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Villa Maria Academy High School's writing and communications programs enable students to gain confidence, build vital skills, and develop interests that lead them forward.

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Voice *Finding a*

Villa Maria Academy High School's writing and communications programs enable students to gain confidence, build vital skills, and develop interests that lead them forward. *by* PHIL GIANFICARO

When asked to explain the importance of The Villa Voice, the award-winning student-run newspaper at Villa Maria Academy High School in Malvern, editor-in-chief Brianna McDonald responds with a journalistic tenet: “to thoroughly report on and factually deliver the news.”



“If we didn’t have the paper, no one would really know about all the events and things happening at school,” says McDonald, a rising junior. “Even though the paper is published only a couple times a year, it’s still great to see what’s going on in our school. We’ve done stories on teachers and staff, and even students who’ve started a small business, like selling painted shoes or started a small bakery business.”

The staff has also done stories about “Miss Unstoppable,” referring to a student, teacher, or staff member who has had a positive impact on the community or at Villa, and how Villa may have changed them for the better. “Without the paper,” McDonald says, “who would know?”

At Villa Maria Academy, a Roman Catholic college preparatory school for girls, the student communications program comprises *The Villa*

Voice; *Reflections*, the student yearbook; and *Festival*, a literary magazine that showcases students’ talents in writing, art, and photography. Each of the publications has been recognized for excellence by multiple scholastic press associations, including those at Yale and Columbia universities. Sophomore, junior, and senior students who create superior work are recommended for membership in Villa’s chapter of the Quill and Scroll International Writing Honor Society.

The Villa Voice staff includes as many as 40 students—typically eight to 10 students per grade, freshman to senior—who meet weekly to brainstorm ideas, edit stories, and learn journalism techniques. Under the guidance of staff member Laurie Scaggs, students have an opportunity to get involved in every aspect of newspaper production, from interviewing, writing, and editing, to layout and design, to photography.

“The way *Villa Voice* is structured, students start off being reporters and writers,” says Scaggs, who assumed



Select photography by Jeff Anderson; others courtesy of VMAHS

the publications advisor position three years ago when the newspaper was revived after many years by Caroline McDonald, Class of 2019, who is Brianna's sister, and Alexis Fowler, Class of 2019. "If students are committed to writing and reporting, they are considered for a promotion to a leadership position as an assistant editor or editor. The students run the training sessions themselves. They gain so much confidence that helps prepare them for life beyond high school when writing skills are so essential."

Hannah Rosenberger knows. Villa's 2020 class valedictorian, Rosenberger is a former writer and editor at *The Villa Voice*. She credits the instruction she received there as the foundation for a planned career in journalism. Currently a sophomore at the University of North Carolina majoring in media and journalism, Rosenberger is a staff writer at the school newspaper, *The Daily Tar Heel*, which claims an impressive list of alumni, including the novelist and playwright Thomas Wolfe, award-winning sportswriter and author Peter Gammons, and multiple Pulitzer Prize winners.

"Honestly, that experience at Villa made me want to go into journalism," says Rosenberger. "I've known since I was a little girl that I wanted to write. *The Villa Voice* started when I was a sophomore, and I'd never been exposed to journalism writing before then. I learned about finding stories, talking to people, getting the facts, and writing the stories.

"I was shy when I was younger, but I think it was just part of having to get older and figure myself out," she continues. "What working at Villa helped me do was to break out of my shell. ... The experience was invaluable."

Igniting a Flame

Scaggs' impact at Villa extends beyond her work with the student newspaper. She is in her sixth year as advisor to the Villa yearbook, *Reflections*, and is also the school's director of student experience marketing.

"When I started at Villa, Sister Regina [Ryan] gave me the opportunity to be with *The Villa Voice*," she says. "The girls through the years are just so talented and easy to work with. As for Sister Regina, she meets with the girls, and they always feel her support. She speaks to them like she's talking to colleagues. She always wants to hear their views."

Villa's student communications program continues to evolve. Students are working diligently to expand their sphere of influence to include a more robust digital presence. McDonald plans to launch a website and blog that features news and sports at Villa. She is also archiving past *Villa Voice* editions in a PDF format.

"I'm leaning toward a career in the tech or medical field, but these [media] skills are great to have regardless of what field you go into."

—Brianna McDonald, a rising junior at Villa Maria Academy High School and the editor-in-chief of *The Villa Voice*



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Fruits of the student communications program's labor

"The goal is to showcase everything at Villa online," Scaggs says, adding that the school is also eyeing TV as another media opportunity for students. "It's going to be very informative. The girls will focus on real issues, including editorials. They'll debate issues like snow days versus cyber days, where there will be a girl representing each side of the argument."

The forthcoming project will enable students to develop video and presentation skills that are increasingly in demand, both in education

and in the workplace. "I'm leaning toward a career in the tech or medical field," McDonald says, "but these [media] skills are great to have regardless of what field you go into."

Villa's student communications program is one more example of the many ways in which the school is preparing girls for the next phase of their lives. Writers and artists apply their talents to all aspects of the publishing process, from the creative work to campaigning for contributions. For some, the experience equips them with invaluable skills and fun memories; for others, it ignites a flame that leads them forward.

"Several former Villa students in the communications program are now studying journalism [in college]," says Scaggs. "Raquel Lacusky at the University of Florida, Erica Legaard at Syracuse—they were inspired by the experiences they had here at Villa." ■