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Through a tradition known as the Senior Project, **Germantown Academy** empowers graduating students to explore real-world opportunities by way of its vast alumni network. page 22

Mark Steffens, CEO of Airline Hydraulics Corp. and a Germantown Academy alumnus, with GA Class of 2023 graduate Nick Venziale at Airline Hydraulics' Bensalem headquarters

Endless Possibilities

THROUGH A TRADITION KNOWN AS THE SENIOR PROJECT, **GERMANTOWN ACADEMY** EMPOWERS GRADUATING STUDENTS TO EXPLORE REAL-WORLD OPPORTUNITIES BY WAY OF ITS VAST ALUMNI NETWORK.

BY LEIGH ANN STUART



GA Class of 2023 alumna Alissa Freeman completed her Senior Project at NBC Studios in New York



Class of 2023 alumna Morgan Hellebusch did her Senior Project at Fabscrap, a signature recycling service for retail companies in Philadelphia.

During the last month of high school, most seniors' thoughts turn to graduation, senior week, summer vacation, and college life. At Germantown Academy, seniors in their final month of school explore areas of interests in a real-world environment. The goal: to forge invaluable connections and prepare them for what awaits in the next phase of their lives.

For more than 50 years, Germantown Academy seniors nearing graduation have completed a Senior Project. The month-long endeavor invites students to complete a scholarly project or internship opportunity, culminating in a night of presentations through which students share their findings with members of the GA family, including faculty, parents, and peers.

"There has been a concerted effort to make this program really robust and meaningful," says Molly MacKean, Ph.D., head of upper school at Germantown Academy. "In my mind, having seniors be able to have some weeks right before graduation to pressure-test what they've learned in real-world practice is very important. This is a true capstone."

Seniors focus all their energy on their projects in their final weeks at GA, with most participants spending the month of May off campus. Exceptions to the rule include those enrolled in Advanced Placement classes, as these students continue to prepare for those tests while working on their projects.

"By the time a student is a senior, kids have been in school most of their lives," Dr. MacKean shares. "They've been exposed to curriculum defined by the adults in their lives. College is different because it often presents kids with so many more choices. They have to ask themselves, 'What am I

passionate or curious about?'"

"We want to make sure students have the ability to use a pocket of time and the resources in our community to make connections, experience internships, and dwell on the life question, 'What compels me?'" she continues. "To be able to do this before they go to college and experience all the opportunities a college provides, I think it's impactful, meaningful, and empowering."

Students can explore a scholarly project or shadow someone in a particular career, ranging from surgery and occupational therapy, to law enforcement and finance, among others. The opportunity to meet and interact with alums who excel in varied professions enriches the final leg of their GA experience.

Mark Steffens, CEO of Airline Hydraulics Corp., with headquarters in Bensalem, is one of many GA alums who not only participated in the Senior Project as a student but also serves as a mentor to current GA students. Steffens, an alumnus from the class of 1988, remembers his project fondly. He interned with Major League Baseball's Philadelphia Phillies, the hometown club that would later draft him as a player.

"Rory McNeil was my sponsor, and my experience was awesome," Steffens recalls. "Rory was a great mentor and is still a good friend of mine. During my project, I was fortunate to work with Maje McDonnell, who was basically the mayor of the Vet [Veterans Stadium] and a true salt of the earth. He took me under his wing and gave me the unique opportunity to meet with a lot of really interesting people."

McNeil, another GA alumnus, taught Steffens about the power of the school's alumni network. In turn, Steffens began "paying it forward" eight years ago, when

he joined the Senior Project program as a mentor.

"I would say probably the greatest thing about the Senior Project is that it's a boots-on-the-ground experience," he says. "A textbook doesn't cover all the variables that you encounter while running a business. Students are given latitude to start their adulthood with this, and there's implicit trust with the kids, but they earn it."

Dr. MacKean adds that the Senior Project benefits students in many ways. While some are obvious, such as lifelong alumni connections, others are less apparent.

"It also provides an important feedback loop that allows us as a group of adults to hear every year what students are deeply curious about," she says. "That influences our curricular evolution and how we invest in the future of our community. We want kids to learn from us, and we also need to learn from them what they're passionate about and what they need going into the world."

"We've been around since 1759," she continues, "and we haven't stayed excellent for over 260 years by doing the same thing over and over again. With initiatives like the Senior Project, which has evolved over the past 50 years to reflect innovative thinking around learning, we are staying on the cutting edge of what excellent education looks like." ■



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