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High School's** Senior
Capstone Experience
helps students such as
Elizabeth Dougherty
explore potential career
options while providing
the skills necessary to
succeed in college and
beyond.

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Elizabeth Dougherty spent her Capstone experience at Paoli Hospital alongside Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist Andrea Williamson. The experience allowed Dougherty to deepen her understanding of the complex dynamics of the operating room and the critical role of a nurse anesthetist.



Learning By Doing

VILLA MARIA ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL'S
SENIOR CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE HELPS STUDENTS
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IN COLLEGE AND BEYOND.

Villa Maria Academy High School

370 Central Ave. | Malvern, PA 19355 | (610) 644-2551 | VMAHS.org

Like many of the students she now mentors at Villa Maria Academy High School in Malvern, Cara Walsh wasn't exactly sure where life would lead her—what to study in college, what kind of career she wanted—when she was a Villa senior in the early 2000s. Fortunately, throughout its rich history as an independent Catholic high school for girls, Villa has strived to empower young women and to give them the tools needed to succeed on the next step of their journey.

Walsh found her way, of course. Today she helps the next generation of Villa students discover their passions through a program that has proven to be quite impactful since its inception about a decade ago.

The Senior Capstone Experience, a graduation requirement for all Villa students, is a yearlong project in which they hone their abilities to explore a topic of interest, to think critically, and to find meaningful solutions to real-world problems. Combining a strong research component with a job-shadowing opportunity, the program offers students a chance to determine a college major or career path they may want to follow. It also allows them to have fun while doing so.

"They take it very seriously," says Walsh, the director of the program. "As I tell them, they are really going to get out of it what they put into it. Something we stress at Villa is that managing your time and communicating with adults you do not necessarily know are skills that you need in college, but also for the rest of your life. Some students find they need that boost, and this is an amazing way for them to do that. We focus on those soft skills you do not always learn, and help you make amazing connections."

Students first learn about the program during seminars as sophomores and juniors, but they dive in during an introductory assembly with Walsh in September of their senior year. She explains the details of the project: choosing an area of interest, creating an essential question that serves as the theme, finding a research mentor—a professional in the field they have selected—and participating in the required job-shadowing experience.

With the assistance of said mentor, each student must reach certain research benchmarks throughout the year. Then, in May, she will visit an experiential mentor's workspace—an office, a hospital, a school, a sports arena, a retail establishment, etc.—to work directly with that person for a minimum of 25 hours.

"It's exciting to see what their initial idea is in September, how it evolves, and then what they're able to do in May with the job shadowing," Walsh says. "It is really a cool process and a valuable journey for a lot of them. Utilizing the amazing resources around us in the Philadelphia area has been fantastic. There is so much around here to pursue what they are interested in."

Allie Lange, a Newtown resident, as well as a Villa graduate from the Class of 2024,



For her Capstone experience, Ava Meyers shadowed Jennaphr Frederick, a reporter for FOX 29 News. Meyers's experience has helped her figure out what she wants to do with her professional career.

had one of the more interesting Capstone experiences from her graduating class. Having grown up as an avid Philadelphia sports fan with interests in philanthropy and the media, Lange reached out to a family friend who is the executive director of the Eagles Autism Foundation, a charitable organization affiliated with the NFL franchise. With the director's guidance, Lange was able to explore her essential question: How does sports media affect philanthropic causes? She participated in several fundraising initiatives affiliated with the Eagles Autism Challenge during her three days of shadowing.

"I'm really thankful that I got that opportunity," Lange says. "It was such a positive experience and so rewarding. The Eagles Autism Challenge is the fastest-growing charity in the NFL, and they take what the players are passionate about and then use it to help fundraise. For example, a bunch of the Eagles are singers, so they did a Christmas album. One of the players, Cam Jurgens, started his own beef jerky brand, so they did an event at Chickie's and Pete's to help fundraise for that while I was shadowing."

She adds, "I definitely think I got firsthand experience through research and in-person shadowing of how much media affects how much money you can raise for charity."

As much as she enjoyed spending time among her favorite football players, Lange was equally proud to have worked with the female leadership in the charity. The thing she will remember most about the project: the opportunity to hone her research skills.

"In the moment, you're questioning the process because it's a lot of work," she says. "But once you get to shadowing, you realize how much that work pays off. Villa is so great at preparing you for college and for

your career. I do not think I would have had nearly the same experience if I did not do the research—you get a lot out of the effort."

Lange, who is now headed to West Chester University, wants to study communications. As for her post-college ambitions, she thinks she would like to pursue a career either in sports broadcasting or philanthropy.

"No matter what," she says, "I want to be able to help people through my job."

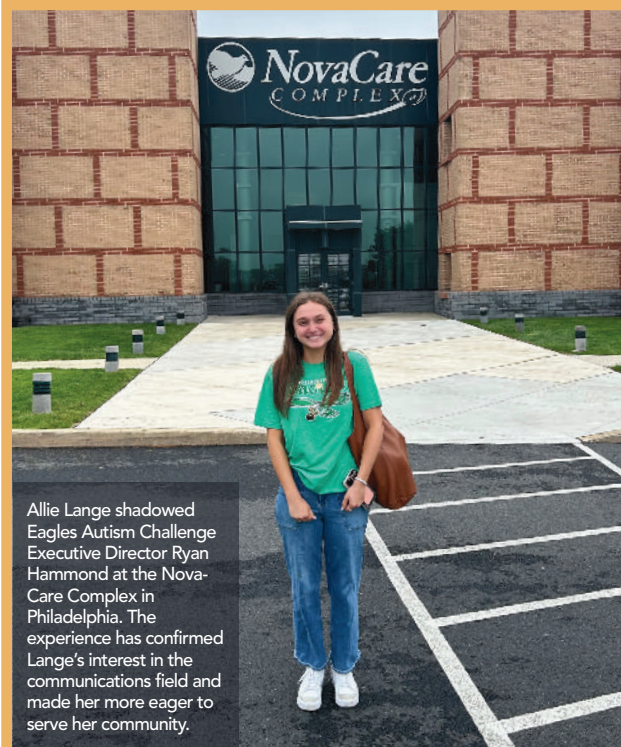
Other students, including some of her friends, realized that the field they thought they were interested in is not actually for them—and that realization is equally beneficial. As Walsh tells them, "It is OK to not know what you want to do for the rest of your life. This is a wonderful place to start, but no path is linear, especially when it comes to your career, so give yourselves a little grace."

She is living proof, having found a home at her alma mater and helping today's students get the most from a Villa Maria education.

"If I did not love going to Villa, I would



Ariana Butler spent her Capstone experience at Essent, shadowing Chief Security Officer Marty Nebel. She had the opportunity to see the importance of cybersecurity and privacy in a business and the role the company plays in securing consumer data. In the future, Butler intends to pursue a career in cybersecurity and/or own her own business.



Allie Lange shadowed Eagles Autism Challenge Executive Director Ryan Hammond at the NovaCare Complex in Philadelphia. The experience has confirmed Lange's interest in the communications field and made her more eager to serve her community.

not have come back and worked here," she says. "I had such an amazing time, and my best friends today are girls I went to Villa with. We are so lucky to have this supportive community of alumnae and even parents of graduates who did not go to Villa themselves but have an overwhelming desire to help other Villa girls. It is a very special place." ■