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## WISE Program Opens Doors for Miramonte Students

By Uma Unni



2014 Miramonte High School graduate, Anjali Majumdar, earned her pilot's license as her WISE project. Photo provided

changing," she says, leading her to pursue a future career in engineering and aviation.

Majumdar's classmates took on projects ranging from research at UC Berkeley and internships at technology companies to physical challenges such as rock climbing, marathons, and trapeze. Brooke Bundy, now a director, writer, and actress in the Hunger Games franchise, did a one-woman comedy sketch as her project. Shauna Barrows, hailed by her classmates as having done the craziest project of all, learned to spin fire.

Of course, students aren't just tossed out into the world and told to figure things out for themselves (that might have been especially problematic in Barrows' case). WISE provides a strong mentoring system, in which all students are paired with teachers who help them design their projects and monitor their progress, offering advice and support when needed. "You get these wonderful and supportive relationships with students," explains Elizabeth Aracic, a WISE teacher at Miramonte until last year. "You get to know them really well, and you're supporting them in a very different way than you would a normal student in your class. You end up forming really long-term friendships."

WISE is a time-consuming elective, requiring responsibility and time-management skills. It forces students to reach beyond traditional classroom skills and learn to interact effectively with the mentors, colleagues and strangers they encounter through their projects. It also requires a kind of fearlessness; as Allison Burke, a WISE teacher until 2005 puts it, "The kid who thinks 'why not?' will always do better than the one who thinks 'why?'" This might seem discouraging to some who feel they're more likely to ask "why" than "why not," but Burke also adds that in her experience, "it was the 'regular kids' who discovered hidden depths," not just the go-getting, responsible kids with brilliant time-management and people skills.

Aracic feels that above all, students must be passionate enough about their project to face the challenges it presents. Students who want to slack off and relax toward the end of the year are not advised to take WISE.

Most WISE students don't miss the easy leisure they gave up by enrolling in this program. "Although I did lose out on some goofing off outside of school with friends, I was able to make so many more friends in the class itself as well as out in the real world," recalls Kaiser Pister, a WISE

Has a cure for "senioritis" finally been found?

For 12 years, Miramonte High School has run a program called WISE (Wise Individualized Senior Experience), which sparks a passion for learning by allowing seniors to build flexible learning modules around virtually any issues or skills that intrigue them. The WISE program is available to seniors who complete an abbreviated, accelerated version of the English 4 curriculum in the first semester, then spend their second semester off campus pursuing their passions.

Anjali Majumdar, a recent Miramonte graduate currently at Stanford University, learned to fly a four-seater plane for her WISE project. She would wake up early in the morning to go flying, since the five allotted off-campus hours per week weren't enough for her to get her license.

Despite having lost so many mornings of sleeping in, Majumdar has "absolutely no regrets" about taking WISE. "The experience was life

student who interned at a computer game company called TweedleTech. He also developed important business connections which he hopes will help him out in the future. Pister is currently a freshman at UC San Diego, studying computer science and engineering.

Other WISE students share Pister's thoughts on the program. Adam Schaffer, a 2008 Miramonte graduate, agrees that his WISE experience at Rockridge, a think tank that used cognitive science to advance progressive policies, helped him "secure competitive internships and jobs" in the field of civil society and human rights. "I think it helped prepare me for my career," explains Schaffer, "and let me know what I liked - and didn't like - leaving me less time pursuing career paths I had no interest in, and more time doing what I loved - and having fun." Schaffer went on to study political science at Middlebury College, and now works at a human rights organization in Washington, DC.

This sentiment is echoed by Burke, who remembers a girl who had been convinced she wanted to be an architect until she spent her WISE semester interning at an architect's office. After that, Burke recalls, "she abandoned the idea completely and was so grateful not to put her energy into a course of study she didn't love."

Many WISE graduates share a deep appreciation of what the program has done for them, and how much it has affected their lives. "If it were up to me," Pister says, "WISE would be available at every school for all seniors. It is such an amazing experience and was vital to my transition into adulthood. There is nothing, no AP, no amount of goofing off second semester, that is worth missing WISE for."

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