

FEATURES

# Jacqueline Cordes

## NEIGHBORS

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**T**he term "renaissance woman" may be a cliché, but one is hard-pressed to find a different descriptor for Claremont teen Jacqueline Cordes.

The 17-year-old Vivian Webb junior has so many interests it's difficult to cover them all in one news feature.

She is a dedicated pianist who practices for hours a day learning complex pieces. She is a polyglot, who is conversational in Japanese, Chinese and American sign language. She wrote a screenplay, "The Silent War," which is tied to another pursuit, Japanese manga art.

She is on the basketball team and has a grey stripe belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. She is inspired by abandoned urban areas and spent last summer creating a photo essay of Ellis Island, and was also part of an all-female tech crew for Webb theater's production of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Jacqueline is a Claremont kid through and through. She went to Chaparral Elementary and El Roble Intermediate schools, but chose The Webb Schools over CHS because she could take classes in Chinese. She credits Claremont Educational Foundation's SLICE program for inspiring many of her pursuits, including computer programming and writing.

Last semester her class load reflected her diverse range of interests, including Chinese, crime and punishment, gothic and horror in literature and culture, astrophysics and honors pre-calculus.



**COURIER photo/Steven Felschundneff**  
Seventeen-year-old Jacqueline Cordes has a wide range of interests that include piano, Chinese language and technical theater. Last year, she combined two of her interests—creative writing and drawing—and won a sweepstakes award and a first-place ribbon at the Los Angeles County Fair.

"Some are hobbies, some go way beyond to where I am obsessed. Piano is definitely beyond a hobby," she said during a recent evening at the Claraboya home she shares with her parents Jay Cordes and Catherine Caporale. "I love learning pieces on my own."

Piano lessons began when she was nine, but about a year ago she became consumed with playing. During the summer, without the pressures of school, she practices up to eight hours a day on an electronic keyboard.

A self-described perfectionist, Jacqueline prefers to practice with headphones so no one can hear when she makes a mistake. She can relax and just play. She has mastered several tricky pieces such as Frederic Chopin's "Fantaisie Impromptu" and Ludwig van Beethoven's "Moonlight Serenade" by memorizing the work instead of reading music.

She has studied Chinese for three years at Webb and has been tutored in Japanese

by longtime Claremont resident Sumi Foley. She taught herself sign language by watching videos online. Jacqueline has even returned to Chaparral to teach languages.

"I like to try a wide variety of languages," she said. "That's why I appreciate learning something like Chinese and sign language, which are completely different."

Her goal is to learn Korean, Thai and Tibetan, but the languages she now knows have already expanded her world view.

"At this Chinese restaurant I was speaking with the server," Jacqueline said. "At the end of the meal she gave me a hug and I realized how through learning someone's language you really connect with them."

Jacqueline is a grapheme synesthete, meaning she sees specific colors when she thinks of symbols like letters and numbers. For example, the numeral one is yellow. Synaesthesia can help people with learning languages and memorization.

In fifth grade, Jacqueline's teacher held a competition to see who could memorize the highest number of digits of pi. She planned to master 40, but a boy in her class announced he would memorize 50—through one-upmanship. Jacqueline recited 80 digits and won the competition.

"Three years later during Halloween I was dressed as the Terminator and this kid asked, 'If you are the Terminator what is pi?' And I just recited my 80 digits of pi and he like physically jumped back. It was pretty great," she said.

Jacqueline won a sweepstakes award at the Los Angeles County Fair for her science fiction story "The Silent War," and a first-place ribbon for her manga drawing of a futuristic London that is the setting for the story. She worked for two years on the story, which centers around a female character and a guy she is interested in who is supernatural. Through the narrative she attempts to unravel what he is about.

Asked if languages inspired her interest in manga, she said it was the opposite.

"It's really the other way around. I originally got into the languages from watching anime. I also really like creative writing, so manga was a great way to combine art and writing."

Jacqueline loves urban exploration, called Urbex, and photography. She is drawn to things she fears, like giant machines or machines under water, but instead of avoiding them, she goes out looking for them.

"Urban photography falls under that because abandoned buildings can be really creepy, but I am drawn to that," she said.

Of all her pursuits, it is technical theater that rises to the level of a potential career. Jacqueline loves lighting design and will be traveling to Houston with her Webb tech buddies for the United States Institute for Theatre conference in April.

One wonders how Jacqueline finds time for all these interests. Well, she wrote a paper entitled "How to Outperform Your Skill Set" all about the shortcuts she has implemented to quickly master a new skill.

"It's about little life hacks to get around things you may have thought you could not get around," she said. ■