

Journeys School seniors defend their theses

Teens stand their ground against those questioning positions they took.

By Sarah Lison

Journeys School senior Annie Watters stood before a room full of people last week at the library and said industrial food producers have helped create a culture that is unable to view foods as whole products. The mindset allows producers to modify foods at their convenience and use cheap ingredients to achieve their main goal of making a profit, she said.

Watters then defended her thesis as the audience peppered her with questions.

While the scene might be common in college, not many high school students get this type of experience.

Watters and eight other Journeys School seniors who presented their theses this month have been working since the start of school to research, outline and write about topics of their choosing. They've spent countless hours on the projects, met many deadlines and presented three times to their peers at school.

They've gained confidence in speaking about their research, and some now have a wealth of information they might be able to use as they pursue careers.

Watters said she knew she was going to research a health topic from the start. She's considering careers in health or science and plans to attend Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash.

She quickly realized the scope of her project could become unruly and had some second thoughts. In the end, she narrowed her topic to the growing obesity rate in the U.S. and how it's been driven by changes in food and food consumption since the 1950s.

"It was kind of the part that intrigued me the most, and I had the most research to support it," Watters said. "It's something we depend on to survive."

One of the first questions Watters faced during her presentation on May 12 at Teton County Library was about what she might say to a representative from a major food producer. What if that person told Watters cheaper foods are what people can afford?

Watters said later that unlike other seniors, she didn't find as much counterargument to her thesis. Much of the research she came across that refuted her opinion was done by the industry, she said.

"I guess if I was to sit down and have a conversation with somebody from a big food corporation, it would be a lot different," she said.

Before delving into the project, seniors talked a lot about finding out if a source is credible, she said.

"For me, if something reappeared in more than one place ... it was strong and supportive," Watters said.



Journeys School senior Annie Watters presents her capstone thesis at Teton County Library on Wednesday. She argued that industrial producers have created a mindset that enables them to modify foods and use cheap ingredients.



Qian Wu rejoices at finishing her presentation. She researched the effects of monosodium glutamate, a common ingredient in Chinese food used to improve flavor.

Lexy Davis' experience was a little different. Davis, who plans to study psychology at Syracuse University, looked into the use of animals for medical research.

"I went in thinking there's only one answer - it's horrible," Davis said, but she soon became confused. "I started asking 'Is it OK? Is there somewhere to draw the line?'"

When Davis got to the defense portion of her project, she decided to say animals should be used in medical research only when there's no other alternative.

"I went in with one opinion, and I came out totally different," Davis said.

Using animals to test cosmetics is always wrong, she said, and she hopes people will find better methods for medical research in the future.

Davis said that before students presented and defended their theses at the library, they had to give three presentations to about 40 people at their high school.

"It's about the same as the thesis, but it's less scary because it's people you know," she said.

She's definitely more confident about speaking in public, she said.

"I'm a little worried about college, but I'm way better than I would have been in my freshman year," she said.

Davis' twin sister, Ariella, said the experience helped her grow in another way.

"Academically, I feel way more confident," she said. "I've done research, but never this much."

Adviser Matt Daly said students were expected to compose a 4,000-word paper, though some wrote considerably more.

Ariella Davis, who plans to attend Syracuse for a semester and then transfer to University of Southern California, made a case for same-sex marriage. She's considering careers in social work or law.

She said she never came across any research that caused her to have second thoughts about her topic.

Teens tackle variety of topics

Besides Annie Watters, Lexy Davis and Ariella Davis, six other Journeys School seniors presented and defended their theses during three evenings this month in the Ordway Auditorium at Teton County Library. The following is a list of those students and a short description of their topics.

Peter Stalker IV

Stalker researched the economic benefits of legalizing cannabis. He concluded that legalization could help local and federal governments weather the recession by creating new revenue sources and reducing law enforcement and prosecution spending.

Arthur Eby

Eby researched the best form of government for economic, environmental and social sustainability. He concluded that government intervention in Americans' private lives and industries eventually has a negative effect on climate, community, the economy and more.

Kristine Quint

Inspired by a documentary about former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Quint researched whether humans have a psychological need for war. She concluded people do not have such a need because war is a cultural mechanism people use to get what they think they need that has a devastating psychological impact.

Rachel Pepper

Pepper researched the change that art in Europe underwent in the 19th century. She concluded a number of factors contributed to a paradigm shift that allowed art to morph from a strict discipline to a lifestyle where change and free expression was celebrated and encouraged.

Qian Wu

Wu researched the chemical structure, history and production of monosodium glutamate. She concluded that despite MSG's bad reputation in the U.S., there is no evidence that shows it is harmful to people's health.

Patrick Finnegan

Finnegan analyzed the advertising, marketing and research practices of global pharmaceutical producers and found that the industry is changing people's perception of what is needed be healthy. He concluded Americans can increase the industry's integrity by challenging the status quo and demanding the most current and honest scientific research.

"Right from the get-go, I knew that I was going to try to defend legalizing it because I've always supported that," she said.

She found much of her information online and interviewed a reverend who supports same-sex marriage. Her research strengthened her point of view, she said.

For Watters, the project served two purposes: to edu-

cate herself and to affect others in some way.

Watters plays soccer with the Jackson Hole High School team, and her coach read her thesis several weeks ago during a 10-hour bus ride. Since then, he's been trying to avoid eating processed foods, she said.

"Just to see one person affected makes all that work worth it," she said.