driving taxis in Austin drove the company's stock price higher, the billionaire seemed to offer even loftier claims about the new technology. However, his robotaxis have dragged behind Waymo and Zoox cars, the other two autonomous vehicles operating commercially in the city. Most recently, he announced the fleet size would double from 30 to 60 vehicles with human safety monitors in December 2025, still short of the goal of 500 fully functional cars by the end of the year.

#### Yuletide Victory

Despite its perennial lack of snow, Austin has been titled the most festive city in the U.S. for the fourth consecutive year. The home services marketplace Thumbtack published its 2025 ranking of a number of U.S. cities, basing placement off of the frequency of requests for holiday light installation. It was followed by fellow Texas metropolis Dallas and Seattle, Washington.

## UT

from page 1

After UT neglected to address the compact through its Nov. 21 deadline, Trump extended the offer. Other alumni have expressed deep frustration that UT did not immediately reject the offer. Former Travis County Commissioner and longtime UT supporter Karen Sonleitner outlined that the proposal contradicts the values of free inquiry and open debate that shaped her experience at the university.

"This is striking at the core of why I wound up going to the University of Texas at Austin," Sonleitner said. "It just cuts to the core related to free speech on campus."

Sonleitner said she was disappointed that UT continues to consider the compact rather than refusing it outright, and she warned that approval would have lasting consequences. She explained that has already prepared to remove UT from her will if the university agrees to the terms.

"I passed along the message that if you all sign this compact, I am taking out UT's money, and I'm not putting it back," Sonleitner said. "It's not an idle threat, because as a trained journalist who got my degree, I actually think this will cheapen the university."

Concerns are also growing among prospective students. LASA sophomore Silas Croft, who plans to apply to UT, said the compact's speech-related provisions could shift the



**A LONELY STAND** A pride flag was propped up outside of a teacher's office in Burdine Hall, the location of Women's and Gender Studies and Sexuality Studies. The compact could promise restrictions on campus rules as well as class syllabi. photo by Ellington Tough



**BLACK & WHITE** The Gordon-White Building is home to UT's ethnic studies departments, which have become a target of Trump's deal. photo by Ellington Tough

university's culture for incoming students. He supports broad free expression and worries the deal could push UT away from open dialogue.

"I honestly think the best way to do it is to have open, free speech, where you can say whatever you want," Croft said. "There should be a healthy middle ground where people from either side can say what they want to say."

With alumni reconsidering donations, professors reluctant to speak publicly, and students questioning the university's direction, UT's decision carries wide ranging implications. Many alumni fear that approving the compact could damage UT's reputation and drive potential students and faculty toward other institutions.

"If they say yes, people will just go elsewhere," Sonleitner said. "We will lose out on really incredible people."

## Rise

from page 1

According to Ryfe, the journalism most Americans are familiar with did not emerge until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Prior to this, journalism was not a professional industry; prominent community members served as editors of newspapers they founded, and advertising was not their financial focus. Increased ad sales enabled publications to succeed with a wider distribution. Ryfe attributes this success to a virtuous cycle that results from the connection between news and advertisement.

"The more advertising contracts the news organizations had, the more news they needed to put in the white space around the advertisers," Ryfe said. "They needed more news, which meant they needed more journalists."

According to Ryfe, at the turn of the 21st century, the virtuous cycle turned into a vicious cycle as American families moved to the suburbs and more women entered the workforce. This forced journalism's business model to adapt because newspaper distribution decreased.

"People began to move to the suburbs and then they drove into work," Ryfe said. "You couldn't read a newspaper while you were driving. Newspapers really weren't compatible with the life experiences of more and more people, so they began to lose market share over time."

With the beginning of the digital age of American society, the accompanying widespread reliance on the internet also

contributed to the decline of the journalism industry. According to Ryfe, as specialized sources emerged, Americans were less dependent on newspapers.

"What you once got in the newspaper in terms of crossword puzzles, sports sections, lifestyle sections, and cooking recipes, was disaggregated online," Ryfe said. "Particular websites devoted themselves to each one of those things, and so newspapers were left in the wake of this transformation."

Ryfe, from a research perspective, maintains his faith in the journalism industry despite Pew Research Center estimating that 53% of U.S. adults at least sometimes get their news from social media. The news that they are following on the internet, Instagram Reels or other forms of social media, still largely originates from reporting by a journalist.

"There's so much of the internet's news production that feeds off the original reporting that journalists do," Ryfe said. "News influencers who are on Instagram will give you 90 seconds of the most important news stories of the day. They only know that because some journalist has gone out and done some reporting."

The well-researched and factual reporting that American journalists practice is necessary to democracy, according to Ryfe. Still, he explains that a new era of journalism must expand to meet citizens' where they consume the bulk of their information as an increasingly small number of social media platforms dominate the public eye.



graphic by Megan Gerold

# Convention Center Receives Renovation, Controversy

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor

Business meetings, high school dances, basketball games: all of them had to leave the Austin Convention Center this September as wrecking balls and CAT trucks took their place.

Austin City Council voted this July to bring down the original center to make way for a larger, more robust building downtown. The idea has been in the works since 2015, when the Austin Convention Center Department hired a consulting firm to draft an analysis of potential expansions into the surrounding blocks. After negotiations with property owners surrounding the six-block center failed, iterations turned to an internal plan, expanding up and down without increasing the facility's footprint. Throughout this decade of discussions, however, Acting Deputy Director Katy Zamesnik said the goal has remained accommodating more action.

"We were turning away about 50% of the business leads that we were receiving," Zamesnik said. "That was simply because we were either too small for that event, or because we were already booked. We are the 61st largest convention center in the country, even though we're the 13th largest city."

The new structure will allow 200,000 square feet of more space for events with an underground exhibit hall, outdoor public plazas, and cultural exhibits. Opening in 2028, it is estimated to bring an annual \$285 million more economic impact than the previous average of \$550 million.

"Since we announced the expansion in 2015, 37 hotels have opened up downtown in anticipation of that," Zamesnik said. "We knew that tearing the building down, starting fresh, being able to put all of our civic halls underground was really the right thing to do for the project. And that was what we worked on throughout the COVID period."

To pay for the construction, City Council created a Convention Center operating fund, which draws from Hotel Occupancy Tax

(HOT). HOT charges short-term bookings an additional 17% of the room's cost, typically ending up on the customers' bills, of which 6% goes to the state of Texas. The City of Austin splits the remaining 11% it levies into 2% for UnconventionalATX, the expansion project, and 9% for other tourism affairs. 15% of the money going to UnconventionalATX is directed to cultural arts, and another 15% of it is put aside for historical preservation.

"If there's no expansion, there is no 2% expansion HOT, and then therefore there is no funding for live music," Zamesnik said. "Tourism is the fourth largest employer here in Austin, and we're a really critical part of that. I think we would lose out on a lot of what is really important to Austin, since the live music fund is funded from the Convention Center's operating fund."

Although HOT money will pay for the bulk of the project, as well as live music, the July budget included additional city funds. This has drawn the ire of the environmentalist Austin United PAC, which spokesperson Finn Sonniksen explained had drawn up a petition against the plan due to what he called its shortsightedness.

"We held petition events all over the city, trying to get as many petitions as we could from certified, valid voters on the voter roll," Sonniksen said. "I think that the ideal would've been for them to consult people in Austin about what we want to do with the convention center."

Although there was no direct input on the latest plan, city officials did take efforts to include Austinites' voices. An initial 2019 vote prompted Austinites to consider whether voter approval should be required for expensive convention center improvements and increased HOT, and one of the committees assigned to analyzing the possibility of expansion was composed of private citizens. Because the vote failed, City Council has been able to shape the plan, and implemented the raised HOT to meet it.

"The visitor impact task force was appointed by City Council, and they worked for about a year to study the idea of an expansion and whether or not it was something that we should do," Zamesnik said. "They published their report and supported unanimously that we should go ahead and do an expansion... We also have the Tourism Commission, which is another citizen-led appointed body, and they were sent up after the task force to advise the council on matters

related not only to expansion, but to Hotel Occupancy Tax."

While the construction would be paid for with the operating fund, Austin United PAC treasurer Tanya Payne worries the city could dip into its primary budget to cover unforeseen costs.

"This council is like, 'Oh, it's all Hotel Occupancy Tax, but don't look while we approve another loan,'" Payne said. "Before this, they had said it's already paid for, it's all Hotel Occupancy Tax, and it's on time and under budget. And then all of a sudden, there was a need for more money, and they just quietly voted for it."

The city rejected Austin United's petition after eliminating 483 signatures in a sample of the 21,000 they collected, putting them just under the 20,000 needed to trigger a citywide vote, two of which they attributed to duplication. The unknown cause for rejecting the remaining 481, described by the city as "miscellaneous reasons", worries Payne.

"We bought software, we had validators, we touched each and every one of those signatures," Payne said. "They don't want us to vote on it. In light of Prop Q, people are really aware that this Council has been on a spending spree."



GOING UP IN DUST The early phases of the new convention center's construction continue. Currently, the site is a massive hole that accommodate its foundation. photo by Ellington Tough

## Look Out, Rudolph Holidays Bring Rise in Dangers

AALIYAH AHAMED | staff writer

Colorful Christmas lights being hung up around houses, seasonal plants like poinsettias and mistletoe everywhere, and the joy of getting to travel. Although these are enjoyable if the correct precautions are taken, there are lots of potential dangers these activities can inadvertently pose.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission found that a major danger is holiday decorations, like Christmas lights. On average, it reports about 160 Christmas decorating-related injuries each day during the holiday season, with nearly half of the incidents involving falls. Drunk driving is another common risk, along with poisoning from seasonal plants, such as mistletoe and poinsettias. Austin Fire Department Fire Specialist Josh Lewis has found that holiday-related injuries, including fire dangers, occur more often during the season.

"People trying to fry frozen turkeys during Thanksgiving, unattended space heaters, those are all common ones," Lewis said. "Not only unattended, but also clothing piles too close to space heaters, space heaters not plugged correctly into

instead plugged into a power strip." According to a survey conducted by Drive Research, 77% of people put up a Christmas tree and decor every year. Although it is a cherished tradition, people can make mistakes when putting up holiday decorations.

"The most common safety mistakes are not having inspected all the bulbs, making sure all the bulbs are there, inspecting the wires, making sure they are in good condition," Lewis said. "If you follow all of the safety guidelines, of checking your lights, keeping [the Christmas tree] away from your fireplace, then you know it can all be very safe."

Along with holiday decorations like lights and Christmas trees, festive seasonal plants like holly and mistletoe are common in and around houses during the season. Sameera Mehdi, an internal medicine doctor, believes these can be safe if the correct precautions are taken to avoid allowing the plants' chemicals inside one's body.

"Just be aware of what you ingest," Mehdi said. "Chronic conditions can become exacerbated. For example, heart failure patients, if they drink too much fluid, then their heart fluid is exacerbated, if they eat too much salt, their heart failure is exacerbated."

Mohammed Kurugu is a Pflugerville Police Department officer who reports dealing with more emergencies during the holidays. With traveling and going on family road trips during the season

being another popular way to spend the holidays, Kurugu reports that roads can get dangerously crowded with more people coming in and out of the country.

"There's gonna be more people on the road, so more traffic," Kurugu said. "It's gonna be more people who aren't familiar or traveling from other cities, so there's gonna be more traffic collisions. Then there's an increase in people being out for the holidays, so more intoxicated drivers out there as well, so that also increases collisions and fatalities."

Holiday events and parties can be a cherished tradition among friends and family, with lots of people gathering each year to celebrate together. Kurugu commented that these traditions can take place injury-free if the correct precautions are taken.

"For people who do attend holiday events and do partake in the use of alcohol, I would say not to drink," Kurugu said. "There's driving services. Utilize that, or call somebody. Do not drink and drive."

With the rush of people coming in and out of department stores, shopping malls and other public places can reach capacity rapidly during the holidays. Places quickly get crowded, and it is important to be aware of your surroundings.

"During the holidays, you're gonna have people who are out shopping more," Kurugu said. "Thefts are crimes of opportunity, so lock your cars and hide valuables, don't leave them in public view, like purses or gifts. There's people out there looking to get that kind of stuff, and if they see it, they'll take advantage of it."

Cooking and eating delicious holiday meals is another major part of the holidays. Mehdi advises everyone to take in consideration their health while enjoying these meals, or the consumption of alcohol.

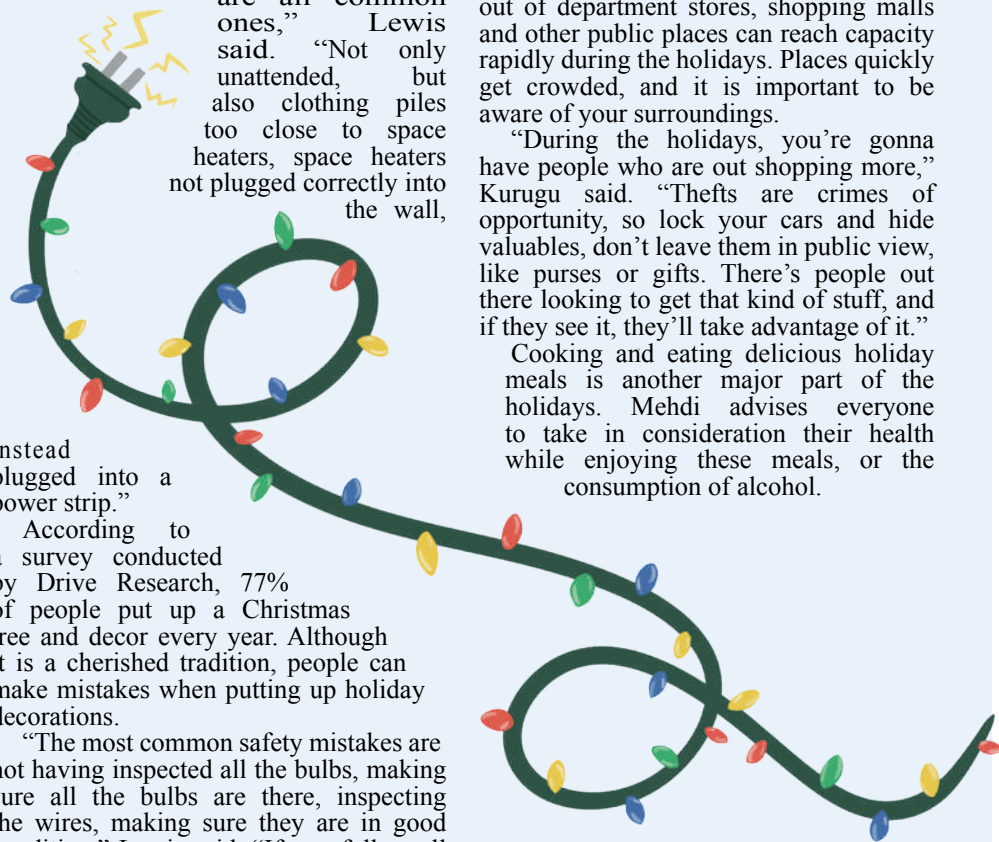
"The advice

I would say is to do everything with limitation, do everything in moderation," Mehdi said. "I had a patient who was cooking something on the stove, and it was hot and caught on fire, and they actually ended up burning themselves because the stove caught on fire."

There are many fun aspects of the holiday season, from decor like seasonal plants or Christmas lights, and gathering together in shopping malls to celebrate the season, or having family dinners. Kurugu believes these can all be enjoyable and safe traditions, as long as the right precautions are followed.

"One piece of safety advice I would say for the holiday season is don't be in a rush to get places," Kurugu said. "Don't drink and drive, there's no rush to get to places. Just slow down, stay safe, and keep others safe."

Graphic by Tita Gonzalez



## Shutdown's Effects Remain

ZACHARY EGLER | staff writer

The government shutdown may feel like a now-distant political story to some, but for Austin families, its effects are as real as they were when it became the longest in U.S. history. From high-level employees to food stamp recipients, people reliant on government funds were left stranded as the flow of federal money froze.

When the U.S. Congress failed to agree on a new governmental budget at the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30, the federal government shut down and some federally funded jobs and initiatives were halted. As compromise efforts remained stagnant, agencies that relied on regular funding were unable to keep workers on payrolls.

One government-funded initiative, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides low-income families across the U.S. with money to spend on groceries, had its benefits frozen overnight. In response, LASA baseball coach and World Geography teacher Eric Martanovic rallied the AISD community to respond with a food drive combined with a wiffle ball tournament.

"The motivating factor was understanding just how many families it would impact," Martanovic said. "We knew that there would be families who were struggling prior to Nov. 1, and to not receive their regular SNAP relief would affect our youngest students greatly."

Martanovic estimated that the drive raised roughly \$2,500 and fed more than 200 families. Nonetheless, according to Chris King, the Executive Director of Baptist Community Center Mission, Austin fundraising efforts still struggled to provide for families. Some individuals got half of their monthly SNAP benefits for November, while others received none, straining the church's efforts to feed locals in need.

"When you see a single mom with six kids who's used to getting \$900 in SNAP benefits that [can now] go to nothing, that's a big challenge," King said. "We were seeing so many more people come in, trying to keep up with food, and it's been a challenge."

The shutdown has also affected federal workers nationwide, disrupting payments and temporarily laying off hundreds of thousands of employees. A civilian Air Force software developer, who asked for anonymity for fear of retribution from his employer, described how the shutdown changed his daily routine when he stopped going to work.

"My family's whole routine has been altered—some in good ways," the software developer said. "Normally I am on base from 5 a.m. to 2 p.m. During the shutdown, I get up, watch the news for the latest updates on the government, then I take my daughter to school. My wife's day-to-day tasks are impacted since she normally keeps it quiet and handles the house cleaning, but I am home hassling her."

Because he is the main developer, his absence stalled critical systems. Applications could not be updated or maintained, and other personnel were limited in what they could do.

"Being the main developer on my project, no one else had the knowledge to develop or maintain the code base," the developer said. "...There are other issues, such as System Administrators being deemed non-essential, so any account issues or lab environment issues

would cause the continuing efforts of the active duty personnel or the essential workers to halt."

His role was deemed non-essential, making the man an immediate target of the temporary layoffs and furloughs given to hundreds of thousands of people in similar positions. He communicated with his team informally, but projects were frozen.

"I was strictly prohibited from working on any efforts dealing with my normal job," the developer said. "[My team and I] have been staying in touch via a text chain."

The pause in work created concern about long-term consequences. If the U.S. Armed Forces needed to do so, the developer was certain that bringing systems back online would require a time-consuming effort.

"If the U.S. Armed Forces were to be drawn into a major conflict during the early stages of the government reopening," the developer said, "we would need a massive task force to get all systems up and running at near-flawless states."

Morale on his team also suffered during the shutdown. Some coworkers were unable to take paid leave, while others worried about future job restrictions.

"Many people on my team did not have six weeks of vacation stashed so they simply did not get paid for some of the shutdown," the developer said. "I thankfully did have enough vacation to cover the shutdown, but now I am wiped of 3 years of saved vacation. Now I do not have the days to take a family vacation anytime soon."

"While we were able to work other jobs during the shutdown, we have to be cognizant of what type of job we take. When the government reopens and our clearances are up for review, if it is a job the government does not approve of, our clearance could be reduced or revoked."

Although the shutdown ended on Nov. 12, restoring funding to the weakened organizations, the money that never came during its 43-day span continues to weigh on those it affected.



UP, UP, AND LATE An arrival tracker at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. It was one of few major airports not to receive the funding cuts that delayed flights at 40 others. photo by Asher Zvi-Nova

graphics by Megan Gerold

# Passion or

# Product?



## Seniors Reflect on the Pursuit for Perfection

REBECA GONZALEZ | features editor

Every day, LASA students face exams, quizzes, and AP classes. Yet, their stress and busyness isn't confined to the ring of the bell. Whether a morning practice, afternoon job, or club, student's free time is filled to the brim with extracurriculars. However, how much of these activities come from a place of passion rather than career advancement?

In a 2024 study, the University of Georgia found that overscheduled students are significantly at risk of heightened anxiety and stress. However, the study also considered the benefits of extracurricular activities. Ultimately, it found that cognitive activities led to a net zero benefit when considering positive and negative effects, whereas non-cognitive activities resulted in a net negative.

LASA senior Eleanora Mason has had her share of busy schedules. Like many students, she found her passion in fine arts.

"I've spent the most time on guitar-focused extracurriculars during high school," Mason said. "Between practicing, lessons, rehearsals, and summer programs, music takes up a really large part of my life."

Although content with her decision to focus on guitar, Mason recognizes how difficult it was to abandon other activities for the sake of properly pursuing one. This has been especially true when some of the activities had been important to her for decades.

"The rigor of LASA forced me to make some difficult decisions early on in my high school journey," Mason said. "I had to prioritize guitar over playing cello, which I quit after five years, and running over ballet, which I had been doing since age three. Ultimately, these decisions led to a much more balanced life, but I definitely miss some parts of the

activities I put to the side."

However, even her initial cut of activities wasn't enough to avoid being overscheduled. As Mason began to fixate on playing guitar in college, an additional weight was placed on her passion.

"College pressure didn't really affect my choices in extracurriculars until senior year," Mason said. "I've spent a lot less time training for cross country and track this fall because of the additional pressure of auditions, which take up more time than my schoolwork right now."

She recognizes that choosing to major in music has given her a new lens for networking and resume-building. Although it is a passionless aspect of her activity, it is a crucial one for her artistic success.

"Although it started as an interest, there are parts of it that have come from resume growth," Mason said. "Particularly because I'm pursuing a degree in music, there are programs and masterclasses that I decided to take up because of the connections that they would afford me."

Sophie Bell has spent her past four years at LASA playing for the LASA Varsity Volleyball team and her club volleyball team. Similar to Mason, Bell's passion developed into her future career.

"My parents put me in four sports and two instruments as a kid," Bell said. "Volleyball was my favorite activity, and eventually I decided to pursue it seriously. I decided that I wanted to try and be recruited for college when I was in 7th grade."

As soon as Bell became focused on pursuing volleyball in college, her perspective shifted. However, instead of resume-building and networking, like Mason, Bell was fixated on her athletic performance.

"Knowing that college was my goal, volleyball, in some way, changed," Bell said. "I started to care a lot more about my reps, practices, and footage. It became less of a carefree activity and more like a job."

Yet Bell entered the season committed to play volleyball at Case Western Reserve

University. Having the pressure removed allowed her to view the sport through a newfound lens.

"However, what stayed the same was how it helped me escape a lot of my outside stress," Bell said. "The biggest change is that instead of caring about playing time and recording games, I play for myself."

With the goal of majoring in music, Mason is forced to look at guitar beyond just an activity she is passionate about. However, she argues that viewing an activity as beneficial for a college resume is somewhat essential.

"There's really nothing that I've done purely for the resume," Mason said. "But the summer programs that I've participated in have helped with boosting it and getting recommendation letters from music faculty across the country."

In fact, Mason believes that even as she builds her resume, she still finds her initial passion for guitar. For her, it's inescapable to focus on only either her passion or her career.

"I think that everything that I've done in pursuit of a better resume has also led to serious personal fulfillment and improvement on my instrument and in my community," Mason said. "In search of great rec letters, I learned to develop consistent practice routines and met faculty that have become great mentors to me years later."

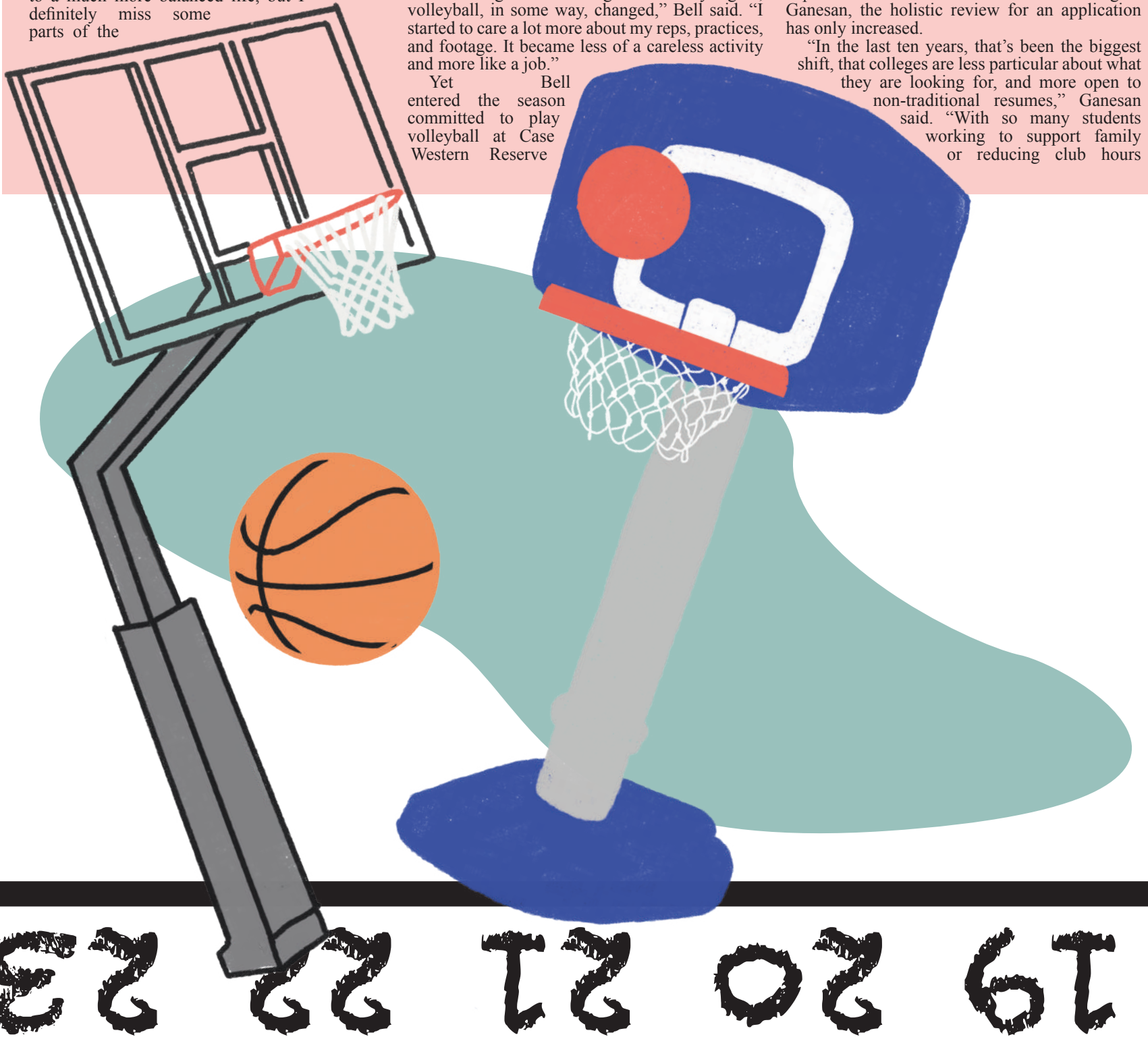
Yet, ultimately, Mason recognizes the appearance of her application. Even though her passion encourages her activities, she is forced to think qualitatively to achieve academic success.

"My volunteer experience and fundraising, which sound great in an essay or activity list, have also made me more connected to my community and allowed me to make a real impact on my community through music," Mason said.

Vyasar Ganesan is a college advisor at LASA and has seen diverse student opinions about experiences with extracurriculars. According to Ganesan, the holistic review for an application has only increased.

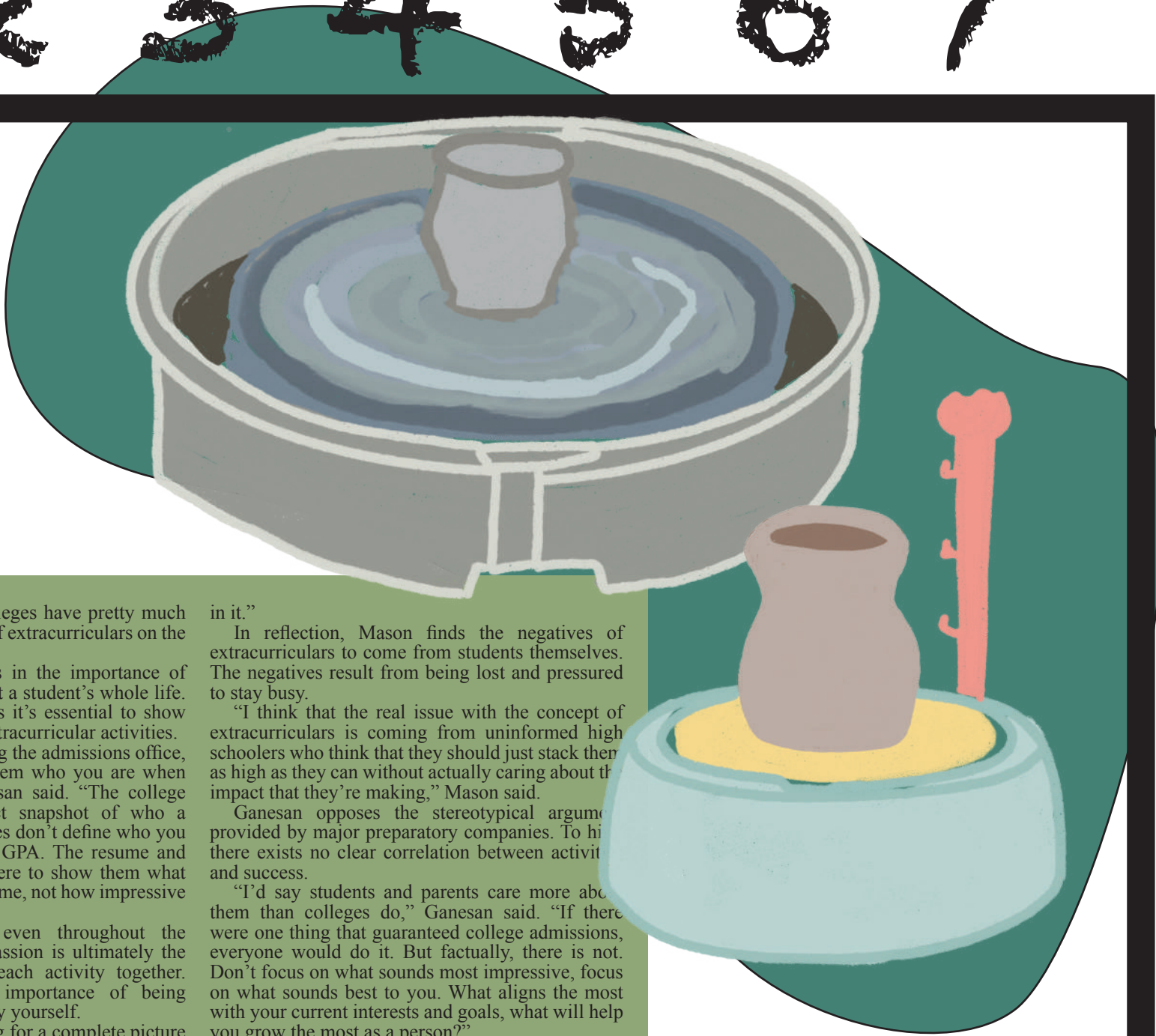
"In the last ten years, that's been the biggest shift, that colleges are less particular about what they are looking for, and more open to non-traditional resumes," Ganesan said. "With so many students working to support family or reducing club hours

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to take care of siblings, colleges have pretty much reduced the overall impact of extracurriculars on the admissions process.”

Ganesan deeply believes in the importance of college’s taking into account a student’s whole life. Because of that, he believes it’s essential to show your genuine self in your extracurricular activities.

“It’s less about impressing the admissions office, and more about showing them who you are when you aren’t in class,” Ganesan said. “The college application is an imperfect snapshot of who a student is — your SAT scores don’t define who you are, and certainly not your GPA. The resume and extracurricular bit is just there to show them what you do in your limited free time, not how impressive you are as a student.”

As Mason described, even throughout the resume-building process, passion is ultimately the critical aspect that binds each activity together. Ganesan emphasized the importance of being genuine to accurately portray yourself.

“Colleges are just looking for a complete picture of students as people, and extracurriculars allow them to understand how you’re allocating your time to things that you care about,” Ganesan said. “As long as you’re focusing on balancing your time and doing things that actually make you happy, you don’t need to found a startup or win a ton of international competitions. Creating a cohesive personal story is what really matters.”

Even through academic pressure and college applications, Mason has reached out of her comfort zone and begun a new activity. Differing from the rest of her schedule, the activity had zero pressure or resume-building aspects tied to it.

“Recently, I’ve picked up a wheel-throwing class at The Contemporary purely out of interest, and I’ve really enjoyed starting something from scratch with no pressure around it,” Mason said. “I’m rediscovering a lot of the childlike joy that I used to find in my other activities through it. It’s relaxing to take a class without expectations or grades and to be able to find my own fulfillment

in it.”

In reflection, Mason finds the negatives of extracurriculars to come from students themselves. The negatives result from being lost and pressured to stay busy.

“I think that the real issue with the concept of extracurriculars is coming from uninformed high schoolers who think that they should just stack them as high as they can without actually caring about the impact that they’re making,” Mason said.

Ganesan opposes the stereotypical arguments provided by major preparatory companies. To him, there exists no clear correlation between activities and success.

“I’d say students and parents care more about them than colleges do,” Ganesan said. “If there were one thing that guaranteed college admissions, everyone would do it. But factually, there is not. Don’t focus on what sounds most impressive, focus on what sounds best to you. What aligns the most with your current interests and goals, what will help you grow the most as a person?”

Bell reflected on her own extracurriculars, which she enjoys, that don’t carry the same pressure as volleyball. Through them, Bell gets to explore her interests without being bothered by college pressure.

“My favorite extracurricular outside of volleyball is PALS,” Bell said. “I want to go into the pediatric field of medicine, so having experience working with kids is something I enjoy. I also just find working with kids to be fun and rewarding.”

Ganesan emphasized the importance of showcasing a genuine character. He explained that following a passing will be the most successful path to follow when choosing how to spend your free time.

“It’s not so much what you did, as much what you got from it: growth, a sense of personal development or self-definition,” Ganesan said.

“If your involvement outside of class highlights those, then that’s enough! My advice is always to pursue your passions, try new things, not just what you’re good at.”



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## Johnston

from page 1

In 1987, the Liberal Arts Academy was founded at Johnston as a magnet program meant to encourage students to come to the high school. In 2001, the magnet school left the Johnston campus, and combined with the Science Academy — another magnet program established at LBJ High School — in order to form LASA. Then, in 2008, Johnston High School became the first school to be shut down by the Texas Education Agency.

Dr. Caroline Pinkston, who has a PhD in American Studies, is the AP Seminar teacher at LASA. Each year, the staff picks the curriculum, and for the two years that AP Seminar has been a class, she has incorporated work from the Johnston Archives into the lessons. For Pinkston, this work allows students to truly grasp the impact of LASA's role in Austin.

"I think it's really important for students to understand that LASA didn't just kind of come out of the void," Pinkston said. "We are connected to this much broader history of race and equity in Austin in interesting and important ways. It can have a big impact on what we do as a school moving forward and how we can be responsible stewards of that history for other people."

The archives have changed over the past two years as AP Seminar students have worked alongside Switek. For the 2025-2026 school year, students have the opportunity to choose what aspect of the archives they would like to engage in, according to Switek. One of these projects is an effort to change out the Legacy Hall: a collection of memorabilia that is inside cases in the cafeteria.

"The Legacy Hall really needs a complete overhaul," Switek said. "We would like to pull things together and regroup them in different ways to tell more of a story and actually have panels that kind of talk about what the decade was or maybe put it in a historical context and have links to Austin at that point or Johnson at that point."

The archives will also continue to change with each year. Currently, Dr. Rolf Straubhaar, who is a professor at Texas State and a Johnston Alumnus, is working to get a Melon Foundation Grant, which would greatly expand the oral history portion of the archives.

"He's writing a grant for \$100,000, that if we get it, it would start next fall of 2026 ... his goal is to do 250 interviews over the 18 months," Switek said. "And then, ultimately culminating with an exhibit, it could be an exhibit in the Austin History

Center, could be an exhibit here, and then, ultimately, a book."

Beyond preserving the history of Johnston, this work encourages students to think about the methods of archiving, Switek noted that students who wished to change out the costumes in the Legacy Hall should look into what lights are best for preservation. For Pinkston, this is one of the biggest reasons she chose to involve AP Seminar with the archives.

"I just want students to experience a little bit of what history looks like, what it looks like to do history," Pinkston said. "I



**JOHNSTON PRIDE** LASA showcases Johnston's trophies and vintage uniforms. Alumni are working to update it with more memorabilia. photo by Ethan Stern

still think it's a good learning experience to recognize that that's what history is. It's you digging through papers and tracking down people and talking to them and collecting these stories and then building something out of it. I want students to recognize that any lecture you have in a history class, any textbook you read is the result of someone doing that kind of work."

According to Switek and Pinkston, this work ties one generation to another. Switek believes that the importance of the

archives is to recognize the changes across the history of LASA.

"You guys are here living and walking through a campus that was not yours 5 years ago," Switek said. "It has belonged to so many different people, so many different campuses, so many different students. It's had so many incarnations. I would like you guys to know that, to understand that, to know your place in it. And also just be really, really aware, you guys probably already are, that you are very blessed. You have so many more opportunities generally speaking than so many other students in Austin, in AISD, in the South ... You're living it, you're walking, you're seeing the people who once walked to this campus, you're interacting with them and talking to them. I want you guys to have a conversation with them. I want you guys to take what you know and the experiences that they've had and somehow tie it into your experience."



**MEMORIES AND TRIBUTE** LASA showcases Johnston's art work. When alumni visit, they often take a walk through this hallway. photo by Ethan Stern

## Seniors Share Advice

MADDIE DIAS-STANG | staff writer

As the Class of 2026 heads toward graduation, many seniors may start reflecting on what they've learned during their time at LASA, and what they want younger students to know before they cross the stage themselves.

Ari Pople, a LASA senior, explained how she has learned that friendship is an important lesson. For her, the strength of those bonds is what defined her high school journey.

"I think making good, and trusting friends," Pople said. "I've found a really good group of friends over the last few years, and they really help me out a lot."

Pople explained that learning how to manage time is another key takeaway. Looking back, she noted that the challenge was not the workload itself, but how she approached it.

"Work more on time management," Pople said. "Manage the time that's given to you by teachers. I think I spent a lot of my free time just messing around when it would be significantly easier to just get my work done during the time that was given for it."

For juniors preparing for college, Pople's advice is straightforward. She stressed the importance of refining one particular part of the application.

"It's really important to ask as many people as you can to read [your supplementals]," Pople said. "Not that you have to take everyone's advice, but having a lot of people definitely helps make your writing the best that it can be to submit to your colleges."

Senior Leonor Hayden explained that one of her biggest lessons has been about working with others. She realized that succeeding in group settings often requires navigating challenging personalities.

"There are horrible people everywhere," Hayden said. "I don't mean evil, I just mean hard to work with. You kind of have to learn to deal with that, because they're everywhere."

Hayden's advice to younger students is to enjoy their time. She advises students to avoid over-stressing the academic pressures of high school.

"Grades are not that deep," Hayden said. "Pass your classes, and do well if that's going to make you feel good. At least for me, I cared more about the social aspect, and I think you're going to really regret your high school experience if you don't go out, make friends, try new things, and live your best life."

She reminded students to take full advantage of the school's attendance policy. Hayden explained how students should use absences to take a break from school.

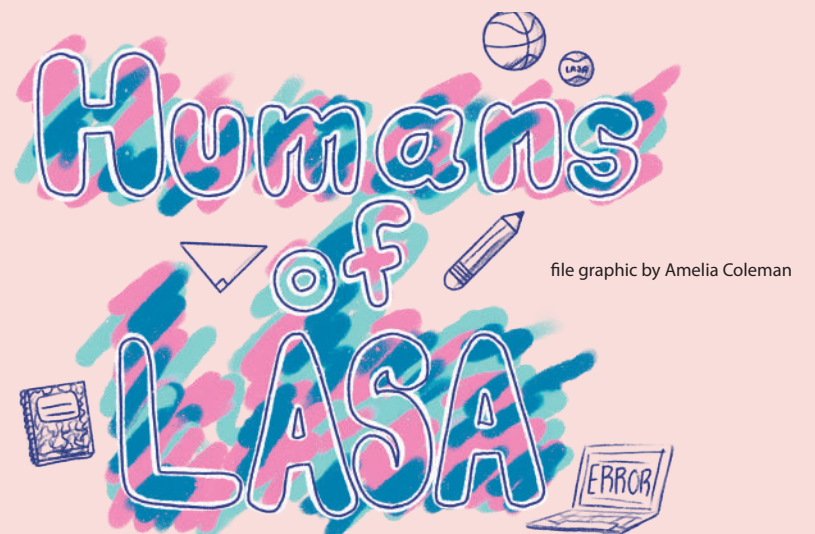
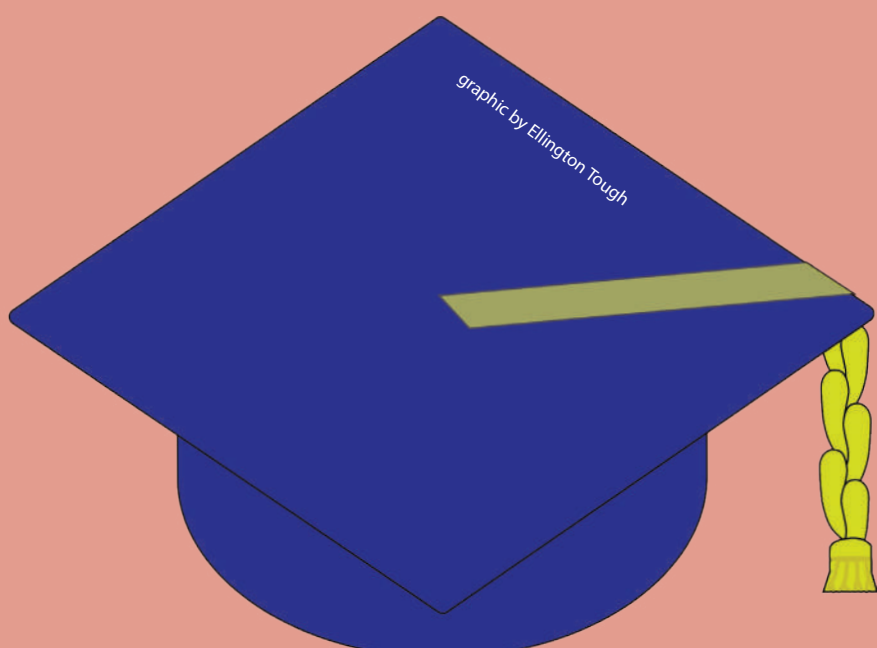
"You have four unexcused absences, per class, per semester, that you can have in a class before incurring consequences," Hayden said. "Use those absences ... Live your life, sleep in, and go to a Target. Live your best life, and use your absences."

Senior Kirtan Amin explained the key to success is consistency. He emphasized that being deliberate with both time and teacher relationships is crucial for the future.

"Use your time wisely, study every night, and just try to make the most out of the entire day," Amin said. "Go to office hours and meet with teachers because you need to earn your recommendation letters."

Amin explained that clubs and sports have helped him develop life skills. For him, involvement outside of class was the best way to develop the soft skills necessary for the world beyond high school.

"Communication and time management," Amin said. "Don't wear yourself out, and don't force yourself to cram. Learn how to talk to people, learn how to build connections, because you don't know what's going to happen in the future or who's going to be your friend."



file graphic by Amelia Coleman

CLEMENTINE DAVIS | staff writer

San Czaplinski is the Academy Director at LASA. Czaplinski grew up in north Texas in a small town named Brownwood, where she met her husband, her high school sweetheart, and recently celebrated 31 years of marriage. She joined the LASA administration in 2012 and has loved being a part of the team ever since.

LASA Liberator: Tell us about yourself.

Czaplinski: I grew up in poverty, although I really didn't know it because my mom did a fantastic job of keeping us from knowing that we were poor.

Well, I shouldn't say always because there was a very short period of time that we were homeless, but I thought we were camping. My mom made it a camping trip for us, so I didn't know until I was an adult. I used to tell people all the time it was my favorite summer, it was the summer between my third and fourth grade year, and we were out at the lake every day and we were hiking and swimming and doing all of the fun stuff, collecting bugs and sleeping on top of the roof of the car at night under the stars, and it was actually an adventure, it was a blast.

LL: What did you do after high school?

Czaplinski: My four older siblings all quit high school to go to work full-time, so I was the first of the nine to graduate high school. I didn't even plan to go to college because I knew that my parents could not afford to send me. So I worked five jobs the year after I graduated high school, because I was only 17 when I graduated, and no one was willing to hire me full-time.

I was working at Golden Corral one evening, and a friend of mine said, "You know, San, you are one of the smartest people that I know. If I can go to college, you can go to college." That kind of stuck with me, just in the back of my head, and so the next year I decided I was going to try and apply.

LL: Walk me through a day in LASA.

Czaplinski: I have a to-do list, and sometimes it's a mental to-do list on top of the one I keep in writing, and most often, I would say that I am 20% successful in getting to that to-do list.

Usually, things come up as soon as I walk in. There's a kid in crisis, a teacher running late, someone missing in the front office, and they need help, a flat tire, and they need someone to cover the entrance doors; there is a lot going on.

LL: What are the big parts of your job?

Czaplinski: I would say that the big pieces of my job are the master schedule and everything that it entails, beginning to end, applications, so I am the person in charge of helping with the application process. I sit down again with Ms. Cresenzi, and I go through everyone and decide who is accepted and who is not.

LL: Do you work with the other admins?

Czaplinski: Oh, I do, yes. In the time that I have been here, it has been the strongest admin team. I feel like we are very aligned and we hold each other accountable, so even when we do not agree necessarily, we still compromise, and we also help each other out in ways that sometimes we didn't even realize we needed. They have been a super great support system for me this year, because I lost a brother in September, and the start of this school year was really tough for me. They definitely rallied and have helped me. It feels good to feel like you have a family at work, as well.

LL: What is one thing you'd like students to know?

Czaplinski: As you change jobs in education, sometimes you have more distance between you and the students. I do wish that there was a way that could be different. I know I cannot build a relationship with 396 freshmen, but I want students to know that at least here at LASA, we all have your best interests in mind.

When we are making decisions, it is not because we are trying to be harsh or mean. It is really to help you learn from your mistakes if you are in here for a disciplinary issue, or to help you learn how to advocate for yourself. It is those things that we really want for you. I would want students to know that no matter what, we are on your side.

## How LASA Students Manage Stress Levels

MARGO MCALISTER | club contributor

LASA can be a pressure cooker. Assignments, tests, clubs, and extracurricular activities are always happening, so often, some might get lost in the whirlwind. However, the school has resources to deal with the issues that might come out of the constant motion.

Because LASA can be stressful to some, the school has resources to help those in need. Two wellness counselors, two therapy dogs, and a calm space for relaxing are all helpful tools for those in need of a break. LASA wellness counselor Shanon Cardona mentioned the school has a multitude of resources for students.

"You have options when you come in here," Cardona said. "You can either speak to one of the two [wellness counselors] or you can have the ZenDen or just pet the pups."

Some students believe the therapy dogs, Bean and Juney, help them the most. Sierra Pena is a LASA junior and also an officer of the Dynasty drill team, as well as a manager of three sports, who agrees with this opinion.

"As someone who has dogs," Pena said, "I do think that the dogs here at LASA are very helpful just because being around animals can be calming for a lot of people."

The wellness counselors also work directly with students. Cardona mentioned the counselors are there for the extreme situations that might happen at school.

"We are here for crisis interventions," Cardona said. "We are here for students who are struggling with either anxiety or depression, and we do short-term help, which means we're not their therapists, but we, many times, support the students who do

have therapists, so we are the backup when they are in need on campus."

Junior Etta Corn has used LASA's mental health resources before. She gave a reason why some students may not use the offered tools as much as they could.



**STRESS NO MORE** Therapy dogs are one of the many stress management tools provided by the wellness counselors. They can be visited in the wellness center or around the school, photo by Ethan Stern

"I think it probably could be publicized more around the school," Corn said. "I think a lot of kids know it exists, but it kind of just feels far away and doesn't feel like something they could go and do all the time."

For some students, reaching out can be the hardest part of getting help. Pena explains how she also deals with this issue herself.

"I just am a really push-it-through type of person, so anytime that I struggle with mental health, I have a hard time reaching out," Pena said. "This is for a lot of students, not just about mental health but about academics. I have a hard time reaching out just because I am a strong believer that I can fix my own problems, which is not the honest truth."

For some, issues with mental health extremely impact their lives. Corn explains how many pressures are put on students, including herself.

"I've had decent struggles myself with stress from class," Corn said. "Personal image issues and stuff with my family, and so I think it matters a lot to take care of your mental health."

Corn's concerns are not uncommon. When dealing with stress or other mental health issues, Cardona explained how it's important to see the signs before they get bad.

"Listen to your body, listen to your mind, listen to your emotions," Cardona said. "You don't want to stuff them down, you don't want to pretend they're not there, and you don't want to avoid them."

## String Fest Starts Beginner Students Strong

ELIOT DONMOYER | staff writer

The 51st Annual Fall Festival for Strings, also known as String Fest, is one of the largest music events in AISD. Approximately 1000 students and their teachers come from across the district to perform simple songs together. This event allows the oldest students in the district to impart their years of experience on the next generation of musicians before graduating.

It is a mandatory event for all beginning orchestra students, typically sixth graders, and all senior orchestra students. LASA orchestra seniors take a field trip in November to help teach beginners and perform alongside them.

LASA orchestra director Rachel Horvitz takes LASA seniors to String Fest every year. She provides them with a schedule, sheet music, and chaperones them to the festival.

"I just cheer them on," Horvitz said. "Our students really embrace that role of being teachers and mentors to their peers,



**RAPTORS PLAY AWAY** LASA orchestra plays at Stringfest. Students guided and played alongside younger students, photo courtesy of Rachel Horvitz

even if they're sixth graders."

Many seniors who attend String Fest also attended as sixth graders. Violist Charlotte Revesz attended String Fest as a beginner in 2019.

"I really enjoyed it. I grew up playing piano, so I had a bit of music background, but it was really nice to go back to some of the basics with some of my friends and things as we started on a completely different instrument, and just seeing the huge group. At that time, it was at the Performing Arts Center, so the whole stage was filled with the cello and basses, and [the violas and violins] were out in the auditorium."

Revesz will be returning this year as a senior. No longer a beginner, it is now her responsibility to teach and assist during the festival.

"Honestly, I'm really looking forward to it," Revesz said. "I think it'll be sweet to see. Kind of a full circle moment, as much as anything. It'll be nice to see the sixth graders and be like, 'oh we were once there and playing those easy things, and now we're doing all kinds of harder Tchaikovsky or whatever at this point.'"

The Fall Festival for Strings will be at the Delco Activity Center this year. Samantha Stewart is the emcee for the event and director for Bedicheck Middle School.

"It is mandatory, and I think that is a good thing," Stewart said. "I think it's important to do events cross district, and have a goal for all of the beginners. The students always have fun going on a field trip and spending time with their friends."

Seniors and directors perform alongside the middle schoolers. They also assist the beginners tune and set up.

"It can be a little hectic," Horvitz said. "Again, the kids are really good about taking that initiative to be like 'hey, can I help you find your place,' or 'hey, let me help you carry that.' All those things that we do for each other also in our own concert setting: helping people find their way, helping people with materials. But of course, that's really, really needed on that scale when it's so

many people, and they're sixth graders just starting out."

This year, the song list was changed to streamline the difficulty levels across instruments. They will perform ten songs, including Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and Hot Cross Buns, to practice different musical techniques. Their finale song will be French Folk Song.

"String fest is such an amazing experience for all of the beginner string players," Stewart said. "I think it is awesome that all of the teachers teach the same curriculum and all of the students are able to come together to play. I also think it's a wonderful opportunity for students to see other players from other schools."



**READY TO PLAY** LASA Orchestra takes group photo. For many, this is their fourth year returning to String fest, photo courtesy of Rachel Horvitz

## LASA Debate Team Dominates the Circuit

ELINA SARKAR | staff writer

When one walks into the LASA Debate meeting in Room 109A, it feels conspicuously like a regular club. The students are laughing, joking with one another and with the coach. However, beneath this casual and friendly surface is a team known for national dominance.

The LASA Debate team has been incredibly successful in past years, winning the national Tournament of Champions, the Baker Award, every major regular-season tournament, and making history with the first team to hold first place in the Coaches Poll for the entire season. LASA debate coach and Texas Forensics Association (TFA) Hall of Fame member Yao Yao Chen explained how their success is concentrated in one event, policy debate.

"It's high-speed, verbal, intellectual chess," Chen said. "You debate in partnerships, you generally debate about a topic that relates to U.S. federal policy, something that a federal government should do."

What is the key to success in policy debate? Long-time speech and debate coach and TFA Hall of Fame member Terri Robinson noted the amount of work debate takes.

"That's what really top-tier debaters do, they put hours and hours into what they do, because that's what it takes to excel," Robinson said. "Lots of people are smart. Lots of people have talent. The two things that will set them apart are a strong work ethic and a good coach."

Chen finds that LASA students have this strong work ethic. He described the time commitment of a successful debater.

"The top teams are putting in 15, 20 hours a week, where they're meeting with coaches, they're meeting with teammates, they're doing research," Chen said. "I mean, it's kind of scary, but it's like it can be a lifestyle, right?"

While the hours can be demanding, LASA debaters may feel the team is a supportive community. Kathryn Houston, a junior on the team, shared her experience.

"I think that the team itself is very closely knit," Houston said. "That largely contributes to why I love being a part of it so much."

This culture may be more than just enjoyable. Chen believes it is the secret to success.

"I think a defining characteristic is that LASA debaters are all pretty hungry. They're pretty humble. They're very hardworking,

they're very motivated," Chen said. "They also really support each other."

Beyond the students' commitment to policy debate, they also have an experienced coaching staff. Robinson described Chen's dedication to the team.

"Everybody works hard, but Yao Yao [Chen] puts in hours and hours of unpaid coaching time with those kids," Robinson said. "He's just an amazing policy coach."

Despite the many accolades earned by LASA debaters, their



**VARSAITY SUCCESS** LASA debaters participate in the Greenhill tournament. Senior Ankit Bhasi and Junior Josey Conley made it to semifinals, photo courtesy of Yao Yao Chen

coach sees other motivations. Chen described the students' passion for the activity.

"There are other things you can do that get more recognition for less time you can put in," Chen said. "They kind of do it for the love of the game."

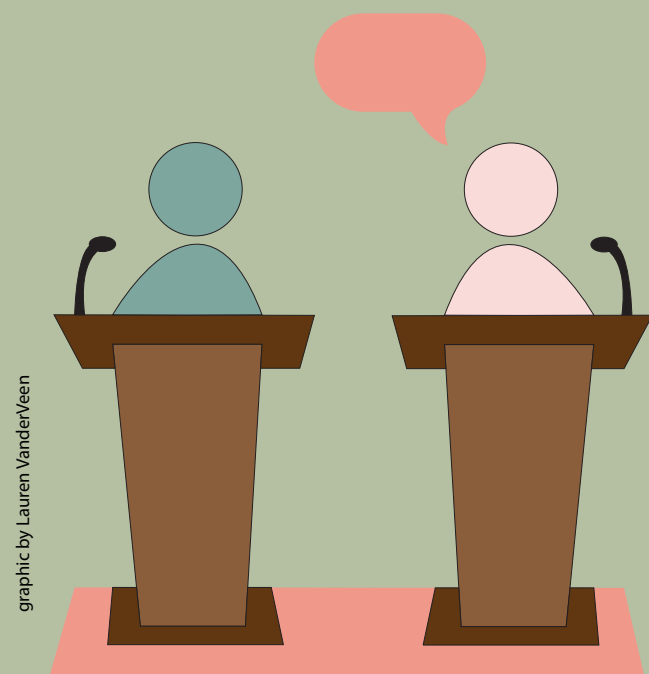
Team members not only participate for the recognition, but also find that they gain a different perspective. Houston explained how debate has altered her worldview.

"Debate has become a place for me to interact with the world through a new lens," Houston said. "This activity changes the

way that I think and perceive the world, and it does so for the better."

Team members have joined and graduated, tournaments have been won and lost, but one thing remains clear: LASA Debate has made a name for itself. Robinson offers an outside perspective on their success.

"They're one of the top policy debate schools in the country," Robinson said. "Everybody knows that. On the state level, on the national level, they're very well respected and well recognized because they win. They're well prepared. They're good debaters."



graphic by Lauren VanderVeen

## Behind

from page 1

“There’s a lot of email advances depending on what artists might need,” Foster said. “We all have a particular stage package for our stages, and then, if there’s any extra gear that artists might need, they would sort that out in advance through email.”

Audio technicians also have to ensure that they are ready before the show to ensure that it runs smoothly. One tool that is an essential part for Polo & Pan is Ableton: a music production platform allowing for live production, arrangement, and much more. Nicolas Miossec, the Ableton operator for Polo & Pan, is tasked with ensuring that everything is ready to go before the show.

“We’re well prepared now, so it’s not overwhelming,” Miossec said. “I can check things in advance if I have any doubt on the station, on some modification we want to have from one show to another. This can be so we can improve instruments, the mixing, sometimes we have to make a little change in the set list.”

The sound check before the festival starts is the only opportunity, according to Foster, for the sound people to make drastic changes to the sound. After that, they are only able to make sure that the levels are set and the musicians have everything they need.

“The first sound check of the day is really good for me to get a starting point for the whole day,” Foster said. “And then the main stage hits, so we can’t really do a full sound check, so it’s just through headphones.”

There is only a short amount of time that the sound people get to complete their full sound check. Brieuc Labiouse, the sound engineer for Polo & Pan, compared this to the amount of time they usually have to get ready for a performance.

“We have much less time than usual, so we have to be on our best to make it work,” Labiouse said. “Usually we have all day, we start at 10:00 a.m. and the sound check is at 4:00 p.m. Today we started at 8:30 a.m., and the sound check was at 11:00 a.m., so it’s much shorter.”

There are two important parts of running sound for a stage and communication between people is a must. Foster described that these parts depend on where one is during the festival.

“I have this radio here, this festival provided radio,” Foster said. “We have a dedicated channel for our stage with my stage manager and the monitor engineer, who’s mixing the sound for the bands on stage, whereas I’m just focused on the front of house for the audience’s sound.”

According to Juno Black, who is an employee of Big House Sound and helps with the sound on the BMI Stage, the backstage crew is just as important as the front of house sound people in ensuring that the festival sounds great. Black described some differences between being backstage and being in the front of house.

“We’re more concerned with managing all of the audio systems on the stage,” Black said. “The main objective is to have the artist comfortable so they can play their show. We’re focused on the artists, not so much on the audience or what’s going on outside.”

Since the festival is so hot, there are a lot of problems that can arise. One of the main problems is equipment overheating, and according to Foster, most of the devices across the stage are susceptible to this problem.

“After day one, I went and bought this umbrella, this sun reflective umbrella, and I’m just moving it around as the sun moves to protect my console,” Foster said. “Sometimes with the heat, the amps that power the speakers will start to give me temperature warnings. Then I’ll take a fan down under the stage and put it on the amps. Even though it’s not in direct sunlight, it’s still accumulating heat from being under there.”

Although technology is a very important part of their job, sound people also help with shaping the sound that the audience hears from the artist. Black added that this is an art that takes a lot of time to master.

“You have to shape each one of the sounds that you’re getting, so they are very distinguishable from other sounds and everything can be heard,” Black said. “So you’re shaping, you’re feeling and limiting the dynamic range of the sounds, how loud and soft they are in order to make the sound.”

The sound engineering that they do is not just important for the enjoyment of the audience, but also for the safety. Foster added that being able to do this is as much of an art as shaping the sounds.

“You wouldn’t want to damage anyone’s hearing, whether it be an artist or an audience member,” Foster said. “So just being able to tame a sound to where it’s not harmful to hear is important.”



**BEHIND THE CURTAIN** Nicolas Miossec using Ableton backstage on the Miller Lite stage while setting up for a performance. He uses Ableton to help Polo & Pan with their live performance. photo by Marcus Balyakina-Herrera

## Brands and Logos: Inside ACL’s Marketing Strategy

MEGAN GEROLD | editor emeritus

Across the grass of ACL, there are brands ranging from Tito’s Vodka to T-Mobile in various forms, from stages, tents, and cups to even koozies.

As Austin City Limits (ACL) has grown from its start in 2002, the number of vendors has skyrocketed with it. In an effort to grow their profits and impact, brands have also developed a vested interest in placing themselves amid the chaos. As larger companies have taken over, the aspect of Austin’s small-town festival has shifted drastically, with attendees coming from all over to take part in the local economy. Tom Strickland has been working for Austin Pizza for years and explained the brand’s presence at ACL has directly coincided with the direction they wish to take their image.

“We’re trying to get back more towards that Austin feel,” Strickland said. “I think we lost that a little with the owners who took over in between.”

Strickland discussed how, despite the economic struggles that Austin has faced, the company’s effort to ensure high-quality service to their customers has continued. This dogma has reinforced their image, both at ACL and at their varying locations, which Strickland described as a network of a friendly community.

“We’ve been here since 1999 trying to make sure people can

get food, and they like it,” Strickland said. “It’s difficult with the way prices have changed. We’re making an effort to get a good product, and they’re getting it quick.”

Branding also extends to what merchandise attendees choose to purchase, with different groups purchasing different products. According to Ashley Casanave, who works as a cashier in the merchandise tent and has traveled to multiple festivals, ACL’s marketing is geared differently than other festivals with most people buying merchandise being on the younger side.

“[Festivals] definitely bring out similar types of people,” Casanave said. “You definitely have to have a type of personality and patience to brave a festival. Austin’s probably been the friendliest one because the demographics are a lot younger than some of the other ones ... That may also be because of who is willing to stand in the merch line.”

For the vendors and brands that attend the festival, marketing is very important. As social media has grown, it has caused a change in how brands choose to market, according to St. Thomas University. However, to some attendees, this doesn’t seem to mean much. Although LASA senior Kamryn Rafael Reames, who has attended ACL since she was three years old, notices what brands are there, she doesn’t feel a desire to buy products from them.

“There’s a lot of alcohol brands: Miller Lite’s a stage brand,” Rafael Reames said. “It’s very centered around alcohol. I think

ACL is a big scam for alcohol brands to make a lot of money.”

This marketing perspective contrasted with what Casanave viewed about the demographics of ACL as younger groups are unable to purchase many beverages at the festival. For LASA senior Calvin Fedyszyn, who has attended the festival since he was nine and lives in the surrounding area, he is more impacted by the ACL branding itself rather than the individual companies.

“I think seeing it outside of the festival every year at the intersection and seeing that big billboard is more impactful than whatever branding they’re doing inside the gates,” Fedyszyn said. “It makes [ACL] feel like a big deal.”

While the ACL posters are a positive aspect to Fedyszyn, the ACL branding on merchandise is a large negative to Rafael Reames. For Rafael Reames, she is less inclined to buy objects from the ACL shop.

“I’m only inclined to get the merch if I like the artist and it’s good merch,” Rafael Reames said. “I hate the ACL store. I hate the clothes. The ACL logos are so big. I’d much rather get the artist merch.”

Many brands at ACL have expanded their impact through what they offer at the festival such as T-Mobile which hosted a lounge featuring a wide variety of perks. As ACL continues to rise in popularity, these companies — both large and small — will continue to compete for the chance to take a small part

## ASL Interpreters Help Add to Inclusive Environment

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor

With two weekends of live music, notable bands from around the world, and tens of thousands of partying attendees, ACL is a feast for the ears. But while the focus of the festival may seem auditory, deaf guests have found a way to enjoy the show in their own way as well.

Since 2012, ACL has offered American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation services. Attendees can request them for specific shows in advance, and then they receive an area near the stage to watch an interpreter sign and dance to the music.

Amanda and David Tuite have been active in the Deaf community in a myriad of ways. Amanda serves as president of the Texas School for the Deaf Foundation and CEO of her company, Access Vine. The married couple started working at ACL four years ago, and they manage the interpreting operations.

“We work together on creating a team for ASL accessibility,” Amanda Tuite said. “We create a team to be assigned to the stages to allow the deaf and hard of hearing to be in the pit.”

Amber G Productions is the brainchild of the San Antonio performer Amber Galloway. The deal with Galloway is part of a larger effort by ACL to give people with disabilities the chance to enjoy the festival, making it more accessible for customers who need accommodations for mobility impairment, special dietary needs, or deafness.

“It’s a big deal to have Amber G Productions as part of ACL,” Amanda Tuite said. “Many deaf people know that they will have high quality interpreters. When they find out that she is responsible for the acts, it’s really huge for the community.”

As performers, her ASL interpreters, who are trained and qualified, do more than translate song lyrics. They give viewers the chance to feel the rhythm and instrumentation of the music through dancing and facial expressions.

“A very small group of interpreters can be experts in this,” Amanda Tuite said. “You have to have the musicality, you have to have verse rhythm to match and move along with the beat. You

have to have a musical background to understand what kind of instruments are being played because you’re showing different instruments.”

David Tuite explained that because ASL is a distinct language, English phrases can’t be translated directly. Instead, performers focus on getting the artist’s message across.

“For example, ‘take me for what I am’ is not signing ‘take me for what I am,’” David Tuite said. “It’s more like, ‘take me as I am,’ which is very different. We’re not signing word for word. We’re taking that whole thing and signing it as a concept at the same time as the person with the microphone.”

Susan Gillespie coordinates the deaf seating area, communicating between the stage crew and deaf guests to set them up near the interpreter. She emphasized the work that goes into preparation for live events.

“The interpreters have to prepare three months back, and they contact the performer so the interpreter can prepare and look at the words,” Gillespie said. “That way, they can fully understand the words, and it’s awesome.”

Live performances can sometimes mean the artist going off script with impromptu lyrics or greetings, forcing interpreters to adapt on the spot. This can be more difficult for those who are fully deaf, but Amanda Tuite described that they remain well-received.

“We have Deaf interpreters and we also have hearing interpreters,” Amanda Tuite said. “Deaf people in the audience will sometimes request a Deaf interpreter. On the stage, the Deaf interpreters already have that culture engaged in them.”

This style, which emerged in the last decade as venues seeking out inclusivity began interpreting performances, has become popular among the non-deaf as well. Videos of the most talented professionals, who are able to seamlessly incorporate signs of what the artists are saying and doing into their dances, have gained the profession attention online. Still, Amanda Tuite thinks the work could use more attention from within the community since many deaf people are unaware of its presence.

“They could do so several different ways,” Amanda Tuite said. “Write an article

in the paper, do a news interview on TV in ACL with Amber about her experience or interview an advocate. Inform the community. Say, ‘hey, come on over, you can get sign language interpreters here.’ Many people react, ‘I didn’t know that was an option.’”

For a performance to be interpreted, attendees must fill out a request form for the intended timeslot. David Tuite worried that deaf aren’t aware of the opportunity and miss the window to request the service in advance.

“Most Deaf people don’t know about their responsibility to request an interpreter,” David Tuite said. “They’re missing an opportunity to get the actors they need.”



**FOLLOW THE SIGNS** One of many interpreters present throughout many of the stages at ACL. As musicians perform, interpreters sign the lyrics to the crowd. photo by Ellington Tough



## City Limits and Kiddie Limits

ARIANA RODRIGUEZ | commentary editor  
ANYA GHIMIRE | web editor

Every October, when Zilker Park hosts Austin City Limits, drawing massive crowds to main stages scattered throughout the lawn, a smaller corner of the park moves at a different pace. Austin Kiddie Limits, a child-oriented part of the festival, allows families to be in a quieter and more contained space, with special activities designed to accommodate the young festival goers.

From hands-on art projects and hip-hop workshops offered by local businesses to child-friendly performances by musicians, Austin Kiddie Limits has slowly become a reliable stop for families who want to enjoy the music festival without having to navigate dense crowds. The area features a rotating selection of various activities each year, most of which focus on giving kids a chance to create, and experiment. Jude Winson is the owner of Cafe Monet — one of Austin's most popular pottery studios — and noted the features that make Kiddie Limits unique.

"It's just sort of its own little festival, in itself, and all the vendors are so nice," Winson said. "All the kids get to do everything for free."

Kiddie Limits provides a fun and secure environment for children, allowing guardians to feel at peace when dropping their children off. Winson highlighted specific ways in which the space is built for families.

"They allow you to park your strollers," Winson said. "They have a place where you can give information about your child and put a wristband on them called Tag-A-Kid."

The mini-festival relies heavily on behind-the-scenes coordination to ensure that the activities run smoothly and safely for the hundreds of children who pass through during weekends one and two. Emily Smith, a second-year staff member at Kiddie Limits, played a key role in helping prep the space before families arrive.

"Kids can get temporary tattoos, hairdos, paint," Smith said. "Just a lot of hands-on things that keep them organized."

According to Smith, most of the work happens before the festival opens, where staff members set out supplies, organize the different stations, and ensure vendors have what they need to operate throughout the day. Winson reflected on changes she has observed in the festival over her experience.

"It's my 20th year," Winson said. "[Kiddie Limits] has grown tremendously ... They bring in a couple new vendors each year, and then all the bands change every year. So it's always a blast."

Vendors who participate in Kiddie Limits typically come from a local business background like Cafe Monet. The pottery studio's booth highlights the hands-on focus that sets Kiddie Limits apart from the main festival.

"The kids get to explore their creativity in a new environment without pressure," Winson said. "[It] is really unique."

Parents appreciate Kiddie Limits for being a manageable and convenient way to experience Austin City Limits. Caroline Morley, an Austin parent, bikes to the festival with her family and described Kiddie Limits as a reliable space for families.

"We love it," Morley said. "It's very family friendly during the daytime."

Morley explained that she hadn't initially thought about attending ACL as a family until recently. ACL's large crowds pose a potential risk or overwhelm for children, but with Austin Kiddie Limits, these fears are downsized.

"At first we didn't even think about it," Morley said. "A friend had been bringing his kids for years, and now we love it, too."

As ACL continues to grow, Austin Kiddie Limits continues to focus on providing fun and interactive experiences, local business participation, and a safe environment for families attending the music festival.

"I see toddlers, baby babies with headphones, and then eight or nine-year-olds running around," Smith said. "It's really for all ages."

### ACL DRESS CODE

LILAH O'DAIR | sports editor

Music festival, or fashion show? Austin City Limits is a common place to find a range of expressive outfits, from floor length dresses to two-piece swimsuits. Some combinations seem to be more popular than others, though, like the colorful corset and a long, lacy skirt. Whether you stick to trends or test the limits, ACL is the perfect place to show your style.

**Floral Beaded Top**  
Allie Sears, LASA Junior, chose a bright beaded tank for ACL this year. Trendy and fun, a beaded top like this one adds interest to the ACL look through the reflection of the sun.

**White Lace Skirt**  
Many ACL goers, like Jaea Rivera, chose to incorporate a long skirt into their lineups this year. Often paired with a chunky belt, the skirt provides a great

**Brown Vest**  
This versatile fashion-forward piece is worn across aesthetics by the ACL crowd. \*\* recognized how the Austin environment encourages a unique look.

**White Short**  
Saumya Reddy and Allie Sears, both LASA Juniors, share an appreciation for the white Jean shorts. They are a popular choice across aesthetics at Austin City Limits for their versatility and fashion potential.

**Pink Corset**  
Reddy sports a tailored corset she found on amazon. She hoped to fit the theme of the Saturday headliner, Sabrina Carpenter.

## Listening in: Hotline TNT's Q&A

GEORGIA FINK | entertainment editor

ACL showcases many popular artists, and with over 100 musicians showcased, there are a plethora of small musicians that perform throughout the festival. One of these bands is Hotline TNT, an alternative rock band started and led by Will Anderson and is based in New York City. The band played on the T-Mobile Stage at ACL this year, experiencing one of their biggest performances yet.

LASA Liberator: What makes the music you play different from other genres of music?

Will Anderson: I mean, in 2025, alternative rock, which is what I would call Hotline, is kind of in its own section of popular music. Like a lot of stuff that gets popular, doesn't have real guitar, real drums. We try to bring that back a little bit. I think it's always been there, but we're starting to see it get popular again a little bit. These things go in waves. Other than that, we're not too different than any other band. We're just two guitars, one drummer, one singer.

LL: What kind of person do you see listening to this music?

Anderson: I say it's pretty broad. I mean, a lot of different kinds of people. We try to make the music that's in our heart, and it's a big umbrella that everybody's supposed to be welcome under.

LL: What kind of shows do you normally play?

Anderson: We do clubs that are around 100 to 300 capacity. We also do a lot of basement shows, holiday shows, VFW halls, weird shows like that.

LL: What kind of things have you noticed that were different about playing at ACL than your usual shows?

Anderson: This is a much bigger production. It's very slick because a lot of people are working, and it makes it a lot easier for us to get in, get out, and play our show.

LL: How did you get on the ACL stage?

Anderson: Our booking agent, Gabe Sunshine, is always out every day. He's looking for opportunities for us. He has relationships with the people who are running the festival.

LL: What did you notice about the audience reception today?

Anderson: Today there's a lot of people who don't know us. So I kind of like those opportunities. We're just going in, they're blind, they don't know anything about us. Our name is on the screen, but I have to hold their hand and be like, all right, we're going to sing this part now. I think it's cool, people go for it if you tell them how to have fun.

LL: This weekend, other than ACL, is there anything different about playing in Austin?

Anderson: Austin is always a very, very music-heavy city, so there's a lot of, I would say, competition. There's always like a million shows happening every time we're down here. But the vibes are always fantastic. People are excited to see rock music.

LL: How do you create your music and make your sound?

Anderson: There's a lot of steps to it. I'm inspired by other bands. If I hear something I like, whether it's in music or something else, I'll go to my studio, which is my bedroom, and just try to make the sound I hear in my head. When it comes to being on stage, there's, you know, gear, there's presentation. As far as the actual sound of the band, I'm just trying to chase the sound I hear in my brain.



ON THE BIG STAGE Hotline TNT playing the first set on the T-Mobile stage at ACL. Will Anderson in the middle with his band playing around him. photo by Georgia Fink

## ACL Cleans Up

MARCUS BALYAKINA-HERRERA | staff writer

Festival-goers at the ACL found more than music on the schedule: the Austin Parks Foundation (APF) brought interactive sustainability to bring forth effort on environmental stewardship. Their outreach this year focused on recycling education, sustainability efforts, and community programs designed to protect Austin's parks long after the crowd goes home.

C3 Presents, an Austin-based company that produces Austin City Limits Music Festival (ACL), estimated that more than 70,000 people pack Zilker Park each day for ACL. The APF volunteers work behind the scenes to maintain the beauty of the park through encouraging sustainability. Some of the efforts to make this year's festival more environmentally friendly include aluminum cups and a reward for cleaning up Zilker Park. In an attempt to make recycling more fashionable, APF created "Rock and Recycle!" The premise of this initiative is to encourage people to pick up recyclable items in exchange for a T-shirt with local bands on the back, something that Alex Hohman, an Austin Parks Foundation volunteer, found an important part of the festival.

"I think one thing that people don't take advantage of enough is that if you pick up a bag of recyclable cans, you get a free T-shirt from local artists," Hohman said. "It gives back to the community in terms of preserving our parks, and it supports local artists."

With thousands of people at Zilker Park, ACL urged the importance of keeping the park clean and staying mindful of their recycling habits. Michael Field, a Rock and Recycle volunteer, explained why cleaning up after ACL is important.

"We have to make sure we aren't a filthy species, you know," Field said. "We have to stay a good example for the environment."

APF programs such as Rock & Recycle are visible throughout the event, and there are many more sustainability efforts throughout ACL. One of these is the hydration stations seen throughout the festival.

"One thing many attendees seem to glance past is the hydration station," Russo says. "The water stations reduce the most plastic, since people are bringing reusable water bottles."

Aside from Rock & Recycle, APF has other programs it runs throughout the festival, including Austin Kiddie Limits, Volunteer HQ, and Divert It, a program where volunteers educate people on items that are compostable or recyclable near trash cans. While Austin Kiddie Limits is an ACL-specific event, Volunteer HQ and Divert It are programs APF holds throughout the year. Madelyn Russo, a Rock & Recycle volunteer, mentioned how these programs affect Austin parks year-round.

"These are very impactful programs in my opinion," Russo said. "A lot of the funds we get from ACL go into the APF funds to keep the parks healthy."

Even outside the festival, the department's work stretches into year-round programs. These efforts don't draw the same attention as the festival booths or on-site activities, but they shape how parks maintain their charm.



photos by Georgia Fink, Megan Gerold, and Marcus Balyakina-Herrera



## Texas Book Festival Takes Off

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor

Although this was only the Texas Book Festival's 30th anniversary, its subject matter ranged from the 1800s territory to the state of the future.

Taking place in the fall of every year, the event is a chance for Texas authors to reach new audiences in downtown Austin, where thousands of guests gather at and around the Capitol. This year, panels with Texas authors addressed the state's past and its meaning. Benjamin Heber Johnson, author of "Texas: An American History," discussed how the image of Texans as frontiersmen cowboys persists to the current day in his session.

"There are indigenous people, and there are the relatively recently arrived Comanche, Spanish, Mexicans, Anglo Texans, fanatical baptists, fanatical atheists, gay rights advocates," Johnson said. "That's part of what makes this place work: welcoming people who find that putting on the boots and hat, or whatever else they need to do to play Texan, works for them."

What Johnson sees is that a popular concept of Texas as a free land, open to individualism, continues to attract newcomers who must decide how state pride they wish to express. Henry Cisneros, former Mayor of San Antonio and U.S. Secretary of Housing and Development, addressed that issue at the festival with his new book, "Megaregion."

"How we address the challenges creates the difference between whether this is positive quality of life, or whether this is erratic and haphazard growth," Cisneros said. "It stems from my original belief when I was mayor of San Antonio back in the 1980s that Austin and San Antonio had to work together in this common ground of Central Texas that we share."

Cisneros touts cities like Georgetown and Round Rock — the fastest growing in the country — as evidence that the demographic shift will balloon the

region's population to 8.3 million by 2050. He intended "Megaregion," to lay out policy that will allow the twin cities to cooperate as they face unprecedented opportunities and challenges.

"The Hill Country gets more complex because of the caverns and the limestone, and the springs and the creeks, so most of the growth, I think, is gonna go east of I-35," Cisneros said. "It's really incomprehensible to imagine that speed of growth and that scale of growth in such a short span of time. Why is it? Because we have a favorable business climate in the state, we have a low tax rate for the state, because we have abundant land to build on, because we have prices that are generally better than other places in the country. We have a population that's young and workforce oriented. We have a history that makes it an attractive area historically."

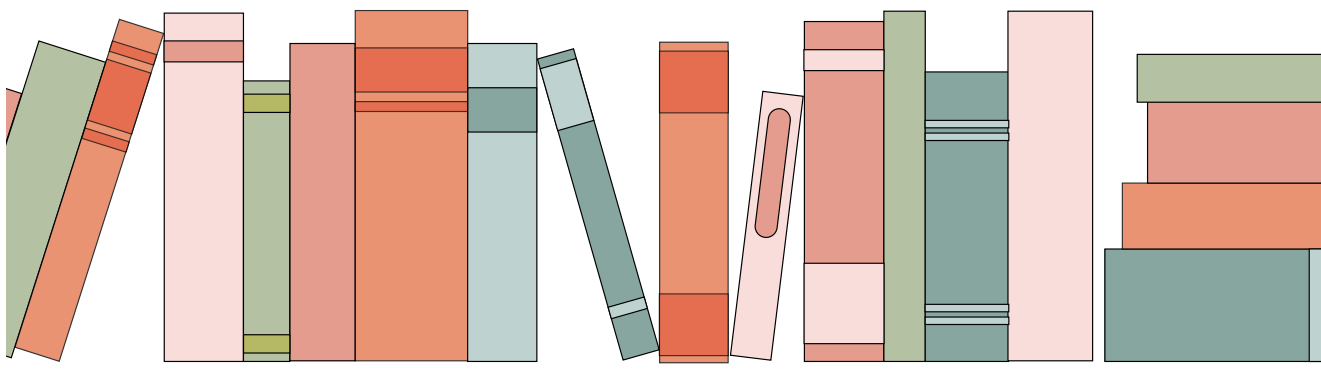
Austinite Chris Giles has been attending the Texas Book Festival for more than 10 years. She enjoys sessions like Johnson's and Cisneros' because they bring new perspective to topics she's familiar with.

"I think that they're really good about bringing a variety of people who talk on a lot of different issues, healthcare, social things," Giles said. "And they cover them both in nonfiction and in fiction, which is lovely because you can get quite a variety of perspectives."

Authors have to apply before appearing at the Texas Book Festival, which includes book signings and sales, but not direct payment. The goal of many authors is to share more about their strongly held beliefs and knowledge, according to Cisneros.

"It's not about selling books," Cisneros said. "The point is to get out an urgent message about a region that I care about, that I think is right now shaping its future, and a region that will either be a wonderful place to live and proud of its identity, or just another congested sprawl mass that once had its best day."

graphic by Abbey Wu



## AI Takes Over Art Spaces

ANDREW DRUMMOND | staff writer

Xania Monet, a completely AI-generated musical artist, has amassed 37 million streams on Spotify, with her hit song "How Was I Supposed To Know?" peaking at number 30 on the Billboard Adult R&B Airplay chart.

This recent, but steadily growing, encroachment by generative AI into artistic spaces has been mirrored across many different genres and mediums of art, raising concerns about what constitutes "real" art and whether or not legal protections should be instituted to safeguard these spaces that are seen by some as strictly human. Elizabeth Hewitt, LASA's art teacher, believes that AI art is not real art.

"[Art is] something that makes humans question in a way controlled by the artist," Hewitt said.

The resoluteness of her "No" isn't shared by all artists, however. Some, such as Bryce Dallas, a Dallas-based tattoo artist, believe generative AI can be used tastefully.

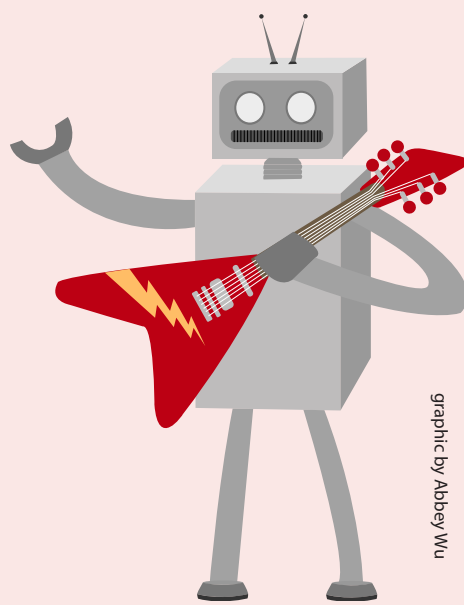
"I don't think [AI] has no applicational ability in art," Dallas said. "I think people have used it in artistic ways, and I even like some of the stuff that people make when they're really pushing the boundaries of imagination and expression."

While the use of AI in art is highly controversial, artists around the world have called for legislation to be put in place to make AI-generated art more easily distinguishable from human-made art. These laws would work to balance transparency with innovation, according to Frontiers, aligning with beliefs shared by both Dallas and Hewitt.

"[Some people] are using it negatively," Dallas said. "People are making stuff that you can't distinguish from reality, and they're using it for propaganda."

While legislation restricting AI is still being deliberated over, very little has been put into place, especially in the U.S. This has led many artists like Hewitt to view AI's restriction as a futile endeavor.

"It's ... getting harder for people to know what's real and what's not real," Hewitt said. "But you can't restrict it. It's not enforceable, and it's just not possible."



graphic by Abbey Wu

## LASA Raptors Go Marching In

MARGOT MORGAN | club contributor

Behind Friday-night LASA band performances are months of planning, rehearsals, and a community working toward one shared goal: creating a show that feels seamless to audiences. For the directors and students, the process starts long before the school year does, and it continues until the end of the fall semester.

Before students even arrive on campus in August, band director Ponder East and the design team are already deep into planning. East explained that while musical preparation begins early, the marching drill cannot start until Aug. 1, which is when the bulk of the work begins.

"We start early, we front-load everything as much as we can," East said. "Usually, before the first day of school, we try to be able to play all of the music."

For junior Josephine Dittmar, the vice president of the band, the structure of rehearsals becomes second nature during the season. Each practice builds the show in small pieces until the band can run their performance from start to finish.

"We'll take maybe 30 seconds of the show, rehearsing it over and over," Dittmar said. "At the very end, we always do a full run of the entire thing."

Even after the show is designed, performing it is even more difficult. Senior band member Vita Istomina explained that the hardest part is simply getting through

rehearsal, especially in the Texas heat.

"It was so hot outside most of the season," Istomina said. "You have to memorize all your music and learn the whole show in that heat."

Although the marching is very important, East emphasized how every design decision — from props to music — aims to create a cohesive experience for the audience and for the students performing. Each element is chosen with purpose, reinforcing the story and theme for that year's season.

"We want them to see the show and go, wow, that all fits together," East said. "And from the kid's point of view, we want them to have a good feeling about it from the moment we announce it."

Dittmar experienced that emotional payoff at the band's final performance of the season. They had their last show at the USBands Central Texas Championships in November, where they placed 6th in the Finals overall.

"Our very last performance was our best performance," Dittmar said. "We were all so proud of ourselves."

There is much more to band than just the rehearsals and performances. East believes the heart of the program is the community that is created.

"I get to watch you become this person that you're becoming," East said. "When we're all present in the moment making music, there's nothing really like it."

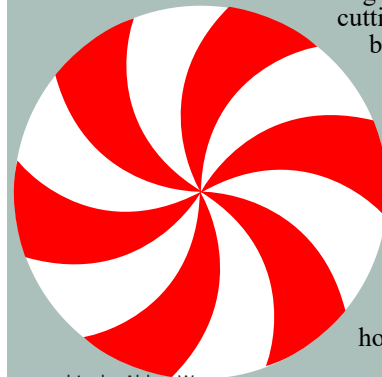
## Editor's Picks

### Favorite Winter Treats

#### Peppermint Bark

GEORGIA FINK | entertainment editor

Right after Halloween is over, stores move every holiday item to the front. All of the treats that are packaged in colorful holiday boxes and bags are put on shelves that you see right when you walk in at almost every grocery store. One of the best holiday treats has to be peppermint bark. A treat with both milk chocolate and white chocolate layers stacked on top of each other and peppermint sprinkled all over the top. The flavors of this dessert blend together very well, with the creamy chocolate melting in your mouth and the sharp peppermint cutting through the chocolatey flavors. As both a chocolate and a mint lover, I was to try this treat due to the similarity it draws to mint chocolate chip ice cream (one of my favorite ice creams). After eating it for the first time, I was surprised how similar they were, but this treat wasn't frozen! I have found that this is the perfect replacement for mint chocolate chip ice cream when it is too cold outside to eat ice cream and one of the best things that one can get at a holiday party.



graphics by Abbey Wu

#### Hot Chocolate

ABBEY WU | entertainment editor

When the cold, winter air sets in, sharp enough to see your breath, hot chocolate is the treat I crave above anything else. Although I love the powdered stuff that you can just dump in a mug, real hot chocolate is my favorite. The kind that is made slowly by stirring warm milk and dropping in chunks of chocolate that melt into something truly cozy and rich.

After the delicious and velvety drink has been made, marshmallows are a must add. As I stir, I watch as they dissolve into creamy swirls. The best part, though, is the moment when you wrap your hands around the mug. The warmth from the burning hot liquid inside seeps into your fingers, and clouds of steam drift toward your face, thawing you from the inside out. From marshmallows to cinnamon to whipped cream and sprinkles, the versatility of hot chocolate is half the fun. The taste always varies slightly depending on how much chocolate I decide to add and what I top it off with. It's sweet and homey, and is the perfect compliment to the chilly weather outside. To me, hot chocolate is more than a drink. It's comfort packed into a mug.



#### Gingerbread Cookies

LILY ANTONY | photo editor

My favorite holiday treat is gingerbread cookies. When I was a young child, I thought gingerbread was too much for me. I didn't appreciate the complexities of the sweet ginger flavors. I was used to simple sugar cookies, so the added spice was new to me. Even with the overwhelming flavors, gingerbread was one of my favorite holiday treats because of how much fun it is to decorate and construct with them. Creating elaborate gingerbread houses was a yearly tradition for my great aunt and me. We would find new architectural styles to base our gingerbread house around. I still vividly remember when my family decided to stay at a beach house during winter break and made a gingerbread beach house. We tried to use cotton candy as clouds, and I remember waking up and seeing that it had all dissolved. We spent most of that morning laughing about that failure. The process of building a gingerbread house was a very difficult and teeth-grinding one, but even when it results in failure, I look back and feel so rewarded. However, even though I loved decorating gingerbread cookies, I still didn't like their taste. That was until one late night when gingerbread cookies became my favorite holiday treat. I was stumbling around my kitchen looking for something sweet to snack on, and saw our little gingerbread house and people. My mom had been snacking on it, so I decided to snap some off and try it myself. I fell in love with the same spices that had deterred me from the cookie. From that day on, I would get some gingerbread cookies to eat along with the house and people we would decorate.



#### Plain Christmas Cookies

PAXTON TIDRICK | finance editor

When the winter holidays roll around, I usually don't enjoy it as much as I should. The snowy atmosphere is nice enough, but the red and white aesthetic is overwhelming, and I find Christmas decorations and media to be very over-the-top and boring after a while. But something that I've always looked forward to are plain, old Christmas cookies! Every year, my family and I make cookies of all different shapes (most notably Texas and longhorns, my mom is very proud of her heritage) and enjoy them both with and without frosting. But this year, we started a week or two earlier than we normally do, just because I was that excited about them! I suppose I'm still experiencing a sweet tooth as a result of Halloween. Modern Christmas cookies have been a thing since the 1500s, and I'd say we definitely perfected the formula. Something about the warm, sugary dough in the shape of a little, featureless man that's getting eaten alive really makes me feel good inside, you know?



# “Funflation” Finds Faithful Fans Feeling Limited

AVERY HERSH | staff writer

Sports fans are rioting against the rise of inflation throughout the world, which has been affecting grocery prices, bills, and now tickets to people’s favorite teams’ games. There has been an increasing demand after COVID-19 for sporting event tickets because people were unable to attend while cooped up in their homes. Prices for sporting event tickets rose 25.1% from 2022 to 2023, rising again 21.7% more till 2024, and has only been increasing since then.

Margot Winegar, a LASA soccer player and an avid sports fan, shared her own experience with how inflation is affecting sports fans. She talked about how limiting it can be for not only attendance but experience.

“I feel like inflation is limiting the types of opportunities sports fans can experience,” Winegar said. “Not only just buying tickets for the game, but also when it comes to food or team merch inside the stadium. Sometimes I eat dinner before Austin FC games because it’s not worth buying chicken tenders for \$16.”

Emily Sparvero, an economics and sports management professor at the University of Texas at Austin, however, attributed this rise in ticket prices to the demand, not inflation. She explained how salary prices are the highest cost in the sports industry, and do not fluctuate with inflation.

“Sport experiences and tickets to games are not really affected by inflation,” Sparvero said. “In pro sports, the most expensive input is player salaries. Those salaries don’t increase because of inflation and generally aren’t affected by macroeconomic factors. Tickets to sports events are expensive because there is a relatively low supply and high demand.”

Fans are facing the consequences of what is happening, and

many are fearing what this means for the future of sporting events. Josue Garcia, a LASA soccer coach who studied political science, expressed what he thinks this may mean for many.

“Slowly, I feel that people will be priced out of being able to go to games or only be able to go see a live game once a season,” Garcia said. “I think that less sports fans will be in attendance at their teams’ games. If ticket prices increase, then not everyone will be able to keep up with the skyrocketing prices.”

While women’s sporting events attendance has been on the rise, having a 55% increase from 2021 to 2024, men’s sporting events have been seeing a decrease in attendance. The overall attendance for sporting events has been decreasing since 2015, but there has been a spike in inflation for tickets. Winegar talked about how many may not be able to afford these highly priced tickets and what this will do to attendance.

“In my opinion, inflation will decrease the amount of people in attendance at sports games,” Winegar said. “Ticket prices will get too expensive, and sports families won’t want to buy more than one seat worth a certain, overpriced amount. If ticket prices increase, then not everyone will be able to keep up with the skyrocketing prices.”

An average person in the United States makes \$62,027 according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2024. With bills, rent, and the cost of living, many Americans may not be able to afford to go to sporting events. Garcia pointed this out, and he emphasized how this might limit annual and less frequent events.

“If you talk about sporting events that only happen once every few years, then people may never be able to experience it in their lifetime unless they make a conscious effort to save and make attending the sporting event a priority,” Garcia said. “For regular season games, I think attendance was lowered, which is why also

most teams are trying to implement a fluctuating ticket price depending on demand.”

Josue Garcia believes that many fans will be forced onto digital streaming instead. He stated that this will not impact the economic success of the major franchises showcasing the games.

“I think that more and more fans will not be able to watch their favorite teams in person and more and more be forced to pay for a service to be able to watch their team on TV,” Garcia said. “More and more paid subscriptions will be used to generate revenue for the sports franchises, so that they can always stay profitable by selling off the television rights.”

Winegar shared her thoughts on the effects that less attendance and inflation could have on the sports companies and teams. She thinks that this could result in a lower budget for players, companies, and their equipment.

“In my opinion, inflation will decrease the amount of people in attendance at sports games,” Winegar said. “Ticket prices will get too expensive, and sports families won’t want to buy more than one seat worth a certain, overpriced, amount. This will probably mean that there will be less money for the sports companies and players, as well as less investments in their playing conditions like fields, locker rooms, etc.”

Inflation is expected to keep rising, according to Trading Economics, and ticket prices will most likely also follow this trend. Many sports fans will continue to be affected by this. Companies have started fluctuating ticket prices based on demand, but that will not help for higher demand games, like the annual games or games for bigger teams.



graphics by Paxton Tidrick

opinion

## Earned or Inherited?

### The Harm of Nepotism in Sports

ZACHARY EGLER | staff writer

The most secure job in sports is being the child of someone important. No matter how many season runs collapse or how many offenses implode, the same last names will keep finding themselves on payrolls. It’s not just performance-based. It’s a family tree.

Take Nathaniel Hackett; if football jobs were earned strictly by results, he would have been out of the NFL years ago. He is the son of longtime coach Paul Hackett and somehow manages to secure high-ranking jobs despite consistently underwhelming results. In 2018, Nathaniel Hackett was the offensive coordinator for the Jacksonville Jaguars, who finished with the second-worst scoring offense in the league. However, rather than being demoted or seen negatively in any way, the Green Bay Packers hired him to fill the same role. While the Packers were successful during Nathaniel Hackett’s tenure with the team, this was largely due to having NFL MVP Aaron Rodgers at quarterback. Following the 2021 season, the Denver Broncos hired Hackett as a head coach in what would turn out to be one of the worst coaching stints in recent memory.

Hackett, along with star quarterback Russell Wilson, was supposed to bring an offense that had recently been dormant to life. Instead, the Broncos had the 31st-best scoring offense in the league, and Hackett was fired midway through the season. Despite this, the New York Jets inexplicably hired him to be the team’s offensive coordinator for the 2023 season. After two terrible seasons there, Nathaniel Hackett was fired once again.

In his 11 years as an offensive coordinator or head coach, Hackett led only three top-ten scoring offenses. In the same span, he coached six bottom-ten scoring offenses. Now, Hackett serves as a defensive analyst for the Packers, supposedly bringing an offensive viewpoint to the defensive side of the ball. Hackett somehow keeps falling upwards. His career feels less like a resume and more like a family heirloom.

This is not to say that all descendants of coaches are bad. The Shanahan family’s success has traveled through generations. Mike Shanahan, father of current San Francisco 49ers head coach Kyle Shanahan, was a two-time AP Coach of the

Year and won two Super Bowls as head coach of the Denver Broncos and another as the offensive coordinator for the 49ers. His son has carried on his legacy, leading the 49ers to two Super Bowl appearances. Kyle Shanahan has continued to use the “Shanahan West Coast” offensive scheme with great success and has firmly cemented the Shanahan name in the NFL history books.

And nepotism is not just prevalent on the sidelines, either. Bronny James did not become a Los Angeles Laker because of his stat sheet — he became one because his dad is LeBron James. It’s not to say that Bronny James is not talented, but if his name were “Bronny Johnson,” he would likely be fighting just to be in the league.

Even good players like Marvin Harrison Jr., son of NFL Hall of Famer Marvin Harrison, have benefited greatly from nepotism. In 2023, Harrison Jr. won the Fred Biletnikoff Award for the most outstanding wide receiver in college football. His stats that year were respectable: 67 catches, 1,211 yards, and 14 touchdowns. Nothing to scoff at for sure, but when compared to Rome Odunze’s 92 catches, 1,640 yards, and 14 touchdowns, it leaves the question of how much Harrison’s father’s legacy was taken into account.

Here’s the problem: sports are supposed to be the place where determination and dedication are what separate those who shine in the spotlight and those who fade, where what you do on the field or court matters more than who your family’s contacts are. But nepotism breaks this. It turns effort into background noise. It tells every unknown kid grinding for a roster spot that talent might get you noticed, but a famous last name gets you hired.

It is not just unfair. It’s boring. Sports are built on underdog stories, not family franchises. Players like Tom Brady, Kurt Warner, or more recently Brock Purdy are remembered because they came out of nowhere, not because they were somebody’s kid. The best part about sports is watching people earn their spot. Nepotism takes that away.

Each time Nathaniel Hackett lands a job or when the Lakers draft Bronny James, it is not just about talent. It is about access, who gets it, and who never will.

Nepotism won’t disappear from sports anytime soon. It is far too familiar, too humane, too easy. Yet, that does not mean it should be seen as something that is harmless. For every player or coach who gets another shot because of what they are born into, there is someone else who never even got their first.

## Wrestling Club Rises

MAURICIO RODRIGUEZ | staff writer

At 6 a.m., most LASA students are still asleep, but not the wrestling club. They are already rigorously training under a single tent, fighting the cold air and dim morning light. No matter what, the club is always practicing with the same intensity that they bring to the wrestling mat during competitions.

Even though LASA wrestling lacks a dedicated room, class period, or indoor space, LASA’s wrestling club has begun the season with more preparation and momentum than ever. Early club competitions, offseason training, and a growing group of committed wrestlers have pushed the program forward. Coach Matt Gochberg and the athletes view that the club’s work ethic and results show what the program can achieve, even though they do not get the same recognition as other sports.

Senior wrestler Jade Friedman is very familiar with the early morning practices. They show the dedication required to improve in a physically demanding sport.

“Wrestling is the only sport at LASA that doesn’t have its own class or room,” Friedman said. “We set up a tent to practice in brutal weather at 6 a.m., because that’s what wrestling is—gritty.”

Coach Matt Gochberg is a coach of the 3F wrestling program, an Austin-based practice facility. After being asked by one of his 3F athletes to help start the LASA club, he accepted and has been coaching LASA wrestling for two years.

“The freshmen wrestled spring club events after last season ended, so their preparation coming into this year has been tremendous compared to past seasons,” Gochberg said. “We started competing right at the beginning of the school year in club events, which gave the kids competition before the school season even started.”

All the additional practice that wrestlers have endured has paid off well for the club. According to Gochberg, each wrestler has shown extreme dedication to their sport and reaped the rewards of it.

“Several wrestlers have had extraordinary improvement both technically and physically,” Gochberg said. “There are plenty of schools in the country that have academic excellence and athletic excellence, and in general, I’d love to see that in LASA wrestling.”

Some wrestlers have been competing their

whole life, but others are just picking up the sport. Freshman wrestler Philip Stanton, for example, joined the club this year for a new challenge.

“I joined because I wanted to try something new and get in better shape,” Stanton said.

Stanton believes the club is very welcoming to newcomers, and they have bonded during their grueling practices. Stanton highlighted how the community within the wrestling club has created an encouraging environment.

“Being a part of the wrestling team is like a family,” Stanton said. “Everyone is super friendly and supportive on the team.”

Even with the environment of the club, it has been difficult to train properly with the little equipment they are allotted. Throughout its time as a club, Stanton noted that the group has struggled with a lack of resources and acknowledgement from the school.

“Wrestling gets way too little recognition



LEARNING FROM THE BEST The club listens intently as Coach Gochberg explains a drill. Gochberg runs his own training program outside of LASA as well as coaching the club. photo by Lily Antony

by the administration and by the student body,” Stanton said.

Even without recognition from the LASA students and staff, Coach Gochberg is confident that the wrestlers will be competitive beyond the regular season. He recognized how his team is showing great promise of being able to compete in the postseason.

“We have two, maybe three, wrestlers who have a very good chance [in competition],” Gochberg said.

However, Coach Gochberg realizes not all of his wrestlers are ready to compete at the state level. Despite their shortcomings at the moment, he believes all wrestlers are vital to the team.

“For the newer kids, I just want to see improvement every day so they’re ready to have success down the line,” Gochberg said.

Throughout the next few years, Gochberg hopes to encourage new faces to join the wrestling club. The coach has said that he wishes to build a community where wrestling thrives and finds its admiration.

“Over time, I’d love to help turn LASA into a program with a real wrestling tradition,” Gochberg said.



GROWING GREATNESS Wrestling club members practice technique. The club trains in a large tent outside the fields at 6 a.m. photo by Lily Antony

## From Coding to Coaching The Possibilities of AI Use in Sports

VIOLET ZITKOVIC | staff writer

To someone watching from behind a screen, the movements of players on the field could be seen as wizardry — their strategies, the work of brilliant coaches, every leg and arm movement toned from years of harsh training. But to a computer, all that's just numbers, and some numbers are better than others.

The recent AI boom has had a tremendous impact on all sorts of fields, and that includes sports. The use of digital tools for improving fitness is nothing new. Personal fitness trackers have been a thing for decades, but new developments in artificial intelligence mean that this fitness advice can become even more personalized and even more in-depth. The technology is still quite untested, and it'll take a while for it to be scaled up to the level where very high-level teams can rely on it. But if it works, it could result in a revolution in how we train and practice.

First, though, there are some specific reasons why AI would be so helpful for sports. Dr. Joe Kileel, from the University of Texas at Austin, studies the applied mathematics behind artificial intelligence.

"Part of a thrust of my research pertains to what are called tensors," Kileel said. "If you think of them as a data set, it's like a table of numbers, but actually the table is maybe not just two-dimensional, but higher order ... This is in line with part of the idea of AI of trying to find these patterns in high-dimensional data."

Artificial Intelligence as a resource can be more efficient for certain analytical aspects of sports. Kileel emphasized how it could be beneficial specifically for statistics and simulation.

"It should have potential for improved statistical analysis, for example," Kileel said. "There may also be possibilities to simulate sporting events using AI."

Commercial AI startups are currently exploring how to get more and more results from artificial intelligence. Darren Montgomery works for the company Zone7, providing AI for a variety of high-level teams.

"Zone7 uses all available data sources: wearables, subjective, EMR, etc., to build a digital twin of each athlete," Montgomery said. "Some of their algorithms simulate future load against each profile to assess potential injury risk. Some others generate optimized plans to meet particular goals for strength, endurance, or skill acquisition. All of it hyper-personalized."

Despite the very recent adoption of this technology, there are already some major successes that have been attributed to the technology. These successes have occurred in a variety of sports.

"We've had teams in top-tier soccer in multiple countries, in NFL, NBA, and other sports," Montgomery said. "All of our clients see year-on-year reduction in injuries and days lost, on average around 40%."

The use of AI in sports is, however, not without its intricacies and issues. Matthias Jud, from the Karl-Franzens-University in Austria, is known for his PhD thesis, a systematic review of scholarly research regarding AI usage in sports.

"AI is extremely differently used in sports," Jud said. "I would suggest a categorization like endurance sports and athletics, where technique is more important than, for example, force or endurance. These are shooting, dancing. So from my point of view, it is extremely important to make a differentiation in this case."

Jud has studied AI programs coming from a variety of places:

Britain, the U.S., Germany, and soccer matches in Austria. Additionally, he's looked at the use of AI technology for sporting activities at a variety of different levels.

"From my point of view, AI is currently used in recreational sports in particular," Jud said. "So you have to also distinguish between professional athletes and recreational athletes, you know ... In particular, for those athletes who do not have very high goals or just doing sports for approximately, I don't know, five or ten hours a week ... Nowadays, AI tools, their functionalities, they are not designed for professionals; they are for recreational sports."

Still, Jud's findings make him believe that it's important not to get too overexcited about AI's capabilities. His findings about personal usage provide some skepticism about the growth.

"As far as I can say now, users are not really perceiving the embedded AI system," he said. "They perceive it like a fitness tracker ... they do not really perceive the AI system itself, and they do not see a benefit of this AI ... AI in this field seems not to be having a huge impact. Now, I don't know how it will be in five years."

Whether they're hopeful or skeptical about using artificial intelligence in sports, whether they're excited or scared, both sides have agreed that the future is still very difficult to predict. Nonetheless, the future of AI will be dictated by the people who work on it, including at LASA. Suhan Li manages the AI Sports Lab club, meeting on Mondays in G104, where students research, write code, and discuss this topic.

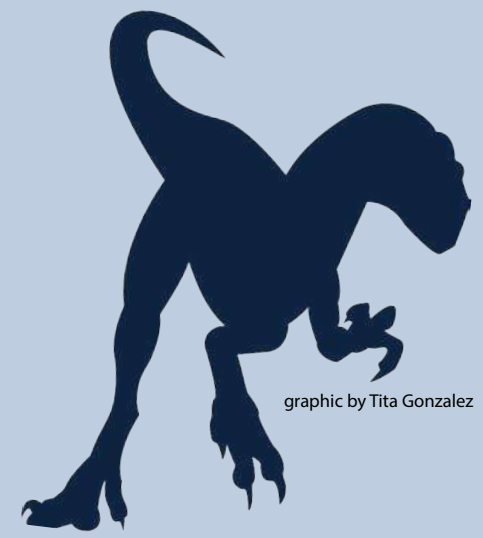
"Usually it's very hard and intimidating to write code for the AI, so we have a soft start," Li said. "We start with research, some research papers, especially systematic review papers that highlight what work has already been done in this field. And we also look into experimental papers to see the specifics. And through this process, my co-presidents and I teach the members about certain research skills. Right now we are just starting to learn how to write the code part."

Li provided a specific example of AI use that he's studying, that being analysis of the saber lunge in fencing. As an important, refined move, one that can result in a point being taken if done correctly, even minuscule changes to the movement of the player. Those embodied in the aforementioned tensors that the AI models use can result in major gains. This principle, by which AI is used for even the smallest changes, results in major improvements, echoing throughout sports, even into the major leagues.

"The benefits will be pretty small, but you have to keep in mind in professional sports, a small advantage is the key to winning or not winning," Jud said. "And so this can in fact have a high impact for athletes to improve their technique, to improve their fitness level, et cetera ... I do not expect that you can run the hundred meters one second faster by AI analysis. This is not possible, and this is not really realistic."

Artificial intelligence usage in sports still has to be refined. The current implementations are scattered, very new, being mostly only in the last decade or even the last five years, and need a lot more testing. The future, though, does look bright to some, according to Li.

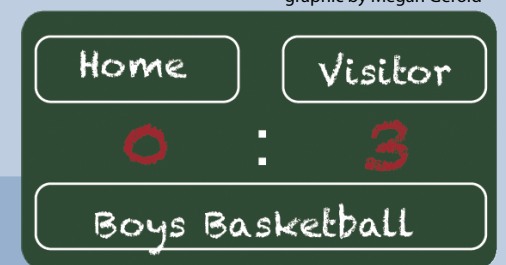
"It's a very new, tantalizing technology," Li said. "I hope more people are interested in this technology."



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

### RUNNING THE NUMBERS

graphic by Megan Gerold



graphic by Phoenix Gerome



graphic by Megan Gerold



## The New World of Esports

JONAH TRIMBLE | staff writer

The idea of sports and competition has been around for a long time, and there have been some extremely culturally impactful sports created over the years. Now, there has been another type of sport to enter the picture: esports.

Esports have become increasingly popular in recent times, and with the constant rise of competitiveness in the video games industry, it doesn't seem like it's going to stop any time soon. With this constant rise, though, there has been a debate on whether or not these new forms of entertainment should be considered "real sports." The general argument against the branding of esports to be sports is that sports are defined to be "athletic competitions" and that esports do not meet that requirement. Christopher Parks, the swim and dive coach at LASA, argued for esports to be considered sports.

"I don't see why not, I mean, it feels like it's kind of a new frontier for athletes nowadays," Parks said. "I wouldn't rule it out as a possibility for the younger generations."

The Director of the esports team at Ohio State University, John Price, explained that the criteria generally used to decide whether or not esports should be considered sports are not necessarily the most important ones. He described that, when different criteria are used, esports should be put in the same category as their physical counterparts.

"That conversation is trying to look at sports as an athletic contest specifically," Price said. "And I think for those individuals that value that element, they might not see it as sport, but for myself, sport is all about the competition and the community that's around it. At the end of the day, there are a lot of activities that often fall under sports that might not normally fit those conditions as well."

Griffin Vaz, a freshman at LASA, believes that esports are sports, just not with the athletic effort seen in traditional sports. He considered that they offer different challenges, though.

"They have competitions as well as the word 'sports' being in the name," Vaz said. "Even though it's not as much of a physical exertion, it's a lot more mental of a sport compared to others, instead of physical. They also have entire teams dedicated to them."

Parks stated that esports could match traditional sports in terms of spectator entertainment. He does believe, however, that it may not come as rapidly as some think it will.

"For me personally, probably not," Parks said. "But for y'all's generation, I think so. Whether it be a football game or a simulated recreation of war in a game, there is that desire to experience that thing in person, so I think it would be tough."

Vaz also thinks that big developments in the world of esports in terms of entertainment will happen with the younger generations growing into adults. He believes that this could have esports compete with traditional spectator sports in that respect.

"I think they will begin to [develop more into spectator sports] because of the growing amount of technological use in the world," Vaz said. "Especially as the younger generations get older, it will attract more of a crowd."

Price believes that esports could easily be presented as a source of entertainment to older generations as well. He suggested that people just need to experience it for themselves.

"I talked to a lot of administrators, a lot of parents, and such, that don't understand what esports are," Price

said. "But when I can show them an entire arena filled with fans cheering on this game, they have no idea what's going on on the television. They don't have to know what's going on on the television to understand what it is everyone's excited about."

There are a lot of different ways to show prowess over others, and this one seems to be coming much faster than a lot of people are prepared for. This new era of competition will bring so many opportunities that weren't necessarily possible in the past.

Looking for esports to compete with the likes of football, soccer, or baseball is not entirely realistic at the moment. They may, though, be a much bigger part of the sporting world in the future.



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

## Students, Gear Up

### What's in an Athlete's Bag?

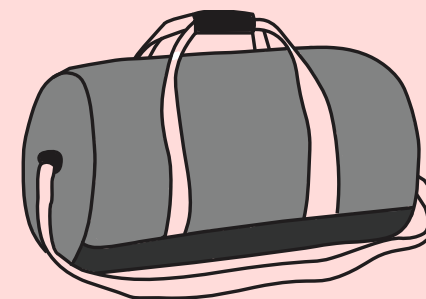
MAURICIO RODRIGUEZ  
JACOB BARRERA | staff writers

For a student athlete, the proper equipment is essential to high performance and improvement. Though the items themselves vary from sport to sport, the basic items are often found in the bag of every determined competitor. From fuel to function, these five items are common and often necessary for an athlete to take their game to the next level.

Many sports require specialized equipment that is required to play or essential for improving your game.



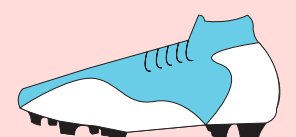
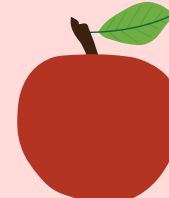
Headphones are an essential for many athletes. Music helps them focus and stay motivated.



Athletes always need to have water and snacks with them. Without this essential nourishment, they will not be able to give 100% effort during their games.



Proper footwear is a necessity for many in order to compete at the highest level. Without it, athletes may be limited in their potential or even vulnerable to injury.



graphics by Mauricio Rodriguez and Jacob Barrera

ADEL WELLS | club contributor

THE RAPTOR RUN DOWN



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

Every issue, The LASA Liberator sends a reporter into the field to try a new sport and write about their experiences.

When I was a kid, my dad taught me proper softball hitting form: square your shoulders, bend your knees, place the bat above your shoulder, and swing through the ball. I then proceeded to quit softball after one season. I hadn't picked it up since, until recently, when I got a chance to go to LASA softball captain's practice.

It was drizzling a bit the day I came, but that didn't dissuade the girls from practice. I walked into the dugout a few minutes early and picked up a conversation with returning player Mary Snyder. She told me that the captain's practice was a great place to get ready before the season started. She also mentioned that she was looking forward to the spring and district play and to the team lock-in, which she really enjoyed last year.

When practice got started, the girls all grabbed their gloves and ran a lap around the field, followed by some light stretches while talking about what they were going to do over Thanksgiving break. They laughed together, making fun of captain Lorena Edwards for saying she was looking forward to studying AP U.S. History. After stretching, everyone paired up, longtime players moving a bit farther away while Mary stayed to help the new players, myself included.

She walked us through the simple throwing drill they were working on, offering tips on how to follow through and when to let go. "Pretend you're stuck in the mud," Mary said. She then showed us the proper position to stand in while she bent her wrist backward, and then flicked her hand forward, tossing the ball towards the freshman around ten steps away. She explained how we should imagine there were "eyes in the pocket" (the palm of the glove), and these eyes should watch the ball the whole way through. When I got a turn, she showed me the motion again, and I was delighted when I managed to make it to the other girl.

After throwing, they started on a drill called "around the horn," where they'd throw it as fast as they could around the diamond to each of the players standing on the different bases, starting over if they made a mistake. Lorena told me that this was one of many drills they would use to practice their throwing—others included diamond throwing, or infield/outfield drills. Sophomore Zoe Roberts told me that she used this drill, and others at captain's practice, to "build love for the sport," and the team community that she says "is really impressive."

This community was evident as practice went on into a batting/hitting drill. They placed the ball on a stand, and then captain Julia Pinzur hit it off to third or first base, where the player there would catch it and throw it across the field. Through each hit, all the girls cheered each other on, and if a mistake was made, they'd teasingly call out that it was all due to a "new glove." Mary stood behind Julia and collected balls, and after every round she'd call out, "Good work, babe." When I asked if I could try hitting, Mary quickly showed me the proper hitting form, the squaring of the shoulders, the bent knees, the follow-through, adding that I should really try to extend my arms. Then, when I got the ball to third base, I too earned a "good job."

Everyone I spoke to told me that they were excited for the season, but also excited for their team community. I could see why. Even in just one captain's practice, there was so much support. They held each other up and made things simple for me and the other newcomers, slowly and gently walking us through the motions to make sure we were set up to succeed.



HOME RUN Adel Wells learns how to swing a bat in softball. The team holds practices often to prepare for games. photos by Lily Antony

graphics by Phoenix Gerome



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Do You Know Ball, Bro?

LASA Makes NBA Predictions

PRATIK GURIJALA | sports editor

As the NBA season gets ready to tip off, LASA students aren't only excited about who will win the MVP or whether the Spurs are finally back, they are also excited for the return of the "Are You LASA's Number One NBA Regular Season Knower?" (AYLNONBARSK) competition.

The annual prediction-based trivia event is organized by history teacher Adam Escandell and AP Statistics and Data Science teacher David Arredondo. It brings together super fans, casual watchers, and curious bystanders who just want to see their friends make hilariously wrong predictions.

"I love ball," Arredondo said. "Basketball fandom is low-stakes fun, and it's a good way to start a conversation with someone I might have nothing else in common with."

Escandell is known for his dramatic and over-the-top presentation of the event. He views the competition as part of a long human tradition of fall rituals.

"Today, in a modern globalized world, we are universally connected through the sacred ritual of NBA preseason predictions," Escandell said. "The 'Are You LASA's Number One NBA Regular Season Knower' is my contribution to these traditions."

The vibe of the event changes each year, but Arredondo explained that it always ends up being an unpredictable mix of comedy and chaos. Students submit serious predictions, wild guesses, and everything in between, often leading to surprising outcomes.

"The vibe is competitive, funny, and chaotic," Arredondo said. "The regular season is always unpredictable, and none of us were that confident in our predictions."

Escandell described the NBA and also the competition itself as naturally chaotic. He talked about how predicting the long NBA season is hard.

"Obsession over the essential chaos inherent over the course of 82 games is madness," Escandell said. "Serenity comes from knowing this is merely the winding path toward harmony."

Students added that the competition resonates with them because it gives them a chance to talk about sports in a low-pressure environment. Arredondo agreed that a mix of casual fans, hardcore watchers, and everyone in between is part of the fun.

"Because it's so hard for even a knowledgeable fan to make a good guess, it encourages everyone to speak up and share their opinion," Arredondo said. "Most of the participants are casuals."

Escandell believes that there is no such thing as a casual fan and a super fan. According to him, this division ruins the sport of basketball for everyone. "The great schism between 'Casual' and 'Sicko' has unnecessarily ravaged our beautiful pastime for too long," Escandell said.

Both Arredondo and Escandell talked about the standout prediction moments from students. Many students predicted V.J. Edgecombe as Rookie of the Year, which was something both teachers initially were confused about.

"All the kids picked V.J. Edgecombe for rookie if the year," Arredondo said. "We thought it was ridiculous, but it's turning out to be prescient."

Escandell was more skeptical of one prediction trend in particular. The number of students who ranked the Celtics first in the Eastern Conference was a lot more than he thought, especially with the injuries and the players they traded away during

the offseason.

"The deep well of belief in the Boston Celtics was foolhardy," Escandell said. "I believed the loss of Tatum and the hollowing out of the frontcourt would doom them."

As the NBA season is underway, Arredondo and Escandell highlighted that the hype only strengthens the competition's atmosphere. The more chaotic the league becomes, the more invested the students get in their predictions.

"A lot of people said the [Dallas] Mavericks would be good, and they've turned out to be trash," Arredondo said. "Already, things we thought were true about team strength are turning out to be wrong."

Students participating in the AYLNONBARSK this year include juniors, seniors, and underclassmen, with many joining for fun. One of those students is junior Camino Rojas-Tang, who said he joined because he loves basketball and wanted to test his basketball knowledge.

"I saw there was a prize for the winner," Rojas-Tang said. "I love basketball, and I pride myself on knowing a lot about the NBA."

Rojas-Tang follows the league closely and said that helped him during the prediction process. He added that this knowledge of basketball gave him an edge and was key to making accurate calls.

"I follow and watch a lot of basketball," Rojas-Tang said. "It definitely helped me during the trivia."

While some students join to connect with others, others like Camino simply enjoy the process. He said the competition doesn't necessarily increase his excitement for the NBA season, but he still plans to return next year because it's fun and easy to participate in.

"I would do it again," Rojas-Tang said. "It doesn't take much time, and it's fun at the end of the season to see how you did."

The competition includes students from all grades, friend groups, and knowledge levels. Arredondo and Escandell emphasized that the shared uncertainty of NBA predictions makes it easy for anyone to jump in.

"Basketball fandom is a safe space to play with aggressiveness," Arredondo said. "That's what I like most."

Escandell said the event's structure naturally brings people together, even those who rarely talk about sports. He believes that the light-hearted competition makes it easy for anyone to jump in and feel included.

"AYLNONBARSK is capable of bringing all kinds of people together," Escandell said. "Even my brothers were permitted into the field to evaluate their level of ball-knowing."

Both Arredondo and Escandell have ideas for future changes to the competition. Some of those ideas include adding the NBA Cup or playoff round predictions.

"The regular season predictions have been fun and low stakes, and it's fine if it stays that way," Arredondo said. "But an NBA Cup predictor round would be fun."

# Austin's Wowing Winter Wonderland

## Light Shows, Festivities Unite City for Season of Celebration



**APOLLO DAHMUS  
MILLER WILLIAMS  
LILY ANTONY** photo editors



graphics by Asher Zvi-Nova

Start Here!

graphic by Nik Bayer



**BLUE GENIE ART BAZAAR** Patrons looking around at different shops in the market Blue Genie Art Bazaar on the weekend in the winter. photo by Lily Antony

As temperatures cool and the year winds down, Austin erupts with winter events that bring the community together. Light shows, holiday markets, and festive performances appear throughout the city, offering people numerous opportunities to celebrate the season. Peppermint Parkway, Mozart's Lake Austin Festival of Lights, and the Blue Genie Art Bazaar are three long-running favorites that draw in thousands of visitors every year.

Each event has its own way of helping Austin get into the holiday spirit. At Blue Genie Art Bazaar, hundreds of local artists showcase their work in an indoor market that has become a staple of Austin's creative community. Lani Gonzalez, the managing director of Blue Genie Art Bazaar, explained that the holiday market brings tons of artists and patrons together.

"Blue Genie is an annual holiday art and gift show," Gonzalez said. "Featuring the work of over 200 artists and artisans, all under one roof." Visitors can shop in person and online during the winter season. Mozart's Lake Austin Festival of Lights brings the Austin community together in a different way by transforming their deck and the lake into a light show. Annie Bowers, the project manager for the show, described how the performance combines musicians, storytelling, and visual effects into a single experience.

"The show includes a performance from a live band, the singer and the host does a retelling of the Nutcracker with popular holiday songs mixed in," Bowers said. "And then partway through the show, there is a fire performance on the water with the Nutcracker battling the Mouse King. You get a lot of really talented folks and all in one hour performance."



**MOZART'S LAKE AUSTIN FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS** People hanging out on the deck of Mozart's Coffee Roasters. Guests get treats and watch the performance. photo by Lily Antony

Bowers said the blend of music and spectacle makes it a favorite for families and visitors from across the city. Mozart's also decorates its deck with themed displays, offering hot chocolate and holiday treats throughout the night.

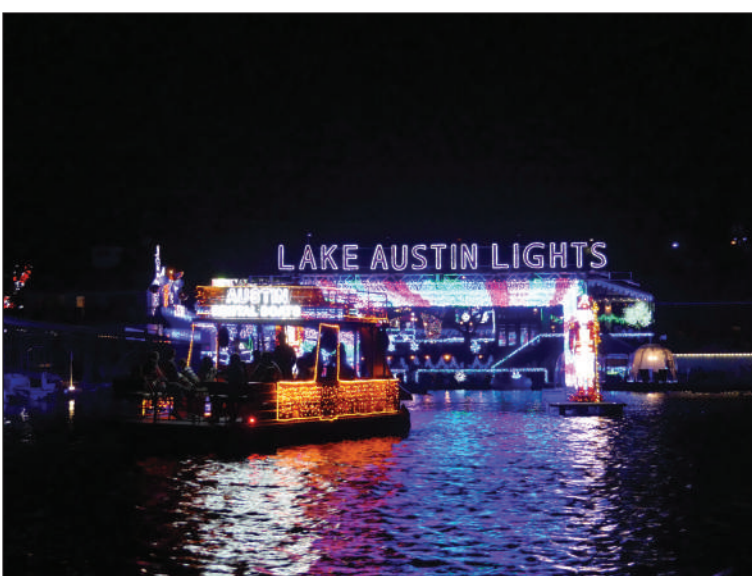
The Circuit of the Americas (COTA) also celebrates the season with its own light show, Peppermint Parkway. The event transforms F1 racetrack and plaza into a winter experience filled with activities. Tim Hamilton, vice president of entertainment at COTA, said they bring the entire venue to life during the winter season with millions of lights and numerous activities.

"We are putting all of our three miles of decor and over three million lights onto the plaza of the main grandstand at Circuit of the Americas, so we have all of our decor that everyone has come to know and love throughout the years, plus we're adding new decor," Hamilton said. "We have entertainment, we have food, we have games, and we have so many different activities."

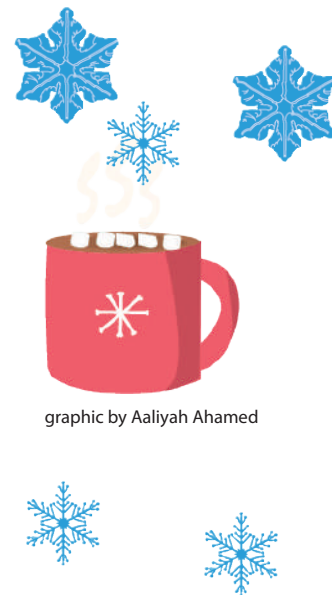
All these events have found ways to give back to and take root in the Austin community to help celebrate the winter season. Bowers described how the community loves coming to Mozart's celebration every year.

"People love it. Normally, your tickets end up selling out. Last year, they sold out every single night," Bowers said. "There are lots of neighbors that we have that we have to be mindful of, but we always make sure to talk to them and normally they're fine."

People come together from all over Austin to see Mozart's performances and lights. Peppermint Parkway also brings in many people to provide an event where people can enjoy the race track and the season.



**AUSTIN BOAT RENTAL LAKE AUSTIN FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS** Arch of lights floating on Lake Austin. Guests go on a tour of the lights during a boat ride. photo by Lily Antony



graphic by Aaliyah Ahamed



**PEPPERMINT PARKWAY TRAIN RIDE** Lights spread around the Circuit of The Americas. Guests ride on a train going around a lit up Christmas tree. photo by Lily Antony



graphics by Asher Zvi-Nova

graphic by Nik Bayer

Almost There!



graphic by Nik Bayer



**PEPPERMINT PARKWAY ENTRANCE** Lights along the pathway into Circuit of The America. Ornament bulbs lit up with many lights and signs surrounding them. photo by Lily Antony

"We have so many different events throughout the year, and Peppermint Parkway really feels like a good way to give back to the community," Hamilton said. "I like the memories that Peppermint Parkway makes for families. When you think back to your holidays with your family when you were young, those are memories that are so special."

Peppermint Parkway is a tool to give back to the community during the winter season. Blue Genie Art Bazaar has also found a way to give back to the community through working with Make-A-Wish of Central and South Texas.

"We have a long relationship with Make-A-Wish of Central and South Texas, and this year we encourage visitors to round up for Make-A-Wish by rounding their purchase total up to the nearest dollar," Gonzalez said. "These contributions will enable Make-A-Wish to continue granting life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses."

All these winter events have their own festivities and activities that make them stand out, but all bring people together during the winter season. If it's riding a boat with hot chocolate, looking at floating lights, shopping for gifts at many different unique shops, or driving around the F1 track looking at lights, Austin has so many different ways of getting people ready for the cool air and holiday season.

Blue Genie Art Bazaar is open from November 14, 2025, to December 24, 2025, their hours being 10 am to 10 pm most days. Mozart's Lake Austin Festival of Lights is open November 22, 2025, to December 11, 2025. Peppermint Parkway is open select nights from November 21, 2025, to December 28, 2025.



graphics by Asher Zvi-Nova