

# HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from

WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

Summer 2024

## WMAA Celebrates Success

Kaitlyn Lawrence came to WMAA like most freshmen do, with a rather vague, cloudy vision of what her future might hold. "I was interested in science and math, but I didn't know what that meant for me," she shares. "I also play the flute and love music, but wasn't sure a music career was attainable."

Kaitlyn leveraged WMAA's extensive STEM course offering to explore her options. "I was thinking about careers in forensics or health, so biomedical engineering seemed like a good place to stick my toe in the water," she recalls. "One of our projects in biomed was a murder mystery. We had a cadaver with injuries, and we had to figure out how the person died. What a fascinating project!"

That introduction opened the door to research. Kaitlyn and her partner looked at a lot of complicated research papers and topics to come up with their capstone project. "We decided to explore how particles pass through the five skin layers," she says. "The research was amazing. It was motivating. I want to keep doing it! I never thought I would have the independence to set up and complete my own project in high school."

Independence is a trait Kaitlyn has cultivated throughout her high school career. "I knew I would have to go outside of WMAA to pursue my musical interests," Kaitlyn says. "I play in three or four ensembles, along with taking lessons. I have definitely learned time management and how to balance the workload."

Kaitlyn decided to pursue a music major, and that sparked an incredibly demanding senior year schedule. "You don't just 'decide' to be a music major," she recalls. "I spent the majority of the year on the application process, which included recording about an hour's worth of music, prescreening, and then an audition. A very small number of students receive an invitation to audition. I applied to four colleges and auditioned at three. I just found out I've been accepted at the University of Michigan!" Kaitlyn also plans to pursue a STEM major and hopefully a biomed degree. "I know it will take me a little longer to graduate, but the skills I've learned at WMAA will get me to the finish line."



*"WMAA has a standard," Kaitlyn concludes. "It's academically intense but teachers are also understanding. They helped me schedule my classes and dual enroll at GRCC so that I could invest time in my college prescreening. Once you earn independence, it's nice to have teachers who trust you and help you make things happen. No one ever puts you down for caring about things. WMAA celebrates success. That's part of the culture."*



# It's About How You Work As a Team



Brent and Sarah Olthof started coaching WMAA's VEX robotics team in 2020. At that time, students set a modest goal to be competitive against Grand Rapids teams. Four years later, students are aiming much higher. "We want to be the best in the world!"

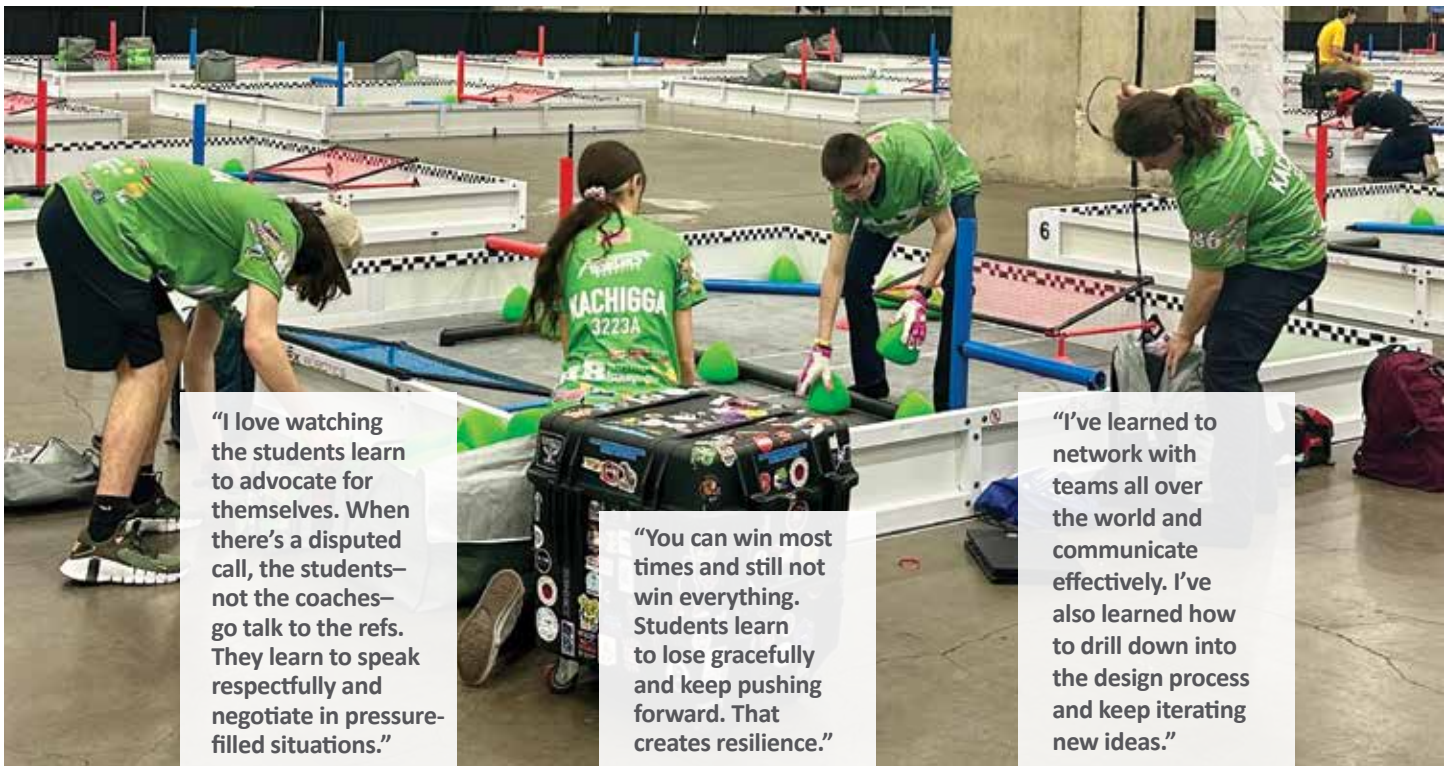
So coaches Brent and Sarah set up the structure and processes to make that happen. "This is a student-centered program," Brent notes. "If their goal is to be the best in the world, our job is to help them achieve it. We coach this like a sport. Students complete an application and try out for the team. They have to commit to a rigorous practice schedule, and those practices can be pretty intense. That's what it takes if you want to compete at the global level."

As with many things in life, teamwork is the most important skill for robotics success. Trevor Olthof is a senior who has been involved in robotics since third grade. "You get good by sharing ideas," he notes. "We have so much collaboration on our team. We spend a lot of time practicing, but almost

as much time on documenting what we're doing and researching what other teams do."

The results bear that out: WMAA students know how to win. WMAA took a team of five students to Dallas in April to compete at the VEX World Championship. "It was like the Olympics," Sarah recalls. "We saw 48 nations parade their flags at the opening ceremony." And just as with the Olympics, the competition got tough in a hurry. There are more than 13,000 teams in the world. The 820 best teams attended the Dallas competition and were randomly divided into 10 divisions of 82 each. WMAA captured 23rd place overall in skills, and qualified 9th in their division. Most impressively, they took home the Amaze Award for the division, signifying that their all-around work was the best of the 82 teams in their division.

Students obviously learn about robotics by participating in VEX, but there's another level of learning that takes place. All of it fits very nicely with the WMAA culture and expectations.



"I love watching the students learn to advocate for themselves. When there's a disputed call, the students—not the coaches—go talk to the refs. They learn to speak respectfully and negotiate in pressure-filled situations."

SARAH

"You can win most times and still not win everything. Students learn to lose gracefully and keep pushing forward. That creates resilience."

BRENT

"I've learned to network with teams all over the world and communicate effectively. I've also learned how to drill down into the design process and keep iterating new ideas."

TREVOR



# Leaders of Tomorrow Gala

## Thank You for Going **ABOVE & BEYOND**

For the second year in a row, we welcomed a sold-out crowd to the Amway Hangar at Gerald R. Ford International Airport to celebrate WMAA students. Our theme of *Above & Beyond* showcased the many ways in which the partnership, forged by staff, students and our business community, allows students to elevate their skills and achieve their full potential.

### Among the evening's highlights:

- ✦ WMAA Founder Dick DeVos shared his delight and amazement over the way our school has exceeded his wildest dreams. He continues to go *above and beyond* through his support of our students and this school.
- ✦ Our guest speaker, Mike Massimino, shared thoughtful and honest reflections on the importance of teamwork, especially as students are challenged to go *above and beyond* in their careers.
- ✦ The Foundation board president, Terry Russell, invited all attendees to go *above and beyond* by joining the Soaring Together Program.
- ✦ A host of WMAA students went *above and beyond* to demonstrate their interpersonal skills as they welcomed, interacted and engaged with guests while sharing their experiences and achievements.

The Gala is our primary annual fundraising event. The monies raised help fill the gap between what is covered by the State's per-pupil allotment, and the real costs of providing the enriched educational opportunities that help our students thrive. (See page 5 for specific ways in which donor gifts are used.)

### We Reached Our Goal!

The Gala match this year was earmarked for annual operations. Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation graciously offered a match for all gifts proceeding from the Gala. We are pleased to announce that we met (and exceeded) our fundraising goal for this event!

Thank you to everyone who made the evening a resounding success!



Morgan Morse, Gulfstream scholarship winner



Guest speaker Mike Massimino

**“When you face a problem,  
reach out to your friends.  
You can't figure out everything  
on your own.  
Reach out to Mission Control.”**

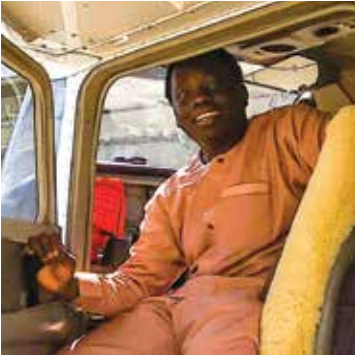
- Mike Massimino



# Launching Our Next Class of Leaders

Each WMAA student has a unique story of inspiration, challenge and success. Those stories are more than just inspirational. They form the backbone of personal character that students will build on for the rest of their lives.

We love sharing how your financial support plays a role in helping students live fully into their talents and interests. This year's Gala celebrated the WMAA culture by highlighting ways in which students and staff go "Above and Beyond." Following are three additional examples of strong, capable leaders in the Class of 2024 who learned to focus and achieve their dreams at WMAA.



## David Idowu

"My father traveled a lot for business. He moved our family to the United States because he recognized that American education offered better opportunities than we would have in our home country of Nigeria. When we came to Grand Rapids, my sister enrolled at WMAA. I've wanted to be a pilot since I was young, so I knew this was the school for me. I fulfilled that first dream by earning my private pilot license this year. I plan to attend Calvin University and study computer science while I look for ways to afford additional hours and ratings. Ultimately, I want to be an aerobatics pilot because that would mean I can fly in a way no one else can!"



## JP King

"WMAA has been a great place for me to hone my problem solving skills. When I joined the National Honor Society, I chose to fulfill my service commitment by tutoring. I started a study group for Algebra I that meets before school, and I tutor a few students after school before my VEX robotics practice. That means 11-hour days, but I've had kids say they passed because of my help and that feels good. For my Engineering Design and Development class, my partner and I decided to organize and streamline the 3D printing farm by adding a logistics system to it. We designed and built a website for uploading files and scheduling print runs. We wanted something that was inexpensive but feature-packed, so that future students could continue developing it."



## Eman Mohamed

"I was born in Egypt and grew up speaking Arabic. My father moved our family to the United States when I was in high school so that we could get a good education, but California was very expensive. We visited family in Michigan and enjoyed it very much, so we came here for my senior year. I love WMAA. It is the best school I have ever attended, but I have had to work very hard on my English. One of my teachers suggested that I apply for the Seal of Biliteracy, which documents that I am proficient in reading, writing and speaking two languages. I think this will help me achieve my career goal of becoming a surgeon."

# You Can Help Our Students Soar!

We often share stories about students who have soared to new heights of achievement at WMAA. Foundation Board president Terry Russell says, “We can expect more of our kids if we give them opportunities.”

Terry continues, “It’s inspiring to our students when you show up as a donor. And you, in turn, will be amazed as you learn more about our students and their achievements. Together, we create one perpetual feedback loop of inspiration.” You can get involved in that loop through our Soaring Together Program. It provides a way for donors to, as the name implies, rise to a higher level of understanding and commitment.

**WHAT IS IT?** The Soaring Together Program recognizes donors who make an annual gift of \$1,000 or more to the WMAA Foundation.


**WHY DO WE NEED IT?** As a public charter high school, WMAA receives a per-pupil stipend from the state, which covers the traditional courses. However, we provide educational opportunities above and beyond what can be found in other high schools. Those opportunities require an investment of approximately \$1,500–\$2,000 per student, per year.

**WHAT IS THE IMPACT?** Each new member of the Soaring Together Program provides most or all of the extra financial support needed to support one or more students. Having that reliable source of funding allows us to continue investing in extraordinary experiences, especially those such as Build-A-Plane that span multiple years.

## WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES?


**\$1,000**

Provides new uniforms for 16 students or one year of 3D printing materials.




**\$2,000**

Pays for one year of Redbird simulator maintenance or covers FAA drone license testing for 15 students.




**\$5,000**

Pays for two 100-hour airplane safety inspections or one year of supplies for Aerospace engineering.



**\$10,000**

Provides three months of fuel for a plane or one year of Build-A-Plane supplies.




**\$15,000**

Pays for one season of Summer Glider Camp or one year of Saturday school.



**\$20,000**

Pays for half of an airplane engine overhaul.




**HOW CAN I JOIN?** We would love to have at least 80 donors participating in Soaring Together. Simply make a gift or gifts totaling \$1,000 or more each year (outside of sponsorships) and we will welcome you into the club. If you would like more information about membership levels and their impact, please visit [wmaafoundation.org/support](http://wmaafoundation.org/support) or contact Meggan George, Director of Development and Marketing. ([mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org](mailto:mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org) or (616) 446-8886 x1112)





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## It's All About Relationships

We often feature stories about student achievement and growth. Opportunities stimulate growth, but relationships nourish it. In this article, we take a closer look at the impact our faculty and staff have on the students whose lives they touch, through the story of Betsy Pott and Makayla Russell.

Makayla Russell, *Class of 2021* and Betsy Pott, *Director of School Operations*

### Q. How did you decide to come to WMAA?

**MR** My brother attended WMAA and I saw that it offered wonderful opportunities for students who wanted to challenge themselves academically. So I followed him here!

**BP** My sister-in-law worked for Dick DeVos and convinced me to interview for the job before WMAA even opened. It was a pretty scary place in early 2010 before the renovation! I helped get the school up and running for our first class in September 2010.

### Q. How do you think WMAA cultivates leadership in students?

**MR** Teachers gave us everything we needed to succeed in the classroom. They let us make mistakes and learn from them. My extracurricular experiences also helped shape those skills. I played volleyball and was team captain, which gave me experience in a leadership role. I also tutored physics and chemistry to help other kids succeed.

**BP** We lead by example. The way we dress, the way we talk, the way we as staff and faculty carry ourselves...we are modeling leadership in all the small nuances of daily activity.

### Q. What is special about the relationship between students and staff at WMAA?

**MR** I had a much different experience in high school than my friends outside of WMAA had. Every teacher cared about me as a whole person. They wanted to build a connection and provide opportunities that fit my skills and interests.

**BP** I think one of the most important things is that students feel important. Nicole stands at the door every morning, greeting students by name. They're always a bit surprised by this! But the longer students attend, the more they realize that we want to know them as people. That's why I coach volleyball, so I can build relationships. That experience of being known and important is integral to the adults our students grow to become.

### Q. How did the WMAA faculty and staff inspire you to become a teacher?

**MR** One great person can inspire you to pursue your passions. Betsy was that person for me. She pushed me to lead and to grow as a volleyball player and assistant coach. She cared about me as a student, a person and a player. But all of the staff and teachers are like that. They are exceptional.

### Q. How does it make you feel when a student commits to teaching as a result of attending WMAA?

**BP** I am excited about having students return to give back in any way. We have former students on staff, as part of the faculty, and as volunteers. These adults are now pouring support and encouragement into the next generation, just as we did with them. I love that they saw the value in those relationships and want to give back.

We are thrilled to welcome Makayla back to WMAA in the fall as a new faculty member!

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## Congratulations Stephanie!

Stephanie Taylor joined West Michigan Aviation Academy in 2021 with dual responsibilities. She has worked closely with the school staff to focus on student recruitment and family communication. She has also worked with the Foundation to help plan, coordinate and execute essential fundraising functions.

Stephanie has done an amazing job in both roles. We are excited to announce that she is now working full-time for the Foundation in the role of Development Manager. “Stephanie is incredibly organized and relates so well to our donors,” says Meggan George, Director of Development and Marketing for both the school and the Foundation. “Having her at the Foundation full-time will allow us to continue increasing our donor outreach and build deeper relationships. That, in turn, will allow me to spend more time on cultivation and growth with donors, sponsors, and community/corporate partners.”

*Please join us in thanking and congratulating Stephanie on her new role!*

## Connect With Us



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