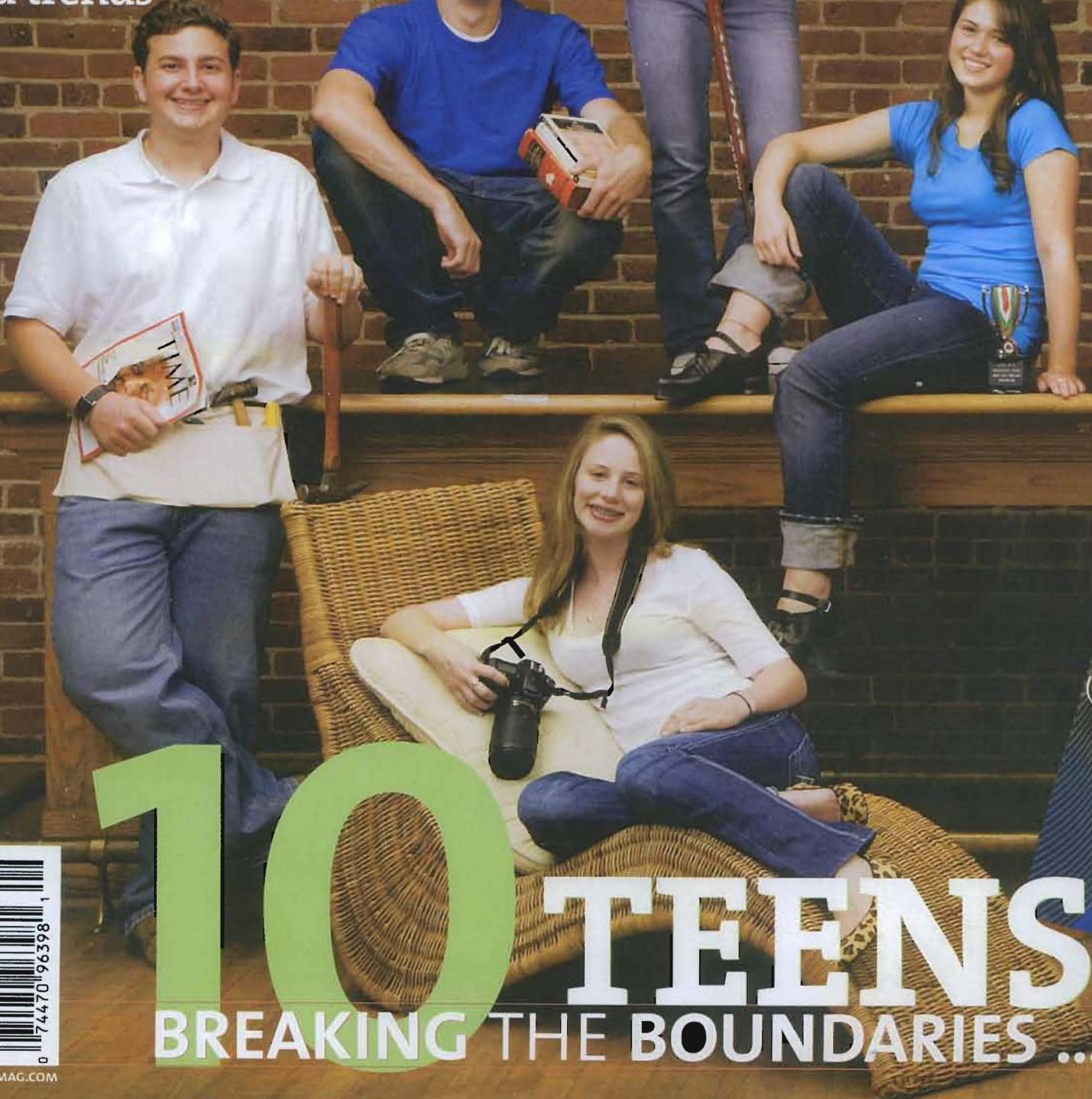


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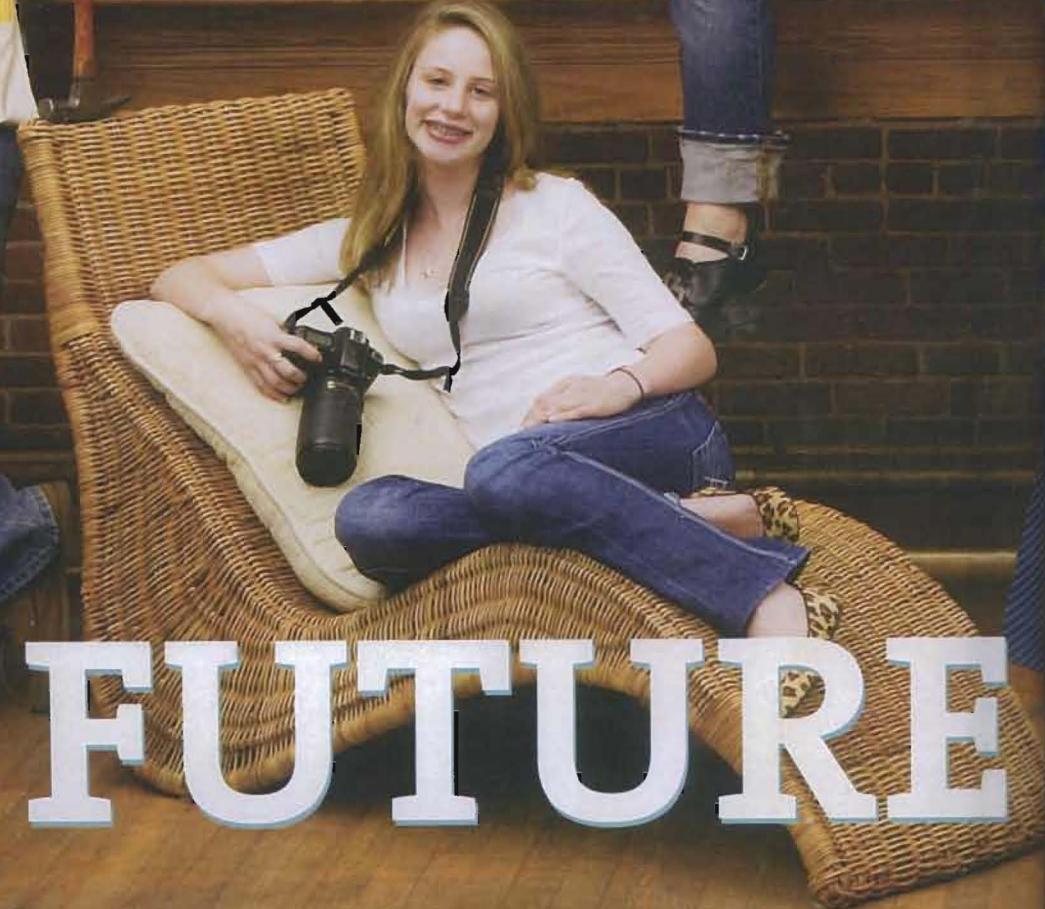


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BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES ...

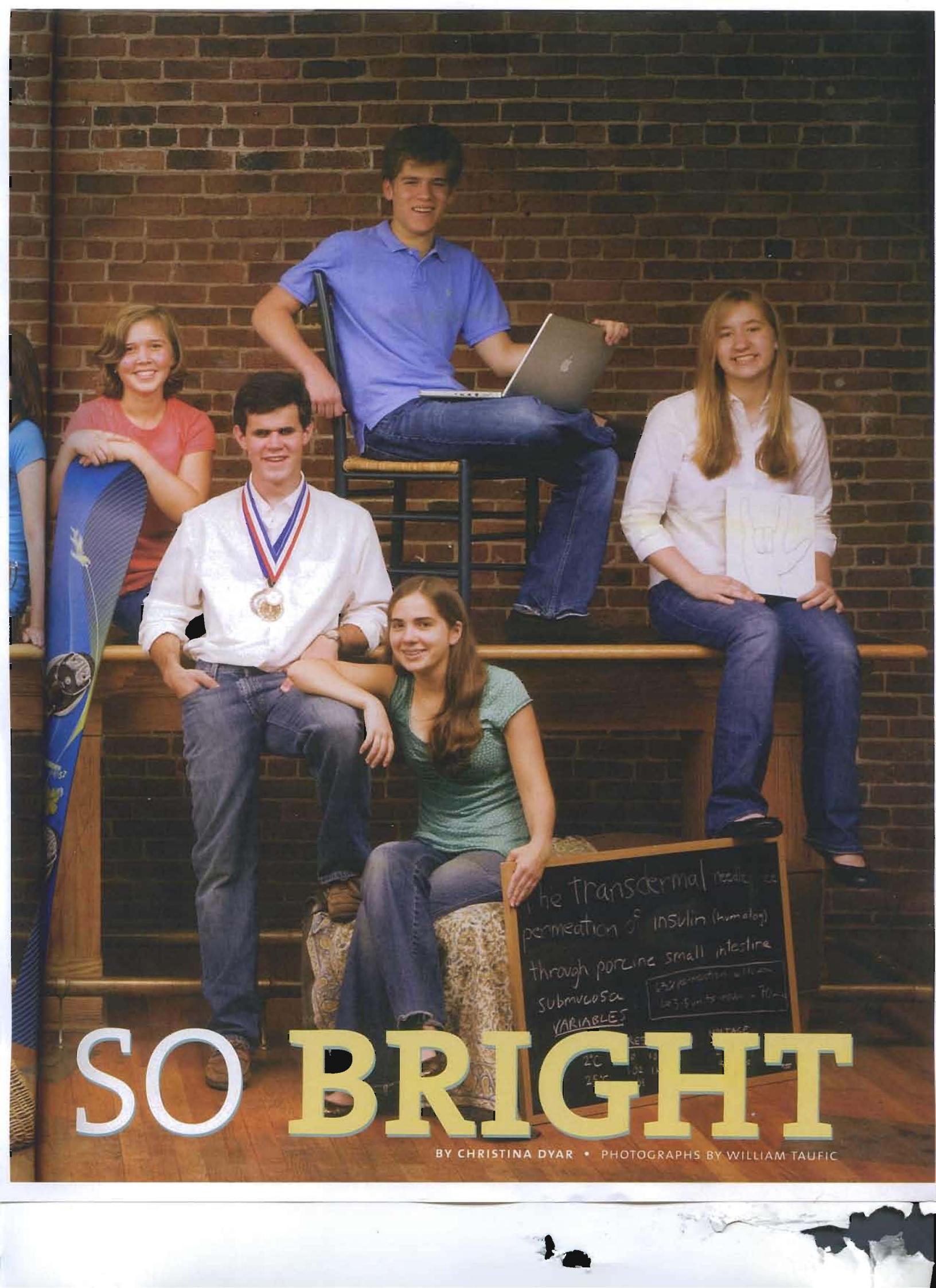


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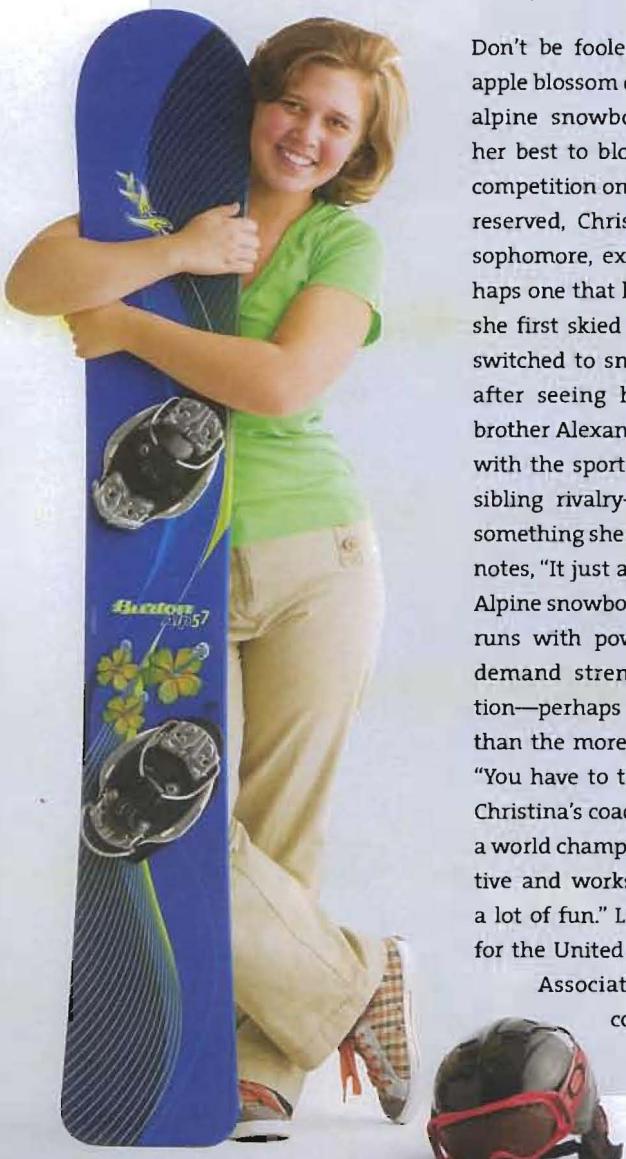


# SO BRIGHT

BY CHRISTINA DYAR • PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM TAUFIC

**W**E'VE ALL HEARD THE HORROR STORIES and read the articles about kids gone wild. Teenagers can have a reputation of being spoiled and selfish. Yet we can all think of well-behaved, talented and smart teenagers, particularly in this era of SAT tutors, college counselors and hypercompetitive college admissions. What makes this bunch of fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds worth keeping an eye on is their passion, long-time stick-to-itiveness and their fascinating range of interests (we have a nationally top-ranked snowboarder, a baseball-loving international thespian, an at-home scientist working to treat juvenile diabetes—and that's just for starters). They question the status quo, put themselves out there, take the risk and make it happen, they all push past their comfort zone.

## CHRISTINA VON BRAUN, 16: SPEED RACER



Don't be fooled by her angelic round face, apple blossom cheeks, and sweet smile — this alpine snowboarding sensation would do her best to blow you away if you were her competition on the slopes. Though seemingly reserved, Christina, a Greenwich Academy sophomore, exudes a quiet confidence, perhaps one that has been building slowly since she first skied at the tender age of five. She switched to snowboarding three years later, after seeing how much fun her younger brother Alexander, now fourteen, was having with the sport. It was the healthiest kind of sibling rivalry—one that turned her on to something she can't live without. As Christina notes, "It just answers something inside me." Alpine snowboarding takes place on groomed runs with powerful turns and curves that demand strength and focused concentration—perhaps it suits her personality better than the more flamboyant freestyle version. "You have to think fast for alpine," explains Christina's coach of three years, Anton Pogue, a world champion. "Christina is very competitive and works hard to go faster. She's also a lot of fun." Last season, Christina qualified for the United States of America Snowboard

Association Nationals for the third consecutive time. This event is recognized as the world's

largest snowboarding competition. Her highest ranking in the country for her age group (fifteen to sixteen) was sixth. This year, she'll compete with the seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds.

"I'm miserable if I'm not snowboarding," she says of her year-round training and racing schedule that stretches from Oregon and Chile in the summer to closer-to-home Vermont in the winter. "Snowboard racing is a tiny world. You have to love it, but she does," adds her mother, Denene. That love translates into giving up parties with friends because she's got a race in the morning. "My grades have to remain high, otherwise I can't snowboard," says Christina. "I know they come first, before snowboarding. And I can't play other sports because I might get injured. But it's worth it, and my friends support me."

While she'd love to go to the Olympics, that's a dream for the distant future. For now, she has her target on getting into a great college and continuing her favorite sport. After college, Christina hopes to see how far her snowboarding skills can take her. "One of the great things about alpine is that we get better as we get older, even into our twenties and thirties," she explains. Do the math: She could be rocking this sport for twenty to thirty years. Now that's dedication.

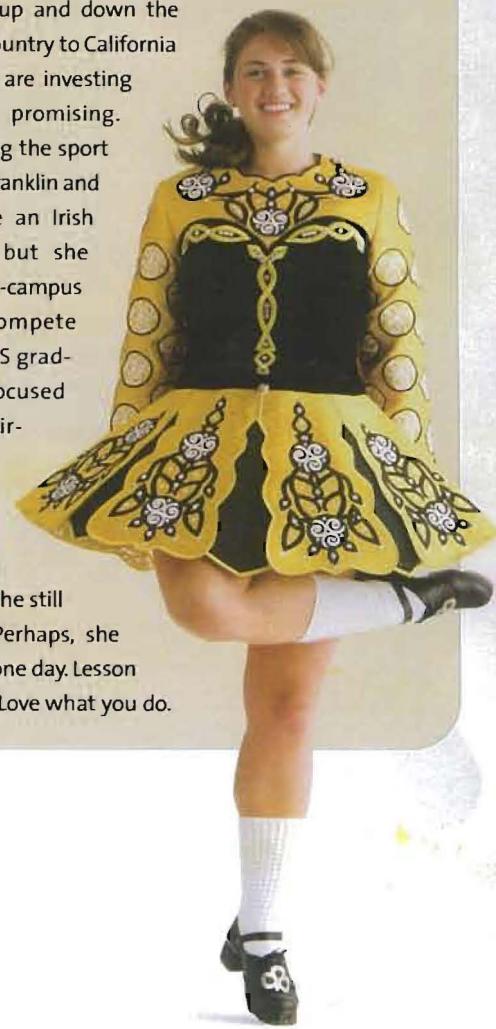
## CAILEIGH DOUGHERTY, 18: DETERMINED DANCER

She flies through the air with the greatest of ease, toes perfectly pointed, one knee locked straight ahead, and one bent slightly behind: That's the lovely Caileigh doing her favorite Irish dancing move called an over. Introduced to the sport (yes, sport—it's quite rigorous, with lots of jumping and leaping) as a three-year-old, she has been taking classes and practicing diligently on her own on a special board (which acts as a portable stage) in her backyard, some days for up to two hours. "I have sprained my right ankle at least twenty times, I have tendonitis in my hip, and have had stress fractures in my heels. My coaches tell me to stop if something is hurting, but I keep dancing. I want to do well for myself. I spend so much time that I want it to pay off in competition," she says. In order to reach the highest level of the sport, you have to compete often, as in almost every weekend. "When Caileigh came to us, she entered into the second-highest level. She was very determined to get to the highest level," says her coach Kathleen Keady, cofounder of the Pender-Keady Academy of Irish Dancing. "She is very proactive and dedicated to competing, so she made her goal, and this year was her first time making it into the final round."

Since Caileigh is constantly practicing and competing, her social life naturally revolves around the sport and most of her friends are Irish dancers, too.

In addition to time, Caileigh's family has also invested a serious chunk of change in the sport. "The dresses are custom-made for my solo. I send my measurements to a place in Dublin and pick out the fabrics, colors

and designs myself. This black and yellow one cost about \$4,200. Then there's the wig, shoes, and studio time." Her parents have also helped fund four trips to international competitions, and countless trips up and down the East Coast and across the country to California and Colorado. Clearly, they are investing in her future, which is promising. Caileigh plans on continuing the sport while she is a freshman at Franklin and Marshall. They don't have an Irish dancing program there, but she hopes to practice in the on-campus dance studios and to compete whenever possible. The GHS graduate is good at staying focused under less than ideal circumstances. Once, she walked through a field of cows out West to get to a barn where a competition was held, and she still nailed her performance. Perhaps, she muses, she will even teach one day. Lesson number one from Caileigh: Love what you do.



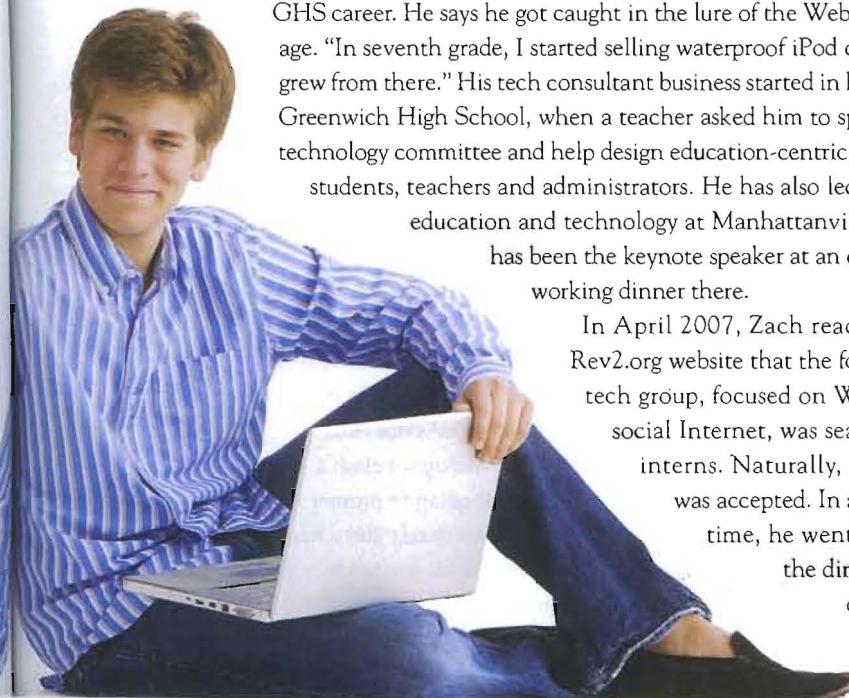
## ZACH SIMS, 18: NET GURU

Move over Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, and make way for Zach and his ubiquitous laptop. As a freshman at Columbia University, he's ready to take on Manhattan with the same level of intensity he brought to his GHS career. He says he got caught in the lure of the Web at a very young age. "In seventh grade, I started selling waterproof iPod cases on eBay. It grew from there." His tech consultant business started in his junior year at Greenwich High School, when a teacher asked him to speak to a school technology committee and help design education-centric tech options for students, teachers and administrators. He has also lectured on fusing education and technology at Manhattanville College, and has been the keynote speaker at an educational networking dinner there.

In April 2007, Zach read a blog on the Rev2.org website that the forward-thinking tech group, focused on Web 2.0 and the social Internet, was searching for new interns. Naturally, he applied and was accepted. In a short period of time, he went from intern to the director of content development. In that role,

he helps to sign and coordinate advertising campaigns with companies like America Online.

According to Rev2 founder and editor Sid Yadav, a seasoned Web professional, "What set Zach apart were his ideas. I'd have one good idea, he'd have ten, most of which I could never have thought of and told him to go ahead with. He grew the business vertically, and soon enough he was talking to million-dollar CEOs and having industry-specific roundtables that he would produce as podcasts for us." Of his interviews with Silicon Valley CEOs, Zach says, "I like getting the inside view. But I'm jealous. I want to do what they're doing." »



## MELANIE LEE, 17: GOOD SPORT



She shoots, she scores! Melanie is a rising star on the Greenwich High School varsity field hockey team. The girl puts a ton of sweat equity into her life as an athlete, and it's starting to pay off: college field hockey scouts are noticing. As her senior year at GHS gets under way, Melanie, as captain, is excited to lead her team. "I just love the sport," she says, "Even if you sit on the bench, it isn't hard to be pumped." She has refined her field hockey skills through various elite camps and club travel teams. She also played for the National Futures Championship team, a select development program that meant practices from January through June.

In addition to being sporty, Melanie is also a smarty. She has a 4.2 GPA and has parlayed her Chinese heritage into an academic adventure. As a clarinet player, she traveled to China during a two-week culture and musical exchange tour with the GHS symphony band. "We played on the Great Wall. It was amazing," she says. Through the GHS Mandarin Club, of which she's copresident, Melanie raised money for earthquake relief by selling boxes of fortune cookies. She's also trying to educate her peers on the importance of the Chinese language, which, she explains, is "becoming critically important as China gains global prominence." Susan Sevren, a publicist for the Chinese Language School of Connecticut, brought Melanie to our attention. Melanie is the vice presi-

## ANDREW JOHNSON, 18: BARRIER BREAKER

Andrew has been blind since birth. He is tons of other things as well, and could have been dubbed the honorary mayor of our teen photo shoot. Despite his blindness, which he is quite open about, Andrew devoted four years of early wake-ups and grueling workouts at GHS to rowing varsity crew. "I love it," he says. "Especially how it challenges you physically and how it's all about the team. There are seven other rowers plus the coxswain. It brings people together, whether you want to be or not."

Andrew admits he had to overcome some physical and mental obstacles to master the techniques of rowing. But meeting challenges isn't new for Andrew. Thanks to his parents, he started skiing up at Killington when he was eight and went every winter for years. "I got lucky," he says. "I have parents who knew I didn't have to be limited. There are different ways to do whatever you want to do." At twelve, he started rock climbing and hiking. On a hiking trip in Italy, Andrew, as a fifteen-year-old, met Eric Weihenmayer, the famous outdoorsman who climbed Mount Everest. Weihenmayer, taken by Andrew's wit and personality, invited him to stay in touch. One year later, they were hiking together in Peru's Machu Picchu.

Of all his athletic endeavors, rowing is the sport he competes in. His goal is to go to the London Para Olympics in 2012. He tried out for the nationals the last

two years and didn't make it. "It's particularly difficult to make the cut," says Andrew, "since there can only be two blind people in the boat, and no less than two women in a boat. There was already a blind girl, so my chances weren't high. I'm going to try out again this year because one blind guy left the team, so now there is room."

When we escorted Andrew to the parking lot of the Arch Street Teen Center to be picked up, we met his dad, who encouraged him to hang up his clothes on the inside of the car. It was a tiny bit frustrating for Andrew, but giving Andrew opportunities, big and small, to do things for himself, has created an independent young man. His upbeat, take-charge approach is something he tried to instill in a five-year-old boy he tutored last year. This boy, according to Andrew, was having issues with his blindness. "I was supposed to teach him piano, but I haven't played since I was nine," he laughs.

Even though being a freshman at Connecticut College is going to present Andrew with new hurdles, he joked with us, "Every four years they have a new blind student. It's my turn this year." His sense of humor and winning spirit are sure to make his college years a success.

dent and student liaison for the CLSCO, and helps promote programs and events.

Perhaps Melanie's can-do attitude comes from all the years she has spent as a Girl Scout. "I love my troop," she says. "We've been together since first grade. It's like being on a team. I've met girls I wouldn't have known otherwise." She's worked on time-intensive projects (such as a Chinese culture box) to earn highly regarded Silver and Gold Girl Scout Awards. In her pockets of free time, Melanie is a skate guard at the Dorothy Hamill ice rink. "I rarely have conflicts," she says of her schedule, which she seamlessly juggles and prioritizes. "If I had more free time, I'd just find something to do and to go play."



## ELIANA CARMONA, 17: SCIENCE WHIZ

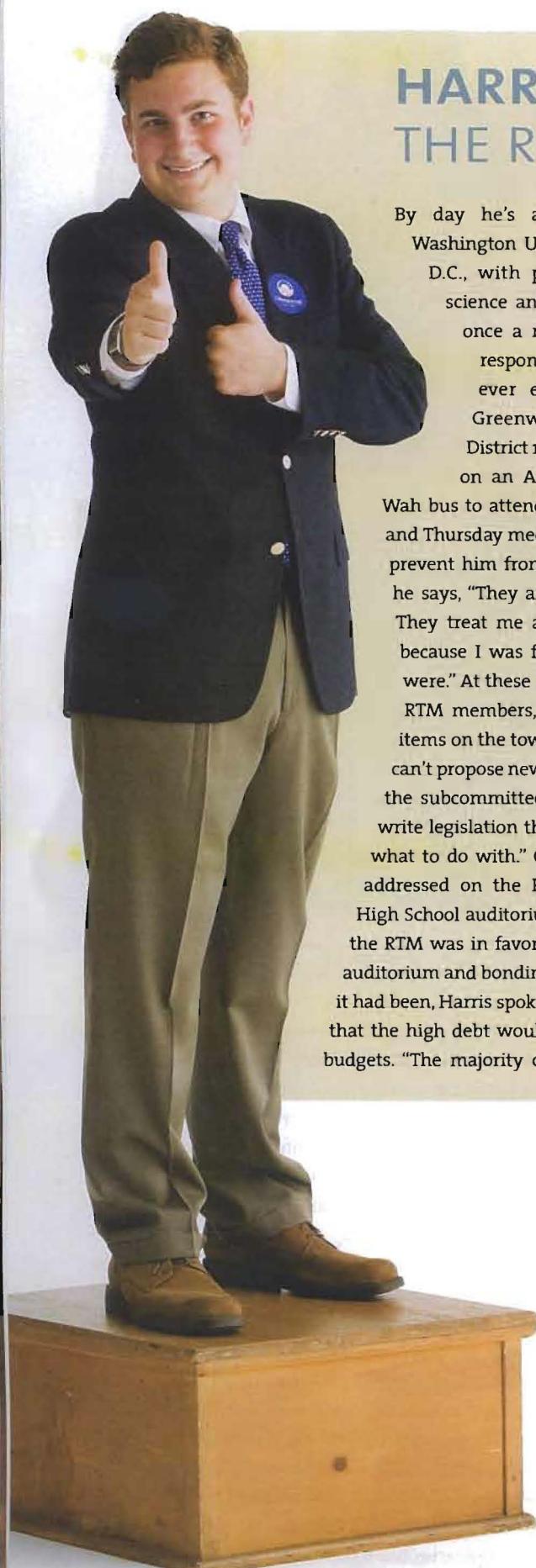
Inspiration comes in many forms. In Eliana's case, it was a recurring gross-out that motivated her. Her older sister Lisa, now a sophomore at Princeton, has diabetes and gets regular insulin shots. "She's used to it, but I hate shots. I'd be traumatized if I had to be in that position," says Eliana. She says it had been bothering her for about five or six years before she researched alternative ways of administering insulin. She used her junior-year science-fair project as a platform to explore the possibility of transdermal insulin administration using chicken and pork skin—the idea being that maybe the insulin would permeate through with some pressure. "In doing the project, she had to learn a lot of technique, technology and instruments," says her chemistry teacher Andrew Barmante. "She's very motivated. When she started the project I talked to some companies that had been trying to do the same kind of thing, but with an inhaler, and they said, 'She can't do that.' But she wasn't discouraged by that. Eliana persevered, came in on weekends and



days off. I know there were times she was sleep deprived." Her efforts paid off: The project captured top honors at the Connecticut Science Fair. Of the fair she says, casting a warm smile complete with braces, "It was the most fun I've had in my life." That's why she plans on ramping up the effort again for this year's science fair. The goal is transdermal permeation through something similar to a patch.

"I could have a future in medicine," she ponders. "But I am squeamish." There is something about medical journalism that really appeals to her, however. She was a reporter at Girls State, an annual summer leadership program, sponsored by the American Legion, for students between their junior and senior years in high school. Participants spend their time on mock trials and enacting mock state legislatures. "Ideally, I'd like to study communications or journalism. I was a reporter at Girls State, and I enjoyed interviewing, getting the story, staying up late to meet the deadlines."

## HARRIS DAVIDSON, 18: THE REPRESENTATIVE



By day he's a freshman at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., with plans to study political science and attend law school. But once a month, Harris fulfills his responsibilities as the youngest-ever elected member of the Greenwich RTM, representing District 12 (North Mianus). He hops on an Amtrak train or the Fung

Wah bus to attend his mandatory Monday and Thursday meetings. His youth does not prevent him from getting taken seriously, he says, "They are all professional adults. They treat me as an equal, which I am, because I was fairly elected just as they were." At these meetings he, like all other RTM members, approves or disapproves items on the town budget. "The RTM itself can't propose new legislation," he says. "But the subcommittees that are part of it can write legislation that the main RTM decides what to do with." One of the first issues he addressed on the RTM was the Greenwich High School auditorium project. While most of the RTM was in favor of full funding of a new auditorium and bonding capital projects the way it had been, Harris spoke out against it, concerned that the high debt would be a problem in future budgets. "The majority of people who responded

negatively to my stance were in support of it, because they support the arts, as do I. Unfortunately, most of the people who supported it didn't fully understand the financial repercussions that it would cause in the town."

But Harris doesn't stop his political involvement at the local level. He interned for Jim Himes's election campaign and hopes to continue helping out if the candidate wins in November. "Harris took on greuling campaign tasks without complaining," says Michael Sachse, the Himes campaign's communications director. Harris is also a self-professed news junkie who scours the political papers, blogs and television shows, like *The Colbert Report*.

While he is obviously very comfortable sporting the buttoned-up look of a coat and tie, he's not afraid to roll up his sleeves and do the heavy lifting when it matters. Harris has volunteered for Habitat for Humanity in Bridgeport and Greensburg, Kansas (after a tornado wiped out the town). Like any promising future political figure, he's got an "in" with Oprah already. He was proud to be part of a team she sponsored to build 500 homes in Houston for Texans who lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina. If he keeps up this winning combination of passion and action, we just may see Harris on Oprah someday.

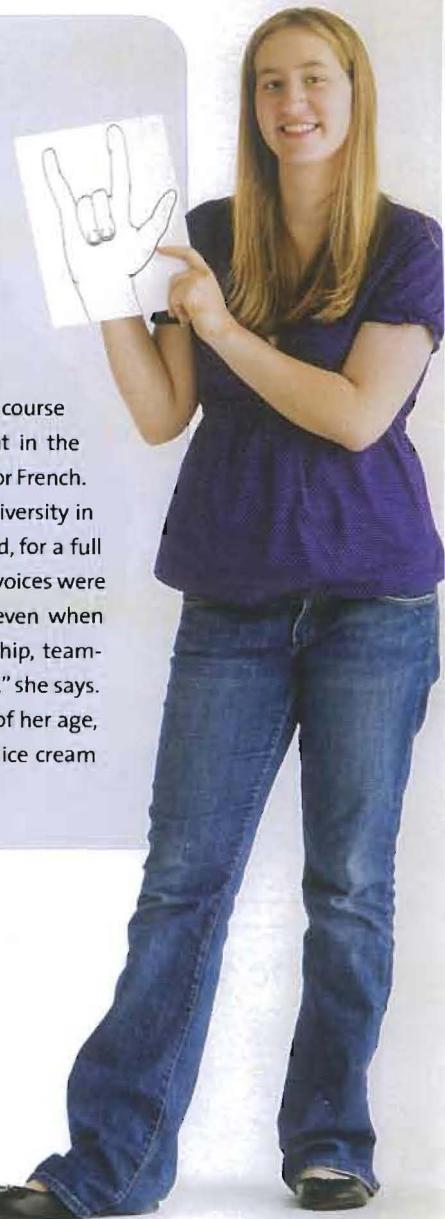
## MARY ANN EGGERS, 17: THE ULTIMATE GIVER

Long-limbed with honey-colored hair and a sweet smile, Mary Ann is a laid-back girl with an impressive array of talents. Though she is soft-spoken, she's won awards for public speaking and has been singing in the Christ Church Choir since she was six. She has toured Europe every summer with the choir, including performances at the Vatican in Rome, the Duomo in Florence, the St. Francis Chapel in Assisi, the Edinburgh Festival and in London and Dublin.

She's also been an effective voice and leader for Kids 4 Kids in Crisis, a junior fundraising division of Kids in Crisis. She's taken its fundraising efforts to new heights, often by picking up the phone and dialing and persuading, until she has surpassed her goals.

Right now, her latest passion is American Sign Language (ASL) for the deaf. Her mom, Bobbi, says Mary Ann "fell in love with the beauty of signing, the symbols, the moves." Mary Ann says she also loves the bonding that happens in the

relationships with the deaf. She explains, "It's like an exotic language that we share." Although she used to do a form of finger spelling with her best friend when she was younger, she discovered ASL through a relatively new course at Greenwich High School that is taught in the language department, similar to Spanish or French. This summer, she attended Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where ASL was invented, for a full immersion program. "For two weeks, our voices were off. We couldn't speak the entire time, even when we were rock climbing or doing leadership, team-building programs, we could only use ASL," she says. Though she seems very mature for a girl of her age, she's still a kid at heart: She loves to get ice cream and hang out with her friends.



## JAMIE BIONDI, 19: TRIPLE THREAT

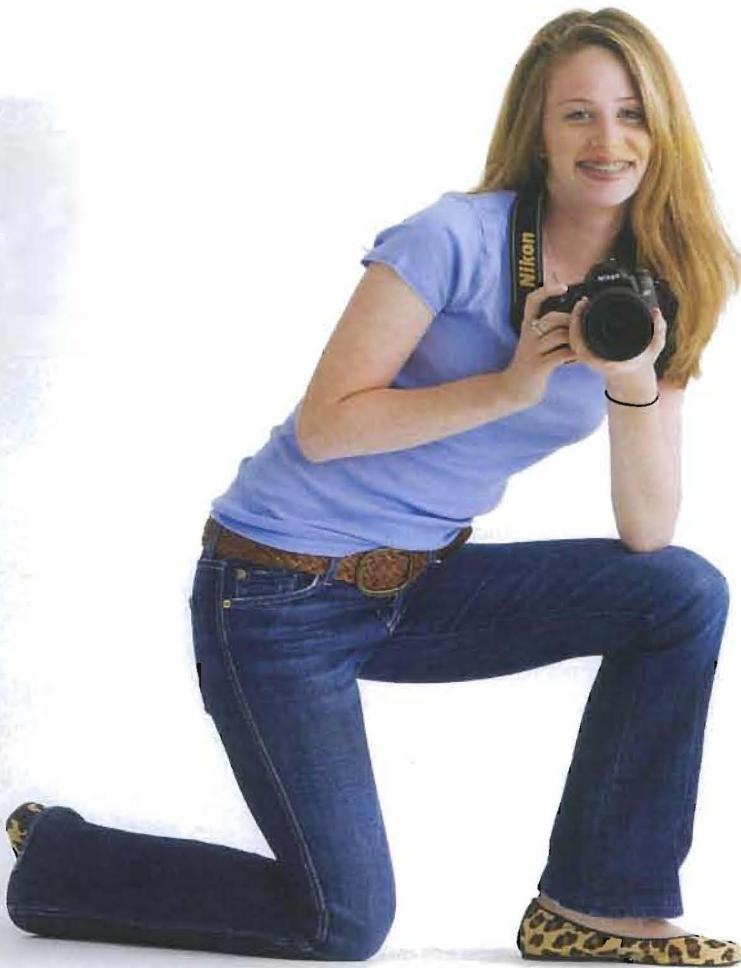
Tall and blond with ridiculously long eyelashes and chiseled cheekbones that would strike envy in the heart of any teenage girl, Jamie

Biondi is a charmer with a Cheshire cat grin and a wonderful self-deprecating sense of humor. It's amazing that he's not the least bit arrogant after all of the accolades showered upon him when he graduated from Brunswick School last year. We'll prattle off a few: He was the valedictorian, the Kulukundis Cup winner (for having the highest academic standing), the Robert L. Cosby recipient (for having attended Brunswick since Lower School and embodying the good character of the award's namesake), and was selected as a 2008 Presidential Scholar along with 139 other graduating seniors around the country.

Now a freshman at Yale University, Jamie looks back on his prolific high school career and sees a guy who doesn't know when to quit or to turn down any opportunity. Sure, he was busy hitting the books and fulfilling his obligations as the baseball team's tri-captain and pitcher, but he still made time to raise money for cancer patients in Fairfield County (a cause that has deep personal significance, as someone he

is close to is ill), as well as other community service commitments. And the multitalented dynamo still indulged his love of acting. "My girlfriend thought I was crazy," he admits. "I'd be rehearsing late, then stay to paint the scenery." This summer, Jamie traveled to the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh to star in *The California Seagull*, an adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

There is something about acting that provides him with a means of expression that he craves. "I love the idea of live theater not only as catharsis, but also as a living, breathing interaction between players and audience," he says. "I really love the atmosphere of rehearsal as a place for people to come together from their hectic lives and put together a piece of live theatre." In addition, Jamie thrives on the team atmosphere. "There's nothing like the feeling when a group of people can prepare a piece to be performed in front of a live audience; it's the pinnacle of human creativity." The consummate team player, yes. But the guy can't help it if he naturally stands out from the crowd.



## SUSANNAH BENJAMIN, 15: SHUTTERBUG SENSATION

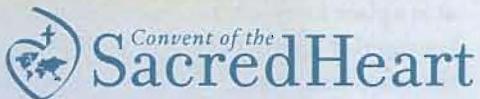
The Christmas that Susannah was twelve, her mother gave her a camera. Although Susannah didn't want the camera, she didn't want to hurt her mother's feelings so she started using it—and something inside of her clicked. "When my mom gave me the camera that Christmas, I didn't understand photography was an art form. Now it's my life," the sunny-faced artist says.

Not even three years later, Susannah is extremely proactive about getting her work shown. She feels that sharing and publishing the photographs are the best parts of her all-consuming hobby. Susannah's photographs have been shown looming large in Times

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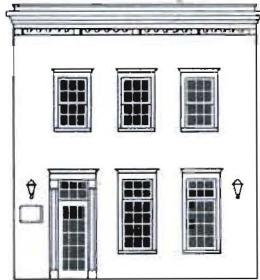


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