



Carlsbad teen blazes trail in political, peace activism

By: SHAYNA CHABNER - Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, January 8, 2007 12:00 am

CARLSBAD -- Since her family can remember, 17-year-old Danielle Gram has been ready to address the problems of the world.

Whether lending a teacher a hand, tackling teenage voter apathy or working "toward world peace," the local teenage visionary says there's no cause too big or too small for an individual to make a difference.

"I try and do as much as I can," the well-spoken teen said. "We all have the same amount of time ... I'd rather use that time as productively as possible to help as many people as possible."

Making an impact, Danielle said, is a lifetime goal that she works toward achieving on a daily basis by involving herself in a wide range of activities and volunteer opportunities, and by trying to inspire those around her to follow suit.

As a senior honors student at Carlsbad High School, Danielle is the president and founder of a student-run political club -- the Future Voters of America -- president of the environmental club, captain of the Speech and Debate Team, the national high school representative of Student Peace Alliance, the cofounder of a nonprofit children's peace group, and a straight-A student.

"I don't even think of them as accomplishments," the humble teen said, after reciting the laundry-list of clubs and community service projects that fills her days. "It's really that I enjoy it."

The independent and gregarious Danielle said she enjoys seeing how her involvement in the community and on campus can motivate those around her to break out of their shells and become passionate about a cause or idea.

In the two years since Danielle founded the Future Voters of America, for instance, she said she has inspired more than 50 fellow high school students to become politically informed voices in the community. Danielle said she also demonstrated to them, with the help of guest speakers and volunteer work, how they can have an impact on the local, national and international level.

"She's accomplished so many things at such a young age and seeing how she has done it just inspires us," said Danielle's best friend and fellow Carlsbad senior, Annika Gacnik.

Gacnik, who is a member of the club, said she remembers when Danielle came to her with the idea and how impressed she was that Danielle was thinking about voting and politics when they weren't even of voting age.

"She's always coming up with new ideas," Gacnik said, noting that she admires her friend's creativity and ability to tackle whatever is put in front of her.

"If she wants something done, she knows how to do it. If she sees a problem, she's willing to go out and fix it," Gacnik added.

Those are traits, her father John Gram said, that Danielle has had since she was young.

When she was about 4 years old, Gram recounted, Danielle finished an argument with her parents and promptly went to her room, packed her Little Mermaid suitcase and then returned to say: "That's it, I've learned all I need to know, I'm out of here."

She walked as far as the end of their block, realized she couldn't cross the street alone and returned after sitting on the curb for about 45 minutes, he said.

"At this point in my life, I don't doubt that she probably did know all she needed to know," Gram said, adding that has found it "rewarding" to watch her grow over the years.

"She has always been looking out for the benefit of others," Gram added. "It's just been recognized in all of her teachers from the earliest ages."

One of Danielle's more recent endeavors was in cofounding a peace group for children.

Together, Danielle and a local peace activist -- Jill McManigal -- have educated as many as 40 children, most between the ages of 3 and 8, about foreign cultures, politics and how to practice nonviolence. One of the activities the children have taken part in is sending knapsacks, called "Peace Packs," filled with toys, school supplies and personalized notes, to children in developing countries around the world.

"When she started her internship with me, I thought I was going to be her mentor," McManigal said of working with Danielle at the San Diego branch of Americans for a Department of Peace. "But she became my inspiration and filled me with hope. ... Danielle is one of those people that makes me want to be a better person."

McManigal added that through working with Danielle and watching her teach children, she has seen firsthand how naturally the self-motivated teen can lead people around her.

"She's quite a trailblazer," McManigal said enthusiastically.

So, where will this self-motivated teen be clearing paths next?

At a university -- which one is yet to be decided -- in the coming years and eventually into the world of international relations and law, Danielle said.

"I do think that I will be doing politics," she said matter-of-factly. "You know, when everybody tells you that you have something that they would vote for ... I really think it's one of those gifts, and I have that, so I should do something with it."

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