

FALLEN KINGS
OF THE SHORT NORTH

SUPER
STUDENTS

A-TO-Z GUIDE
TO HOCKING HILLS

SINGLES
PARTY
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Meet six whiz kids

who will restore

your faith in the

next generation.

PERSTUDENTS SUPERSTUDENTS

by Rhonda Koulermos • photography by Tim Johnson

IT IS NOT HARD to locate a talented high school senior. Guidance counselors, principals and teachers can tick off a long list of bright, highly accomplished pupils, and that's reassuring—for their futures . . . and ours. But there are a few who are off-the-charts memorable. Call them Super Students.

This year we're showcasing six: leaders with mind-bending résumés and lengthy lists of extracurriculars, from the 17-year-old who's put in three summers of genomic research at Nationwide Children's Hospital to the Russian-born valedictorian who takes classes at OSU and then rocks out the sequins and spray tan as a competitive ballroom dancer.

They come from all sorts of backgrounds: privileged, middle class, extremely challenged. "We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny," Dag Hammarskjöld, former U.N. secretary general, once noted. "But what we put into it is ours." These teens seem to recognize and seize their opportunities and—most refreshingly—come across as actively grateful for them.

THE ARTIST

There's so much intricacy, such detail and power in the mixed media works of Zach Wilke, 18, it takes several minutes of careful examination to fully appreciate their scope.

It's art that's getting noticed and winning awards.

The Ohio Governor's Youth Art

Exhibition has chosen his mixed media entry, "Dependance," a series of three photographs that are drawn on with pen and ink, as one of the 300 pieces to be honored at the James A. Rhodes State Office Tower through May 17. His video, "Nocturnal," which utilizes stop-frame photos, was honored at the exhibition's regional level.

And Wilke was one of six Central Ohio students to win the Regional Silver Key from the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. His portfolio of eight mixed media pieces with the theme "Growth/Change" took a full four months to complete as part of the senior portfolio class taught by Dan Gerdeman at Hilliard Davidson High School. "They've got an abstract quality," Wilke notes, "that leaves them open to interpretation."

His creative process for the portfolio pieces began with images he shot on film. In the darkroom, Wilke layered two negative strips and printed them together. He then used black and white acrylic paint to create images—trees, vines, roots and waterfalls—on the surface, making it nearly impossible to tell where the film image ends and his painting begins.

Last year, two prestigious requests were made of Hilliard Davidson's art department, and Wilke's work was chosen both times. The Columbus Museum of Art featured student art in *Bound*, its three-month exhibition in the community gallery; two of Wilke's pen and ink

drawings were on display. Then the White House tapped the school to design the 26 ornaments needed for the outdoor Ohio Christmas tree—one of them was Wilke's creation. "We did an out-and-back class trip to D.C. once the tree was up," Wilke says. "An exhausting day, but very exciting."

Like many successful art students, Wilke has been drawing for as long as he can remember. "I don't know where he gets it," says his mom, Lisa, an account director at BCD Travel. Not from his dad, either, she notes—Mike's an accountant at Honda. But five years of Saturday morning art classes at CCAD, starting in fourth grade, helped.

Three years of Thad Ricker's photography classes at Hilliard Davidson have been pivotal. Wilke has experimented





ZACH WILKE
at Griggs
Reservoir.

with landscape photography, Photoshop portraits and, lately, light painting. He explains, “I use a digital camera, tripod and a long exposure setting at night. Then I paint images with a flashlight or a string of Christmas lights. It’s cool.”

After working as a lifeguard at a pool this summer, Wilke will focus on photography and graphic design at an art college in the fall. CCAD, University of Cincinnati and Chicago’s Columbia College are top choices.

Gerdeman, who’s instructed Wilke in drawing, notes, “Zach’s applied his classroom knowledge in original directions, in exemplary fashion. He’s fused photography and drawing like a professional artist—you just don’t see that in high school. He’s got guts and charisma.”

FIRST, MASTERING ENGLISH; NOW, OFF TO THE IVY LEAGUE

She spoke no English when she moved here six years ago. A placement test administered by Columbus City Schools determined that Sakina Abu Boakye could continue in sixth grade, an academic year that had begun in a rural middle school on the outskirts of Milan, Italy. Her parents, originally from Ghana, were making a new life in the United States, searching for a better opportunity after leaving the intense racial discrimination they faced as African immigrants in Italy.

“It was a rough transition,” Boakye says quietly. “But I watched the Disney Channel to pick up English. After the first month, it came pretty easily.”

So easily, in fact, for this gifted student

that she aced the English portion of her ACTs with a perfect score. So easily, she's become Ivy League material and will attend Dartmouth in the fall.

But this Cinderella story has not been a perfect fairy tale for the 17-year-old, who's a slender, fashionably dressed, outgoing student quick to flash her broad smile. Her parents have divorced. Her mom, Amma, lives in Iowa; they speak frequently by phone. Ishamel, her dad, works two jobs, as a janitor and a caregiver for developmentally disabled patients. His work schedule precludes many of her after-school activities—she has no way to get home. Boakye misses her older sister, who stayed behind when the family moved here.

And yet, the girl who had never ridden a school bus nor had her own locker, who still answered the phone in Italian months after moving to the U.S., found her way. Securing a spot at Columbus Alternative High School, a magnet school for academically gifted students, she tackled tough courses and was a constant presence on the honor roll. In physics, "I didn't breeze through. I had to try really hard," she says, smiling. She took four AP classes and scored well enough in each to become an AP Scholar with Honor. In addition to Twi, a Ghanaian dialect, and Italian, she added Spanish to the list of languages she speaks. Studying government, her love for politics blossomed. She became editor of the school newspaper, president of the National Honor Society and founded a service club.

"Nobody's better suited to an Ivy League than Sakina," says Sebastian Restrepo, director of HighRise Academy, a mentoring program for low-income



SAKINA ABU BOAKYE at Columbus Alternative High School.

students that provides assistance with test prep, college applications and financial aid forms. "Sakina's extraordinary. She makes everyone around her better."

Boakye, who will be the first in her family to attend college, intends to pursue religious studies at Dartmouth, but envisions herself with a law degree someday. Winning "Outstanding Attorney" at the district and regional competitions of Ohio Mock Trial has given her greater appreciation for the skills needed to become a successful lawyer. "It taught me how to word my arguments," she says. "And be persuasive."

She views public speaking as her greatest achievement, especially in Mock Trial and the Poetry Out Loud program.

"We read and interpret poetry, then are judged on our performance," she explains and adds with a laugh, "I can now use all that English I had to learn."

SOCCER, THE STAGE AND SINGING (TO BEGIN WITH)

On opening night of the St. Francis DeSales High School production of *Cinderella*, things were going well for Eric Niehaus, who had a starring role as Prince Charming. Despite a bad case of jitters, he hit his marks, emoted like a pro and reached that high note with grace and power.

But nerves are a tricky thing. They can make you skip ahead—or back—in time. "I walked backstage and started changing clothes," Niehaus recalls with a shrug. Someone realized his mistake and



ERIC NIEHAUS onstage at St. Francis DeSales High School.



**ANASTASIA
MARIA
GORDEEVA**
at the Youth
Ballroom Dance
Academy.



questioned him. "By then I'm in my underwear," he says, his face flushing even now at the thought. "And I should be dancing with Cinderella in the big ballroom scene. I grab the jacket and goofy pants—throw them on—and go out, with no shoes, do the scene." Frosty looks from Cinderella,

silence from the cast when the curtain drops. Nevertheless, Niehaus won Best Actor for the production.

Recover and move on. He took the same approach with grades, after what he terms disappointing freshman and sophomore years. "You grow and mature," Niehaus, 18, muses. "Suddenly I realized I'd better make some changes if I wanted to go to a great college." Tied for fourth in his class, he's an honor roll student and National Honor Society member, a winner of the 2011 Wendy's High School Heisman Award for Academics, Athletics and Leadership. He also was his school's nominee for the U.S. Presidential Scholars Award. Nice comeback, huh? He's hoping

to attend the University of Virginia, Notre Dame or Wake Forest, double majoring in English and marketing.

What college admissions officers are most likely to be impressed by, however, is the range and depth of his extracurriculars. His talent and leadership span two distinctly different crowds: the "Gleeks"—chorus, an a cappella group called the Reverbs, drama club—and the soccer jocks. He's been captain and a four-year member of the team.

"From quiet artsy types to the alpha males who take charge of a room, I seemed to have earned their respect," Niehaus notes. Part of that, he admits, is the respect he affords others. He's unfailingly polite and leads by example: "Like in soccer—I'd work hard, be first back to the line when we'd run suicides."

His parents have something to do with that, Niehaus suggests. Robert, his dad, a purchasing manager at Abbott Labs, has a favorite saying, "Don't tell me, show me." Works great for grades and cleaning your room. And his mom, Joan, a coordinator at Caretenders, a home health agency, has taught him the value of volunteering.

Niehaus has accrued more than 375 hours of community service. On a weeklong mission trip with his church to Cranks Creek, Kentucky, a flood-ravaged pocket of Harlan County, Niehaus says his eyes were opened to overwhelming poverty. "I've volunteered in my own community, but they're well-off compared to this man and woman," Niehaus says. "We built an extra room for them, installed a window. They were so poor, helpless." He pauses. "I truly believe I am my brother's keeper."

FROM RUSSIA TO THE BALLROOM

You get 90 seconds. That's it. An excruciatingly brief slice of time to showcase months of hard work, with 11 other couples snapping, slinking, shimmying and swiveling hips on the same dance floor as you execute your best cha-cha. Switch to the samba and repeat.

The Ohio Star Ball, held at the Greater Columbus Convention Center each November, is recognized as one of the largest ballroom competitions in the world. Anastasia Maria Gordeeva, 19, has competed three times in Latin ballroom—the cha-cha, samba, rumba, *paso doble* and jive. Although the Reynoldsburg High School senior has yet to win or place, she relishes the experience.

"You grow and learn from competition," says Gordeeva, who has placed first in smaller contests. "The whole week before,

you go through the routines in your head. It's about muscle memory. The judges just stare with their clipboards. You have to smile, not be tense, not bump into anyone."

Gordeeva discovered dance relatively late, at 13. Her mom, Olga, says it was all about the dress. "Anastasia saw a red dress I had designed and her eyes got large like saucers," the professional seamstress and costume designer remembers. Gordeeva's coach and mentor, four-time U.S. national ballroom champion Bill Sparks, claims it began when she watched a young friend dance at the studio: "Anastasia was a bit tomboyish and thought it was not her thing, but her ability was apparent from the start."

The 4.0 valedictorian, who moved here from St. Petersburg, Russia, with her mom and brother in 1999, checks in at her high school campus for orchestra practice—she's a violinist. Then she travels to OSU for macroeconomics, political science and the like; she's amassed 35 college credit hours.

She also works two jobs. At Panera Bread, she's behind the counter serving up lattes and smoothies. At the Youth Ballroom Dancesport Academy, where she trains with Sparks, Gordeeva instructs youngsters in the finer points of ballroom dance: rhythm, foot placement and attitude.

"Make sure you get that full range of motion," she implores. Three small girls and a boy face the mirror, hands on hips, right feet perfectly pointed. The little blonde in the sparkly silver skirt briefly slumps. "Stay tall!" Gordeeva says firmly, then, smiling, continues. "Two, three, four and one, cha-cha-cha!"

Gordeeva readied six pairs, ages 6 to 13, for the Arnold Youth DanceSport Classic, held in early March. "Most got first place!" she exclaims, beaming. "But the preparations were grueling." At the same time, the three-time Arnold Classic dance competitor and her partner, Duy Phan, were polishing their own routines. For the competition, Gordeeva went heavy on the tanning mousse and slipped into a sizzling black and silver sequined dress designed by her mom.



SACHIN RUDRARAJU at his family's home in Powell.

"It was a rough transition," Boakye says quietly. "But I watched the Disney Channel to pick up English. After the first month, it came pretty easily."

Her plans to study international business at OSU in the fall have been shelved for a teaching and training opportunity at a large dance studio in Wisconsin. "Going professional opens many doors in dance," Gordeeva says.

With this job, explains Sparks, "She gains business skills, improves as a teacher and, most importantly, as a competitor."

He smiles, blue eyes twinkling. "She could be a champion."

RESEARCH AND RECYCLING

Reading Sachin Rudraraju's résumé (three-and-a-half pages, single-spaced) requires a dictionary and a strong dose of self-esteem. His research descriptions get technical, fast. Most *adults* will never come close to matching the breadth of his community service—it spans the globe—or accumulate a fraction of his awards, achievements and scholarships. Really, what were you doing at 17?

To understand, in part, Rudraraju's work ethic, you have to begin with his

parents. They came from rural southeast India and moved here when he was a tot, Dad, Bhaskara, the first in his family to obtain higher education, is a software architect at Nationwide Insurance. Padma, his mom, is a night-shift nurse at Nationwide Children's Hospital. They place a tremendous value on education.

Rudraraju is the first to tell you he values it, too. This TechColumbus 2011 High School Student of the Year and National Merit Finalist has taken 15 AP classes—heavy on the math and science—and six OSU courses. He's currently working with Dr. Mahmood Khan in OSU's Heart & Lung Research Institute, researching stem cell-based therapy for cardiomyoplasty.

When Rudraraju was just 14, he signed on for research as a student volunteer at Nationwide Children's Hospital. Dr. Peter White, director of the Biomedical Genomics Core at the NCH Research Institute, was so impressed with his ability he brought him back as a full-time research aide the next two summers. "We were comparing liver and muscle tissue samples of runt piglets with normal ones," Rudraraju explains. "We found that the runts developed more disorders—obesity, heart disease."

His AP chemistry teacher at Olentangy Liberty High School, Liz Golowenski, witnessed a transformation—from student to scientist—during that time. "Suddenly, being a doctor was a mission—he had found his goal," she says. Rudraraju wants





SOPHIE CHATAS,
with her French
horn, at
Columbus School
for Girls.



His summer is full: finishing a combat robot he's building for fun, representing Ohio at a five-week session of the National Youth Science Camp and taking a month-long family trip to India. "It's been six years," Rudraraju says. "We're excited to go back."

RUNNER, MUSICIAN, MATH WHIZ

Long before last fall's cross country season, Sophie Chatas met with her coach to figure out how to get from here to there. The doe-eyed, slender brunette wanted to transform herself from a strong runner to a great one. Chatas was hungry for one last trip to the state meet, after finishing back in the pack—107th—the previous year.

"Her drive was most impressive," says Lori Baldwin, head cross country coach at Columbus School for Girls. Chatas began training daily, even though she was still in the middle of a successful track season, one that would see an 11th-place finish at the state competition in the 1,600-meter run. She trained through the summer. Even changed her form: "We worked on her foot strike, got her arms relaxed,"

His talent and leadership span two distinctly different crowds: the "gleeks" and the soccer jocks.

recalls Baldwin. Forgoing soccer, Chatas trained aggressively deep into cross country season, sacrificing strong showings in her early races.

"Sophie was committed," says Baldwin.

She went out fast that November morning at the 2011 state championship. "But with 200 meters left, I was in 30th place," Chatas recalls. "I dug down. I began passing people—what a feeling!" She wound up 13th: a school record, a personal best and an All-Ohio designation (given to state meet qualifiers with a 3.5 GPA or better).

Determination like this is hard-wired into Chatas. The 18-year-old daughter of Geoff and Katie Chatas—he's OSU's chief financial officer, she's an ardent community volunteer—is not just a gifted athlete. An honor student and National Merit Finalist, Chatas has garnered awards for exceptional scores on the National Latin Exam and, as CSG's top math student her junior year, received the Honda-OSU Math Medal. She's interned with OSU's Reading Recovery Program, helping youngsters read. A staff member of the school newspaper and student council president, she's a visible leader with what she admits is infectious school spirit.

She's musical, too. A French horn player, Chatas has been a member of the Youth Philharmonic of Central Ohio for four years. In her final performance with them, she's happy to see Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* on the program, which, she says, "has a great horn part."

Digging in when things get tough, however, doesn't apply just to her running. "Math may've been easy in the beginning," Chatas confesses, "but I really have to work in BC Calculus this year. It's an AP class, and it's a challenge." Her AP success rate, however, is high. An AP Scholar with Distinction, she earned a 5 (the top score) on each of the five AP tests she's taken in a range of subjects, from biology to comparative government.

After a trip to London with her family this summer for the Olympics—they've got tickets for beach volleyball, diving and track events—and Greece to connect with distant relatives, Chatas will attend Williams College in Massachusetts. The Division III school has recruited her for track and cross country. Chatas hasn't committed to either yet. Or a major.

But witnessing Olympic track stars in competition—that might spark a whole new round of Chatas determination. ■

Rhonda Koulermos is a freelance writer.