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Local youth find inventive, productive ways to spend time while sheltering at home

By Diane Claytor



Sabrina Kane, 15, shows off two of her amazing breads from Sweets by Sabrina.



Myra Gakhar, 11, hard at work on one of her resin products



Dane Darby, Royal Chess Academy founder, helps one of his students



A squirrel dining table made by Finn Girdlestone



Lamorinda Peer Tutoring co-founders Michael Wen (left) and Ryan Chan

Discussing stocks with 17-year-old Sam Safahi feels like meeting a group of investment brokers. The fast talking, extremely knowledgeable Miramonte senior tosses out stock names and investment lingo as easily as counting to 10.

Safahi initially invested a small amount of money in cryptocurrency. He made a profit. "I kept spending money on useless stuff, like clothes I didn't wear," he admits. "I got tired of wasting it."

He was also tiring of Netflix and playing endless video games during the COVID-forced lockdown. Remembering how much fun it was to invest, Safahi spent almost every waking hour for several weeks learning everything he could about investing. He read, researched, watched YouTube videos and soon started buying and selling. It was a good market. He made money and lost some. He taught himself about futures and day trading, tech stocks, options and index funds. And after several months, the totally self-taught Safahi proudly says he earned a net profit exceeding \$100,000.

In spite of his incredible financial success, Safahi states unequivocally, "I'd trade all the money I made to have my pre-COVID life back. It was so much better going to school, playing lacrosse, hanging with friends. I miss it a lot."

Like Safahi, many young Lamorindans searched for ways to pass their time while sheltering in place. Albert Einstein once said, "The monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind." The imagination and creativity of our local youth exemplify this quote.

New skills have been learned, talents perfected, businesses opened. While none were quite as profitable as Safahi's, they were all equally impressive.

Tutors

At the beginning of the lockdown, Campolindo junior Michael Wen realized that, like him, many kids were struggling. He knew it was often difficult to find reasonably-priced tutors that were sincerely invested in helping students. Wanting to help the community, Wen and several friends formed Lamorinda Peer Tutoring (lamorindapeertutoring.com), a service offering free tutoring on a myriad of subjects, including English, Mandarin, cooking, and art. Their 30 tutors, predominantly high school-aged, have worked with more than 50 students.

Tutoring is one-on-one so "students are able to bond with their tutor," Wen says. "A lot of young kids are struggling with distance learning. They're not getting much interaction."

Co-founder Ryan Chan, a College Prep junior, states that the students are not the only beneficiaries of this tutoring program. "We foster leadership and communications among the staff," he explains. "I've personally gotten much better at communicating." Wen agrees. "The tutors are also learning organizational skills and time management."

Teaching Games

Springhill Elementary fourth-grader Dane Darby is a chess champion after only two years of playing. "A lot of people couldn't leave their house once the lockdown started but chess was something that could be done inside," Darby notes. Guessing there were kids who might want to learn the game, Darby set up a website (theroyalchessacademy.com) which says he will teach "the strategies to become a great chess player."

Charging very reasonable rates, Darby has already taught more than 40 students, one from as far away as Japan. Some take a one-time class, learning the basics, while others learn strategies in multiple lessons. He

donates a portion of his fee to the Berkeley Chess School, which is where he learned to play.

Toby Barton, a Campolindo sophomore, decided to use his Minecraft skills to virtually teach the popular video game. "I was looking for a 2020 summer job," Barton explains, "and then the pandemic happened so I needed another way to make some money." He taught mostly elementary school students and organized different classes by skill and level. He's again hoping to find a summer job but if that doesn't work out, Minecraft camp will again be open.

Selling Products

With a love of baking and time on her hands, Orinda's Sabrina Kane, 15, thought it would be fun to share her baked goods with the community. She makes cakes, cookies, cupcakes, cake pops and bread. Her specialty, she says, is chocolate cake. Custom orders are welcome and yummy baked goods may be picked up or delivered locally. Kane donates 50% of her profits to charity. (sweetsbysabrina.godaddysites.com)Orinda's Myra Gakhar, 11, opened her own Etsy shop during the pandemic, selling her colorful, personalized, homemade resin ornaments and coasters (etsy.com/shop/pinkstarcreations). "This is not just a hobby or pastime but something I want to continue putting my time and effort into," she says. She donates a portion of her profits to the animal shelter where she found her puppy.

Wagner Ranch fifth-grader Finn Girdlestone says he "wanted to spend more time with my granddad and make stuff with him." Deciding what to build was challenging until they saw a picture of a squirrel dining table (imagine a picnic table for squirrels). That was it! Made with scrap wood, close to 150 were made (with a little help from brother Lennon); all were sold. A portion of the proceeds were donated to the Monument Crisis Center. Girdlestone says he is working on improving the design and then he and his granddad will get back to building more.

Finally, Orinda's Toby Henstrand, 14, didn't sell anything but he did use his sheltering time to hone his writing skills and expand his knowledge of politics and history. Writing for the Institute for Youth in Policy, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that highlights youth voices, Henstrand researches and writes about "issues that are kind of hot buttons but not necessarily talked about a lot." Recent articles include "The Case for More Congressional Members" and "Lowering the Voting Age." (ypinstitute.com/

author/toby.henstrand)

These young people, along with hundreds of their peers, instill confidence that the future will, indeed, be bright.

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