

No Class Rank System at Freeman Starting Next Year

Caitlyn Kennedy
Staff Writer

After the Class of 2026 graduates, Freeman High School, alongside other Henrico County Public Schools, will be discontinuing the class rank system. This means that class rank will no longer be visible to students or colleges, beginning with the Class of 2027 and following classes.

In a video posted a couple of years ago by Henrico County Public Schools, Liz Parker, the director of Student Health and Wellness, explained exactly what class rank was and the logistics of getting rid of it.

Mrs. Parker defines class rank as the “mathematical computation of how a student’s cumulative grade point average compares to other students in their graduating class at their school.” She compares it to grade point average, or GPA, which is weighted based on how well a student has done in their classes and the rigor of each one.

Mrs. Parker further explains how students in a class are “ranked numerically in ascending order according to their class rank.” In previous years, students have been able to see this ranking, and the colleges they apply to can view it as well. Now, this rank is being taken away, and the only visible numbers will be for number one and two, valedictorian and salutatorian.

When asked how he feels about class rank being taken away for the classes below him, senior James Gray, who is at the top of the Class of 2026, said, “I think it’s actually unfair.” James fur-

ther explained his thoughts on the importance of class rank for applying to colleges. “Class rank is an important distinction...I think that taking away that metric puts them at a disadvantage when applying to colleges,” he said.

Another question that has arisen from taking away from class rank is who it affects and how. “The people at the top will be more upset...and the people who are lower down will benefit more,” said James. This is because class rank’s purpose is to highlight the efforts and success of how different students have performed throughout their high school education. “I think that class rank just helps distinguish among the top in the class...it probably hurts the people who need it the most,” said James.

Junior Sam Whipple also agrees that removing class rank might hurt people who rank closer to the top. “The top ten people might feel cheated because they can’t put that on their resume that they were top 10 out of 500,” said Sam. He overall views it as “frustrating for people who are high up, but for the majority of the population it can be [considered] a good thing.”

There are some positives to how class rank benefits students with high GPAs who might have gotten lower grades in a class or two. “Even though they are 50th or something, they still have a high GPA.” Without class rank, the high GPA would be the only evident score for colleges to see,” said Sam.

Class rank is also viewed as a system that sparks competition among students. People who have high academic expectations want to be higher up, which can

put them against others who feel the same way. “[Class rank] sets people against each other and makes you compare yourself,” said Katy Rilee, a junior at Freeman. In her opinion, getting rid of it “won’t feel as much of a competition, which will benefit relationships among grades.”

Sam has similar thoughts and thinks eliminating class rank will change the dynamics between students. “People won’t be competing against all of their classmates,” said Sam.

James disagrees with this and doesn’t see class rank as an incentive to competition. “I don’t think that class rank invites a destructive competition between students,” said James. Instead, he sees class rank as an individual motivator. “It’s just trying to be the best you can, and GPA entices that.”

Katy sees class rank as an unfit portrayal of a student’s efforts. “People have other skills than just their specific classes,”

said Katy. She thinks it’s an unfair reflection of where students excel. “It doesn’t fully give an image of who you are as a student. People have different things that they’re good at,” said Katy.

On the other hand, people see GPA as a very similar factor to overall grades and rigor, especially for colleges to view. Mrs. Parker informs in her video that “60% of admission officers reported that class rank is of ‘limited’ or of ‘no importance.’”

Katy agrees with this and thinks there are other options over class rank. “I think there are ways colleges can figure out where they are lined up compared to other students...with their GPA,” said Katy.

Sam had a similar viewpoint, explaining how the removal of class rank forces colleges to look at other factors. “They’ll have to look at GPA instead of class rank, which might be more or less reflective,” he said.

James has a different perspective and thinks any description of a student’s achievements is beneficial. “Every different metric you can give a college helps,” he said. “Taking that metric away from that college definitely will hurt.”

In general, getting rid of class rank is seen as a benefit towards reducing stress for students. “It just creates disappointment or stress to be better than someone else,” said Katy. “Taking away class rank would remove that feeling.”

Sam agrees with this stress factor as well. He thinks that people who are trying to achieve a higher rank would feel greater pressure to perform. “Now that it’s gone, it would take away that stress,” said Sam.

Overall, people have differing perspectives and viewpoints on the positives and negatives of class rank. As Freeman’s Class of 2027 applies to colleges, the benefits and drawbacks will become apparent.



PHOTO: GOOGLE

Grades shown on report card.

United States Captures Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro

Olive Schreher
Features Editor

On Saturday, Jan. 3, 2026, Nicolás Maduro, the Head of State of Venezuela, and his wife, Cilia Flores, were detained in Fort Tiuna, Caracas, by United States special forces. The “stunning” capture was part of a joint military and law enforcement operation code-named Operation Absolute Resolve carried out by Delta Force, the US Army’s highly secretive, “tier one” special mission unit.

In conjunction with the raid, over 100 people were killed, according to Diosdado Cabello, Venezuela’s interior minister. Although the Venezuelan government has not reported an official number, officials in Venezuela stated that much of Maduro’s security personnel were killed “in cold-blood,” according to Reuters. In addition to this, the army has reported 23 dead, and Cuba has reported 32

members of its military and intelligence services dead in Venezuela.

Upon the raid, Maduro and Flores were taken to New York City, where they both pleaded not guilty to all charges, including narcoterrorism and cocaine importation. “I am innocent. I am not guilty. I am a decent man. I am still president of my country,” said Maduro, in Manhattan Federal Court. They are currently being held at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn with no bail, awaiting Maduro’s next court appearance, scheduled for March 2026.

Venezuela’s future is uncertain. Reuters News said “the capture of him [Maduro] rattled world leaders and left officials in Caracas scrambling to regroup.” Their Supreme Court directed Vice President Delcy Rodríguez to assume the duties and powers of the acting president.

On the other hand, María Co-

rina Machado, opposition leader, has called for an opposition candidate to assume power. During his press conference on Jan. 3, 2026, President Trump said, “We are going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper, and judicious transition.” He also mentioned U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth would oversee the country. When asked about it, Rubio insinuated that they were going to force Venezuela to do what they want using economic pressure.

Delacy Rodríguez’s obtaining power raises many questions about the effectiveness of the mission as well as the motive. Benjamin Fabian, a government teacher at Freeman, said it’s hard to say what’s in the cards for the people of Venezuela, “you have, by most accounts, a fairly corrupt regime there in Venezuela, and the US action really only took out...one part

of that regime, so the whole rest is still in place,” said Mr. Fabian. Despite this, Venezuelans across the US and Venezuela have come together and rejoiced in the fall of Maduro. “It was heartening to see Venezuelan people, both in Venezuela and around the world, cheering the downfall of Maduro... that says a lot about who he was,” he said. “But as for what comes next, there are a lot of things in motion right now, and so it’s hard to say where all this is gonna land.”

As far as Maduro’s future goes, President Trump is not the only president to have wanted the removal of this “left-leaning, yet autocratic, and at times violent regime (CNN).” According to CNN, successive White Houses have expressed this, whether it be to gain access to their oil, obtain regional alignment, or, in this case, fight drug trafficking. Prior to this, Maduro was indicted in 2020 under the Biden Administration for charges including narco-terrorism, conspiracy to commit narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering, and corruption. In addition, federal prosecutors have allegedly high conviction rates, exceeding somewhere between 90 and 95 percent.

The overall foreignness of the event has proven to overshadow the lives lost. This points to what Mr. Fabian said is a “very big problem that we have,” in that we take American deaths more seriously than foreign deaths. “We have a tendency to see the number of people killed in foreign actions as an abstraction,” he said. Since they are not Americans, it is simple to just brush them aside as just numbers, but it is essential to remember that those were real people who lost their lives. This thought raises questions about the morality of the US’s actions:

“Clearly, you’re not always going to be able to run operations where there’s no collateral damage, but... if 80 people are killed so that you can arrest two people, I think that that should generate some questions,” he said.

In turn, this raises questions about US intervention in foreign affairs. In a study conducted by AP News, it was found that 58% of US adults believe President Trump has overstepped on military interventions abroad, despite this, his “decisive, sudden, and perhaps reckless (CNN)” actions to pursue his “aggressive” foreign policy do not seem to be easing up, as President Trump has recently mentioned his desire to exert control over Venezuelan oil and take control of Greenland. While the study reports a strong amount of people in favor of the intervention in Venezuela to stop illegal drugs from coming into the United States, fewer agree that it is good for either the U.S. national security or the economy.

People of the U.S. strive to uphold the values in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. “It’s important to support movements that are in line with American values of freedom, justice, and equality,” said Mr. Fabian, but “it’s important for us to support them from afar.” The value people see in their governments is the result of those people building it themselves. When a foreign hand is too heavily involved, that country did not build its own nation, and therefore cannot fully value it. Mr. Fabian said, “What helps people really value governments in their own country is when that government is of their people, and is built by their people. When they don’t build it, it becomes a foreign thing as opposed to a homegrown movement.”

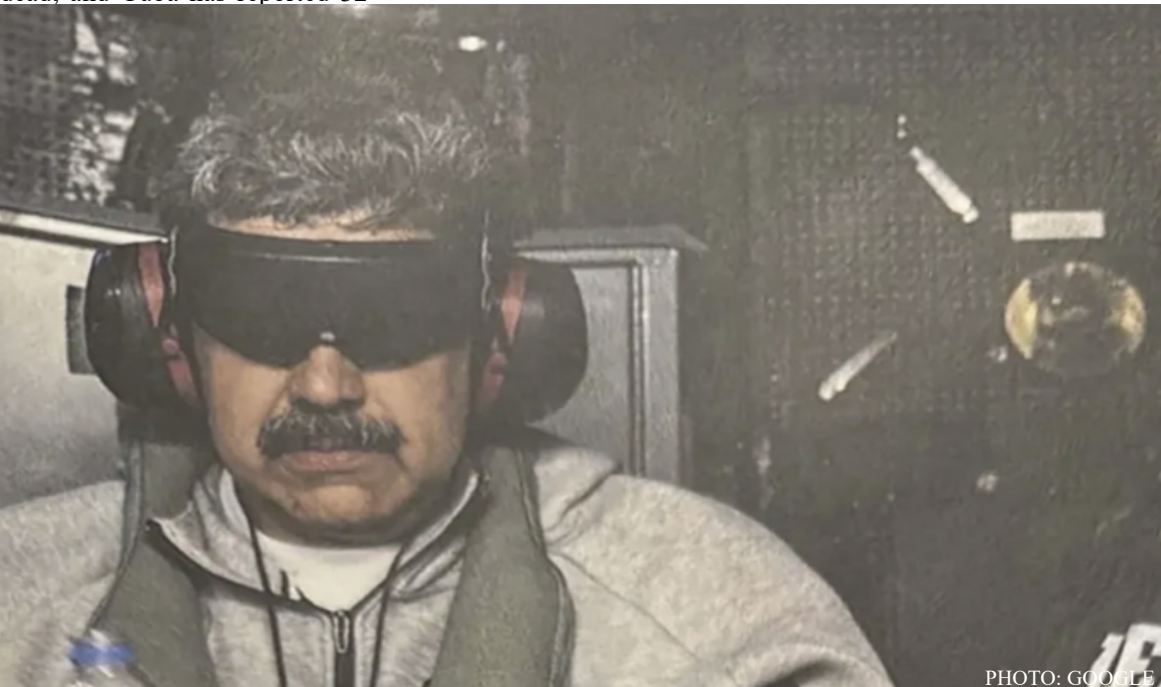


PHOTO: GOOGLE

Nicolás Maduro, the Head of State of Venezuela

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The Legacy and Death of A Beloved Director: Rob Reiner

Rowan Kelley
Staff Writer

Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025, marks a major and saddening loss for the film industry. The beloved actor, activist, and director, Rob Reiner, as well as his wife, were both found dead in their Los Angeles home in the early hours of the morning. The death of this couple was declared to be a homicide, with the murder suspect being their middle child, Nick Reiner. The 32-year-old later stood before the court on Wednesday, three days after Michelle and Rob were found dead, where he was charged with fatally stabbing his parents. Their other two children, Romy and Jake, have already issued statements to the press expressing the pain the family is currently experiencing.

Romy was the one to find her parents in their L.A. home, as she apparently lived across the street from them. Reportedly, from a CNN article titled "What We Know About the Hours Before and After Rob and Michele Reiner's Deaths" by Chelsea Bailey, she went to check on her parents around three in the afternoon, where she stumbled upon their bodies and fled the scene. The Los Angeles Police Department showed up at the scene 40 minutes later after a distressing call was received from a friend of Romy's. The two siblings have asked for well-deserved privacy on this family matter and have given a handful of quotes out, requesting that this event remain confidential to them. The case in itself is still selectively public, with authorities remaining

quiet on the aspects of the murder; however, it is also widely known that Nick was staying in a guest house on his parents' property before the couple was discovered.

The death of Rob Reiner and his wife is an undeniable grievance that Hollywood is currently facing. Reiner, from a young age, began his acting career with the role of Meathead in "All in the Family," a TV show that ran from 1971 to 1978. Reiner was not only an actor but also directed countless movies. Many comment on the humanity found in his movies, not just within hidden messages, but in a way that the people on screen didn't seem that far off from the person sitting on the other side. "[J]ust based on his movies, you can see this commonality again, concerns of friendship and fairness and justice," Mr. Abril, an English teacher at Freeman, said. A multitude of his movies, including "A Few Good Men," "Ghost of Mississippi," and "Stand By Me," all feature central themes that pop up throughout the films. "[They] have these recurring themes, I think, that endure and are really optimistic about people, which I remember when I look back at his filmography," said Mr. Abril.

The films not only serve as a representation of togetherness but also bring a sense of empathy that can be felt by many. "He was a filmmaker who knew how to make movies that would be people's favorite movies, [they] somehow tapped into something human in a way, thematically," Ms. Grimesey, also a Freeman English teacher, said. Reiner's legacy is not only prominent in Hollywood, but it has touched the lives of many, even



Director Rob Reiner and cast

those here at Freeman. "He had his finger on the pulse of something that made people want to go back to him," she said. Rob Reiner wasn't just the director of these movies; he brought life to each set he walked into. "The Princess Bride" and "When Harry Met Sally" are more well-known movies directed by him, but they showcase his ability to jump between romcoms, action, and dramas. "He just made very human people, and he made stories that you felt kind of comfortable living in for the time that you were there," Ms. Grimesey said.

Reiner, among his many other hobbies, was also an activist and a very present part of the Democratic party. Unfortunately, when it comes to his legacy, the press and their ability to hold true to the family's privacy request are nonexistent. His legacy in his films has a lasting impact on the community, but runs the risk of being weaponized by several journalists. "[U]nfortunately, some of it has and will be twisted. I don't think that will be the longevity of his legacy... But it is hard to see the narrative kind of weaponized and twisted for other reasons, when at the end of the day, it's just a tragedy," Ms. Grimesey said. Reiner's legacy does not de-

serve manipulation, as his movies already gave so much for so many.

Numerous articles are focusing on the events leading up to the death of Michelle and Rob, as well as highlighting the addiction Nick Reiner faced before he committed homicide. "I've read about what happened before at the Conan O'Brien party, which makes me a little uncomfortable," Mr. Abril said. Many outside sources comment on the image of Nick Reiner at a Christmas party the day before the murder, all of which revolves around hearsay. The discussion of what is appropriate for the news to publish arose as some are handling it differently, beyond just exploitation. "But in the press, I've seen people remembering him [with] memorials and eulogies that were very moving," he said. Ms. Grimesey agreed with the press taking it too far by resorting to Nick's addiction as the root cause of the murder. "It's easy to make drama out of it, but at the end of the day, it was a very sick young man who took it out on people who were trying to take care of him. And I don't think that story is hard to wrap your mind around," she said.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that the family is given the privacy they have asked for. The shock of Mi-

chelle and Rob's murder was not something the world was expecting to see splashed on the headlines of the biggest news sources, but it is something that has the potential to spread awareness in the future. "It's not a news line I expected to get in the New York Times, breaking news headline," Ms. Grimesey said. The death of this storyteller has injured the hearts of many. The shock behind this homicide of people of that status could be described as jarring.

Regardless, the press may be ignorant about what this event could provide for the future. "[I]f we were really looking at this as an opportunity to look at mental illness and the system, then I hope we don't forget about it," Mr. Abril said. Overall, the family is waiting for the final sentence of Nick Reiner as the case is being closely monitored. There is hope that the community can look back on the many movies Rob Reiner directed that created a space where you could relate, but also be empowered by the characters on screen. "I think he's very symbolic of action and getting us out there and doing things," Mr. Abril said. It is with a heavy heart that the film, political, and acting industry must lower its head in honor of who Rob Reiner was.

Freeman's First Annual Mrs. Curry Semi-Formal

Maryam Vohra
Editor-in-Chief
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On Saturday, Jan. 31, 2026, Freeman High School is set to host its first annual Curry Semi-Formal, a schoolwide dance in honor of Lara Teague Curry, a former history teacher who passed away unexpectedly in October 2022. All proceeds from the event will be donated to the Lara Teague Curry Memorial Scholarship Fund, which supports Freeman students continuing their education.

The Curry Semi-Formal was chosen as the Class of 2026's senior gift, an idea the officers have been working towards for nearly a year. "Every year the senior class [is expected to] give a gift to the school. We [didn't] want to donate a random object that doesn't necessarily have any meaning to the class," said senior class president Aaron Shook. "We thought about how we could leave an impact on the Freeman family, and the best way we thought to do that is if [we honored] Mrs. Curry."

In addition to leaving a legacy behind, the class officers wanted a gift that could raise significant funds for the scholarship. "Thousands of dollars are hard to raise [through] small fundraisers," said Maddie Thornton, the senior class secretary. "By [choosing] something that applies to the entire school, we [would be able] raise the most money [for her fund]." Additionally, the officers wanted to ensure that they chose something that Freeman students would enjoy attending. "We knew that dances were fun, [and] brought everybody together, so it would be something that appeals to the student body," said senior class treasurer Kate Tittermary.

Planning the event proved to be a lengthy and challenging process. Kate originally proposed the idea near the end of their junior year, and since then, the class officers have been working to make it a reality. "We didn't think that it would be able to happen," said Kate. But eventually they "talked to the whole SCA team, met with the [Teague-Curry family], and got a bunch of [teachers to help] and sponsors." Support also came from students who had been taught by Mrs. Curry. "[We] talked to [several] people from the past senior classes who had Mrs. Curry before she passed, and they all loved the idea that we were trying to do something meaningful to the community," said Aaron. One of the class officers' biggest concerns was securing enough teacher volunteers to supervise the event. Administrators were initially hesitant, but the officers gained support by personally reaching out to teachers. "We [went] around classrooms, [asking] teachers we thought would be willing or could volunteer," Maddie said. "We got an overwhelming number of [teachers who said] yes." The Teague-Curry family was involved in the planning process and will attend the dance. At 8:15 p.m., Mrs. Curry's parents will deliver a brief statement detailing the impact Mrs. Curry had on students, teachers, and her community. "[They] were overwhelmed by our generosity and kindness," said Maddie. "They couldn't believe that we would do something like this; they thought it was amazing."

Despite the challenges, the class officers found motivation through Mrs. Curry's influence. "One of the biggest things is that Mrs. Curry had such

an impact on freshmen coming into Freeman. She has always been everybody's favorite teacher," said Kate. "She's someone who was always there for you." The class officers hope the Curry Semi-Formal will leave a lasting impact on the Freeman family and reflect school values. "I think it's something that helps us give back to the community. We [always] talk about the Freeman family and what it means to be a Maverick," said Aaron. "In terms of school spirit and events, we want to bring this to the Freeman family to exude that belief."

Looking beyond this year, the Class of 2026 hopes the Curry Semi-Formal will continue in the coming years and become a Freeman tradition. "We hope [future classes] continue the dance year after year and give back to the community through the scholarship fund," said Kate. "We're hoping that year by year, more people start going, [raising] more funds, expanding the [Curry Foundation]."

The officers also addressed criticism from some students who had made jokes about the dance or questioned its purpose. "They should definitely look more into it," said Kate. "Every single ticket sale goes towards the scholarship fund, and the whole point of it is to give back." Ultimately, the Curry Semi-Formal is about strengthening the Freeman community. "Regardless of whether or not you think that dance is an important issue, the at-large message is that community matters," said Aaron. "So if you're not willing to stand up for the community, what are you willing to stand up for?" The Curry Semi-Formal is open to all grade levels and will follow a dress code similar to Homecoming, including short dresses and suits. Tickets are priced at \$15, with all profits benefiting the Lara Teague Curry Memorial Scholarship Fund. Following the week of cancelled school, all weekend activities for Jan. 31, 2026, and Feb. 1, 2026, were cancelled, taking the Curry Semi-Formal with it. The administrators and class officers are working to reschedule the dance.

Flu and Seasonal Illnesses Increase in Virginia

Tylerson Tweardy
A&E Editor
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As winter continues and temperatures fluctuate between cold mornings and warmer afternoons, student illnesses have become more noticeable throughout Freeman. School health officials and attendance staff report an increase in students experiencing flu-like symptoms, stomach issues, and upper respiratory illnesses.

School Nurse Jennifer Roderick said the clinic has seen many students come in feeling generally unwell. "Stomach pain, headache, and a general feeling of 'I just feel sick. My body hurts,'" Ms. Roderick said.

According to Ms. Roderick, these symptoms are widespread and not limited to one grade level. Attendance Secretary Susan Lafoon has also noticed an increase in illness-related absences. "There has been an increase from earlier in the year," Mrs. Lafoon said.

While concerns about flu and COVID remain, Ms. Roderick said many current symptoms are connected to seasonal weather changes. "As it gets warm outside and then cold, and then cold and then warm, we're seeing a lot of upper respiratory symptoms," she said. "That includes congestion, runny noses, and sore or red throats."

Ms. Roderick said that although many students experienced the flu over winter break, the school has not seen a major spike in flu cases

since classes resumed. "Luckily, knock on wood, we haven't seen a ton of flu here," she said.

The school follows specific guidelines to determine when a student should be sent home due to illness. Ms. Roderick said students are sent home if they are actively vomiting, have vomited within the past 24 hours, have active diarrhea, or have a fever (defined as a temperature over 99.0 degrees). Other symptoms, such as severe pain, are evaluated case by case. Students sent home are generally required to stay home for at least 24 hours before returning.

Freeman is taking many precautions as well. "The school is cleaned every night, and we have wonderful custodians who do that for us," Ms. Roderick said. Parents are also reminded to keep students home if they experience vomiting, diarrhea, or fever within a 24-hour period. Mrs. Lafoon added that hand sanitizers and masks are available throughout the building.

Despite these efforts, both staff members acknowledged that some students still come to school while feeling sick, often because of academic pressure. "It depends on how they feel and their course load," Ms. Roderick said. "Some students come because they need to get something done, turn in homework, or attend a specific class." Mrs. Lafoon shared a similar observation: "The majority are staying home, but some do come to school sick because they don't want to miss a class or they have a test."



Medical Stethoscope

PHOTO: GOOGLE IMAGES

Stranger Things Season 5



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Richmond City Cone Parade



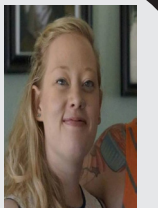
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New Stranger Things Season 5 Review

Vrusha Pramod
Online Editor-in-Chief and
Centerspread Editor

I honestly can't believe it's all over. I can still remember the very first day I came home after school and started scrolling through Netflix for something quick to watch while eating my after-school snack. I've always been a sucker for all things mysterious and paranormal, so seeing the name of this show, I thought it could be an interesting watch. I remember thinking that since the first episode was released earlier that day, I would watch that and never have to give it a second thought ever again. Yet when I was finished with the first episode, I found myself stuck in my seat, overwhelmed with more emotions than I had ever imagined.

With almost a decade in the making, Stranger Things is quite the modern phenomenon. Kids our age have grown up with the cast of this show, and realizing that it was going to end felt like a knife to the heart. Sure, we'd see them again in interviews and whatnot, but this was going to be the last time we would see them on-screen all together. The show's writing and direction, at least in the first three seasons, were stellar. It followed through with a consistent quality and entertainment; however, I'll admit, the fourth season had its dull moments, which I have to attribute to Netflix's increasing demands from its producers. Regardless, I was super hyped for this final season, but would Netflix deliver a powerful finale that was as good as its first two seasons, or would it succumb to its nasty capitalistic needs?

While the season does tend to meander in its episodes, there are still specific notable moments that make it worth sticking through once the different plot lines start to fall into place. We finally get to see Sadie Sink's Max do something other than lie in a coma. Even though she is still trapped in a world of Vecna's making, she refuses to accept her fate. I love her character, and it was so satisfying to see her regain some agency after everything she has been through. That same stretch of episodes also gives us some of the season's strongest emotional dynamics. Watching Will and Robin bond over their shared struggles with their sexualities and their need to feel accepted was genuinely touching. Noah Schnapp and Maya Hawke once again prove why they are two of the show's most valuable players, especially when they share the screen. For me, though, the standout moment was finally seeing Will get his long-awaited chance to do something meaningful after embracing this side of himself. After years of watching him exist mainly as Vecna's puppet, seeing him tap into his connection with the Hive Mind and using it to help save his friends felt like the character arc that was long overdue for him. That same episode also delivered one of the biggest surprises of the season in Karen Wheeler. I don't think any of us expected Karen, who had been completely unaware of the paranormal chaos in Hawkins prior to this season, to suddenly become one of the biggest badasses. Her "mama bear" moment defending Holly with a glass shard was pretty cool, but to

me, it was her strategic play with the explosive air tanks in the hospital that turned her into a legend. It was a brilliant reminder that the grit of Hawkins runs through the entire Walk Em' Down Wheeler's family, and not just the kids. My final favorite moments of the season, though, came from Lucas and Max and from Dustin's final tribute to Eddie. Waiting for Max to wake up from her coma was agonizing, so when she finally opened her eyes, I just knew we were in for an emotional wreck. Lucas and Max's reunion was quiet and intimate compared to the chaos surrounding them. Furthermore, watching Lucas carry Max through the hospital while being chased by demo-dogs stands out as one of the season's most notable moments, as it made Lucas an even more lovable and emotionally grounded character. Similarly, Dustin wearing the "Hellfire Lives" shirt at graduation was the perfect tribute to Eddie. Being so much older now than when I started, I can confidently say that there's still so much I love about this series, but I will say the finale was a let-down. It felt as if the first three episodes were basically just three hours of setup. I couldn't shake the feeling that much of the action could have been compressed into one or two episodes without really missing all that much. Don't get me wrong; it was a lot of fun to see most of the gang back together; however, there were too many times during the first few episodes where I found myself wondering when Stranger Things was actually going to get into the heart of the storyline. Even a series as



Season 5, Netflix Stranger Things cover.

well-written and as well-acted as this one, it can only spin its wheels for so long before even the most faithful viewer and fan starts to lose patience with it all. After the finale was released, a surprisingly large online movement at the time called #ConformityGate appeared amongst fans. "Conformity" seems to reference the idea that the Stranger Things ending we got was "safe" without many twists or turns, and hard questions were left "up to interpretation" by viewers. The idea here, though there are some branching spin-offs from the original concept, is fundamentally that the final two episodes of the series are a hallucination or manipulation by Vecna. Some obvious mishaps or questions left unanswered that were spotted in the show include: a

color change of a dial in a scene, characters' haircuts and stances resembling Henry Creel's, and D&D dice shown that add up to 43, referencing a 43rd episode of the show. Some theories also extended outside of the show; however, it is unfortunate to understand that one of the biggest streaming services in the world would try to pull some sort of "it was all a dream" ending here to rewrite its finale. The two-hour Stranger Things finale was on New Year's Eve and had a theatrical release across hundreds of theaters. I myself saw the finale in theatres and was a victim of the #ConformityGate theories; however, after the realization that there would be no secret episode on January 7 hit me, I turned back to appreciating the parts of the show that I knew were real.



PHOTO: NETFLIX

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For You Pages to Sold Out Shelves: The Five Below Surprise Dumpling

Saanvi Gourishetty
News Editor

What started as a few random videos on my TikTok "For You Page" of people unboxing cute dumpling toys quickly turned into something bigger. I didn't think much of it until they kept showing up, more videos, reactions, and people discussing how hard these toys were to find on countless Reddit chains. When looking online at all the people selling this toy, I was surprised to find that they are typically sold out everywhere across several locations. This is shocking considering how often they are restocking this product due to its popularity. These squishy dumpling surprise toys from Five Below have become some of the biggest toy trends of the year. These toys aren't just stress toys; they are collectible and surprisingly hard to find, as they have taken over social media unexpectedly. With people filming blind unboxings, sharing the rankings of their favorites, and even reselling the more rare ones for over \$100, it is safe to say that they have significantly grown in popularity. The biggest appeal of the dumplings, based on what I have seen, seems to be the mystery aspect of them. You don't know which one you are going to get until you open the package, adding to the fun of the toy overall. Some variations of this specific toy have special designs, hermes, or features, making finding a rare or special one even more exciting. The Five-Below squishy dumpling relates to the same concept of blind boxes or mystery bags that have been around for years and several generations of childhoods. But social media platforms like TikTok have given them a new life through virality. The collectability and nostalgia that these toys bring seem to be a driving factor in this rise in popularity. These toys aren't just popular among younger children. In fact, most of the people that I have seen buying and posting about them are people in their teens

or even younger adults. When asking my own friends about whether they think their popularity is justified, a lot of their answers encompassed the same idea: the experience of a surprise toy is a huge part of the appeal. While I haven't personally purchased one yet, I have certainly thought about it after watching countless videos of the excitement behind them. I've walked past surprise toys before and not given them a second thought, but seeing how many people have purchased them, it is certainly tempting. But do I think the hype is justified? In some ways, yes. The product is smartly designed, it's cute, collectible, and affordable enough for a toy. At the same time, I don't expect this trend to stick around for any longer than various other trends that seem to burn out after a peak in popularity. I think that as soon as a shiny new toy that seems more appealing is introduced on social media, these toy dumplings will get overlooked. However, that is just how virality works, and I would expect nothing less for this toy.

In my opinion, one part of this trend that has gotten particularly intense is the resale market for these five-dollar toys. Once people realized that certain rare dumplings were harder to find, they began reselling the ones they got on sites like Mercari and eBay. Many of them are listed for more than 20 times their original value or even more. This further connected the trend to the popularity of the TY Beanie Baby toys that are, to this day, being resold for price points way above their original price. While I can see how this can be a good business for some, it can also take the fun out of the surprise factor and make it seem more like pressure than an experience.

At the end of the day, I can see how the Five Below dumpling toys are just another example of how fast a trend can spread with the help of social media. They are simple, fun, and seem to have an appealing sense of mystery. I understand why people love them, and the lightheartedness it brings to several age groups makes me love them more, even if I don't personally own one.



PHOTO: AMAZON

Purple and green surprise dumplings

Swipe or Write?

Nikki Rajan
Editor-in-Chief

2025 came with an influx of older trends. From the resurfacing of Y2K to fun patterns like polka dots, we see a lot of moments from the past resurfacing. Along with those comes the resurgence of physical media, including magazines, newspapers, and vinyl.

In 2026, I have already seen a lot of people online who made a resolution to spend more time offline. And honestly, as I prepare to go to college next year, I feel the need to branch out and become more detached from my phone as well.

There are a few movements that have been encouraging this mindset: first, the bookstore boom. Bookstores are seeing an increase in customer bases and income as more people are getting invested in literature. I think it is pretty cool to see older hobbies coming back. It's easy to get used to the idea of connecting reading to school, but it can actually be enjoyable when you find a genre or niche that really interests you. Some people love science fiction and the imaginative universe, and others, like me, are really into realistic fiction.

Another movement is geared more towards the environmental and ethical standpoint. A lot of people are feeling the need to use the internet less because of the heavy impact it has on the environment. With inventions like artificial intelligence

(AI) search engines, the amount of greenhouse gas emissions has been on the rise. So, I think it's pretty cool that people are trying to build personal habits while also helping the environment.

Helping the environment is not the only thing; people can support artists offline when it comes to music! I love seeing people pick up records or CDs, especially when it comes to music from a few decades ago. Not to mention, the digital and vintage cameras are so fun to experiment with. Sometimes they're even better than the regular iPhones we use. I really see this appealing to our generation because I personally love nostalgic items and experiences.

A really interesting word for this movement is called "digital minimalism," which means that people are spending less time online to get more connected with the present. Along with the trends already happening, there are definitely a few more things that I could see becoming popular in 2026.

I might be biased, but I do see more people reading magazines and newspapers this year. A big part of nostalgia from the past decades has been pop culture, and magazines usually cover those moments. I think more people may be reading those in place of their screens.

Another reason why this may be happening is that we all might be tired of the constant screen-watching and scrolling every day. The shift to physical media might be a way to take your mind off

things that social media elevates. We have always been used to renting things; whether that be your subscriptions on Netflix or Hulu, or even social media platforms. I love watching popular TV shows online, but I think people might want to go back to actually owning and collecting their own entertainment, especially as subscription costs continue to rise.

Even though I'm mentioning all of these trends from the past, I really do think that this is a comeback rather than a re-wind. We have lived with social media for almost a decade now, and even we can get bored with it. This just might be another movement in 2026 that will see a resurgence in hobbies off the phone.

Even if those hobbies don't include physical media, there are a lot of things that I have been trying to do to stay off my phone more. For example, I've been seeing a lot of people get more invested in creative activities like journaling.

One of my favorite reasons that people are starting to invest their time in physical media is because of nostalgia and tangibility. Even though it really wasn't that long ago, I think it's so cool to look at things from the past and experience them as other generations have before us.

Physical media isn't the only thing I think 2026 will bring. There is a huge online movement calling 2026 the new 2016. I think we'll be seeing a lot more bold colors and aesthetics from the past decade coming back throughout the year. I love using the older

Physical Media of 2026

Newspapers & Magazines



CDs



DVDs

Vinyl Records



Vintage Cameras

GRAPHIC: AVA HARRISON

filters on social media or seeing old trends like the viral Starbucks frappuccinos coming back already.

I can definitely see influencers and people online advocating for a more authentic, fun, and less polished lifestyle. Most people online feel like 2016 was when people were less performative, and social media overall was a lot lighter. I personally hope we see a shift in having more spontaneity and fun online.

Style-wise, I also think we are starting to embrace older styles. I have already seen a lot of people embracing vintage trends and lay-

ering online, especially with statement pieces like chunky jewelry or scarf styling. This style strikes me as classy while still allowing for personality. With accessories, I'm predicting that we will most likely see more statement belts, brooches, and printed bags that carry more personal style choices.

It is especially interesting to see trends go back in time as technology and AI continues to advance. I think that's why the focus is going to be more on building communities and being authentic online.

For now, I can't wait to see what trends actually stick this year!

Unmasking Valentines Day

Nina Henley

Online Editor-in-Chief and
Centerspread Editor

During the 1500s, King Henry VII of England named February 14th an official holiday. Since then, it has traveled from England and through American history, and while it is not a national holiday for us, it has blended into America's culture as a day of celebration and companionship towards the people you love. Now, annually on the 14th of February, restaurants are filled, chocolate and flowers are sold out, and couples are seen together everywhere. While the idea of it sounds refreshing and thoughtful, looking at the amount of money the day itself makes for companies has to make one wonder: Is Valentine's Day truly romantic and good for relationships, or just a form of corporate manipulation? On one side, Valentine's Day can be viewed as a positive celebration that goes beyond routine expressions of love. It can give people a reason to be emotionally expressive without embarrassment, allowing partners to fully communicate feelings that may otherwise go unspoken. The day can also serve as a reset for relationships, prompting reflection on emotional needs, communication, and appreciation. For some couples, it may even spark creativity through planning surprises, gifting personal gifts, or revisiting meaningful memories together. Valentine's Day can strengthen bonds by creating traditions unique to each couple, like going to the same restaurant every year, or watching a specific movie that reminds them of the start of their relationship. It may

also bring excitement through anticipation, turning an ordinary time of year into something memorable. Additionally, the celebration can extend beyond romantic partners. Valentine's Day is about love, and that extends beyond romance. The day is truly about encouraging acts of kindness, self-love, and gratitude, even if it's just towards friends and loved ones. This can reinforce the idea that love in all its forms deserves recognition and celebration. As relationships become just another part of your life, it gets easy to forget how to prioritize your partner. By having February 14th, it allows for a day to commemorate you and the love you have for those close to you. Valentine's Day has sparked many scientists to look into the health benefits of love and affection. According to UAB Medicine, Valentine's Day is a reminder of how certain expressions of love can benefit the body and improve health factors, such as reducing the risk of heart disease. Their research also suggests that hugging, touching, kissing, and sexual activity boost levels of oxytocin, a hormone that releases feelings of relaxation and calmness. Researchers believe that this is directly linked to helping many heart-related conditions by having the ability to lower blood pressure and heart rate, lower levels of cortisol, reduce inflammation in heart tissue, and possibly repair cells in the heart muscle. This shows how important love can be for both your relationships and your health. While the positive factors are relevant, the increasing pressure of Valentine's Day takes away its true meaning. The day itself is a time to celebrate your love, not save it. The practice and act of loving should extend further than a sin-



Vogue predictions

PHOTO: NIKKI RAJAN

gular day. By dedicating a day to love, people may believe that the small acts, such as giving flowers, chocolates, and having date nights, are limited to special occasions such as Valentine's Day, when in reality, healthy relationships don't

need a Valentine's Day to express their love. Social media has also become a significant factor that heightens the expectations of the day. The unrealistic expectations stem from the rose-petaled view of Instagram, TikTok, and even Facebook posts, where the lives of people are captured in only the best light. Mental health can be chipped away, leaving the person scrolling on these platforms to feel disappointed and inadequate. Additionally, Valentine's Day has become a target for several big corporate marketing schemes. With the rise of social media and society's expectations, the money spent on Valentine's Day is increasing and taking away from the true meaning of it. In 2025, Valentine's Day spending hit a record of \$27.5 billion dollars, which increased \$1.5 billion dollars from the previous record of \$26 billion dollars in 2023. Big corporations have marketed love as something that has to be bought instead of a day to celebrate. In 2023, Montclair State University did a study about how Valentine's

Day has become all about gifts. By using an analysis of social media data, they found that "Valentine's Day" is associated with the terms "shop" and "gift" 131.17% more than the term "love." From the amount of money that our society spends on Valentine's Day, to the social media trends that continue to inspire it, it has become a gateway for business. Valentine's Day is controversial. The idea of love being shared and celebrated is great, but the way that it is being executed shows that love is to be shown through spending money. This is not true, and now the influence of the Internet has turned the day of love into a day to spend. When spending Valentine's Day this year, whether it is with a loved one, your friends, or your family, remember that expressing love doesn't have to come with diamond earrings or expensive flowers. Homemade notes, special activities, making dinner together, or even playing board games are all ways that love can be expressed without a price tag dictating if it is sufficient or not.



PHOTO: WBBJ NEWS

Lane Francis: Record Breaker

Colleen Conway
Staff Writer

Lane Francis, a junior at DSF, dove into the swimming season headfirst, as she recently broke three records, two individual and one team. She broke the school's 100-meter backstroke record, the previous record set by herself in earlier years. Her old time was 55.85 seconds, and her record time is 53.27 seconds, a 2.58-second drop. She received excited reactions from all around the Freeman swim community. "I knew she would break the school record at some point because she's gotten faster since last year, but I was not expecting such a significant drop," said Freeman swim coach Steven Gromling. "That was really exciting to see." Additionally, her teammates expressed similar sentiments when asked about their reactions to her new records. "It was so exciting to see her do that and really fun. In general, just good vibes for the team all around," said senior Karina Blanco. The next record she broke was the meet record for the Hawk Holiday Invite, where 25 teams

across Classes 3, 4, and 5 compete. This was for the 200-meter freestyle relay, where the previous record set was 1:37.76. Thanks to her help, Lane, Charlotte White, Karina Blanco, and Elianna Cuce were able to swim a 1:37.61. The reactions to this were pleasantly surprising because the coaches didn't even know it was a record at first. "All of a sudden, Lane threw down a 22, which was a wicked fast time. Next thing you know, it's on the board, it says meet record," said Gromling. He was ultimately very thrilled with this outcome, as more of his swimmers were able to make their mark on the swimming community. "I was super ecstatic, stoked, happy, and pumped for the girls that they were able to chisel their name into a meet record," said Gromling. Lane beat her own record for the 50-meter freestyle during the Hawk Holiday meet as well. Her previous time was 23.51 seconds, and her record time was 22.98 seconds. This time is additionally a new school record for Freeman, making it all the more inspiring. Overall, Lane was very pleased with these records and enthusiastic about the time

she shaved off in all her events. "I was super excited! It was just nice to drop again," said Lane. Lane started her swim journey by participating in summer swim when she was around five or six years old. She decided to make it a year-round commitment when one of her coaches recommended it. "One of my summer swim coaches convinced me to join when I was eight years old, so I just did," said Lane. She first started with Raintree Swim; however, she now swims alongside NOVA of Virginia Aquatics. Throughout this process, Lane has enjoyed the competitive spirit and hard work that swimming brings. "Swimming is a good way to get energy out, and I love being competitive with my friends," Lane said. Above all, she loves the thrill of the race itself. "I really like racing," Lane said. This passion is evident to everyone around. "She lives for the race. Her training and her mentality revolve right around it," said Gromling. Although Lane has an affinity for swimming, in general, she favors two particular strokes. "My best stroke is backstroke, but I really like the 50-meter free," she said. Lane's passion and skill for freestyle and backstroke are reflected in her performance in the water as well. "Her drive to be better and faster, most swimmers have it, but she has something special for freestyle and backstroke that a lot of other swimmers wish they had," said Gromling. It is the thing that makes her stand out in the water the most. "Lane's a sprint freestyler and backstroker. That's her niche. Her teammates on the Freeman swim team love and appreciate Lane's presence on the team.

Lane is still growing to reach her full potential, and the Freeman swim coaches have high hopes for her in the future. Gromling said, "I hope for her to reach her fullest potential, continue loving the sport, and always keep driving forward." Lane hopes to continue her swimming journey at Freeman for the next two years and then chase higher goals at the collegiate level. "I want to swim in college," said Lane. Overall, Lane has multiple assets that make her essential to Freeman's swim. "She's reliable in her individual events," said Karina. She contributes to the team and helps bring home the win for everyone. "Lane's a super great closer for our relays," Karina said. With all these skills as a sophomore, the Freeman swim team can't wait to see what she will accomplish in the future.



Lane gearing up to swim



Lane placing in an event

Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz Make Their Mark on the VMFA

Ingrid Jones
Staff Writer

The "Giants: Art from the Dean Collection of Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys" exhibit has been showing at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) since November 22nd and will be there until March first. The collection showcases art from the personal collections of American rapper and record producer Swizz Beatz and his wife Alicia Keys, an American singer-songwriter and pianist. An educator statement from the VMFA, said, "Giants celebrates the profound impact of African and African Diaspora artists in the field of contemporary art, illuminating the enduring interconnectedness between creativity and community through the lens of renowned collectors."

Many of the art pieces on exhibit were created to inspire "giant conversations," that challenge existing ideas and critique the society we live in. Mary Ann Peppiatt, who is in her 26th year of being a docent at the VMFA said, "the goal is to start conversations about race and equality, and maybe open eyes in ways they hadn't been before."

To accomplish this goal, there are many different mediums of art featured in the gallery, including paintings, photography, sculptures, and more. Mrs. Peppiatt said, "I think the different mediums allow the appropriate instrument for the message that the art is trying to give."

One specific piece that came to her mind when explaining this was the sculpture, "Strike," by Hank Willis Thomas. "Strike" is a stainless steel sculpture that shows two interlocked hands, one a police officer about to hit someone with a baton, and the other a person trying to stop it. By portraying this image in a sculpture medium, the message becomes more impactful. "I think that was a message that

was very powerful in the sculptural medium that maybe wouldn't have been quite as powerful as a painting," said Mrs. Peppiatt. Another impact that having numerous mediums had was allowing for more black artists to be represented. "I think it expands the number of artists that you can represent. So different artists prefer different mediums, and some even do a variety of mediums, but prefer a certain one for a message," said Mrs. Peppiatt.

This collection is all black artists and lots of the art allows for viewers to see the kind of racism that black people face everyday. Freeman junior Anna Estes said, "I think this kind of art is really important to help you understand different perspectives and experiences, because a lot of this stuff was not stuff that I had personally experienced or witnessed, but that a lot of people do experience."

This exhibit not only showcases the black experience, but shows the great success that many black artists have made out of tough situations. Another junior at Freeman, Tessa Manning, said, "they came from similar backgrounds and experiences, yet they turned that into a love for what they had in different ways, like music, singing and painting and sculpting and photography."

There are also some artists that come from different African backgrounds which is shown throughout the exhibit. "[The exhibit shows] all these different people who were all united by their black culture, but also it was all these different offshoots of it, so you have their different individual identities, but also one group identity," said Anna Estes.

Mrs. Peppiatt is optimistic about the feeling of inspiration and dignity that members of the black community can leave the exhibit with. She said, "I am especially hopeful about giving people a sense of pride in what has been accomplished by their culture."

The VMFA has lots of African American art on exhibit, but what makes this exhibition different is not only the star-power of Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz, but the personal connection the stars have to the art. The Giants exhibit showcases art that reflects the interests of the collectors and art that resonates with them more personally. "This collection is also special, because it's things that they're interested in, pieces of art that are associated with their interests; and we have a very large and important collection of African and African American art, but it's not through their lens...so this makes it exciting," said Mrs. Peppiatt.

One example of the reflection of Swizz Beatz' interests, is the presence of BMX bikes throughout the exhibit, which to Swizz Beatz, represent "making it."

The audience also sees Alicia Keys' personal interests reflected in various pieces, one being a piano with the words, "LOVE" and "FREEDOM" written on it. These words were sentiments in her music video for the song "We are Here."

"The lyrics reference the ongoing problems faced in New York, the United States, and around the world...but remind listeners that we are all here for one another, regardless of nationality, gender, sexuality, language, or cultural heritage," said a plaque next to the piano in the exhibit.

The starpower the two hold draws in a larger crowd and reaches an audience that might not normally go to the VMFA, or be exposed to this kind of art. "I think the museum is always trying to attract different audiences, and especially audiences that don't go frequently...I think people are intrigued by the fact that it's owned by Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys," said Mrs. Peppiatt.

The exhibit not only drew in new audiences, but also drew in a bigger crowd than expected. "Six weeks before the end of the exhibition, they'd already exceeded their attendance goals," said Mrs. Peppiatt.

In drawing a wide range of people to the exhibit, it helps to bring the community of Richmond together. "Especially in Richmond City, it can bring together communities and tie everyone together, because it creates an understanding of other communities that you may not be in or understand right now, but the exhibit helps you to do that," said Tessa Manning.

The Giants exhibition features a wide range of different black artists, fostering pride, giving representation.

RVA's Wacky Tradition

Sophia Bove
Staff Writer

There are many hidden gems in Richmond, but the Cone Parade takes the cake. Famously known as a "quirky New Year's tradition," the parade has been around since 2008, making for 18 years of fun and entertainment, all while celebrating the birth of a new year. It was originally founded by John J. Oliver, owner of the Aquarium Bookstore, long before the parade gained the popularity that it has today.

The parade consists of dressing up in wacky cone costumes, full of colorful colors and a wide variety of decorations. All ages are welcome to attend, from young children to senior citizens. When it first started, the parade only reached an audience of about 10-30 people. Today, hundreds of participants can be seen walking up and down Carytown during the festivities. Even Richmond's mayor, Danny Avula, was seen attending the parade.

The design of the cone varies drastically between people. For example, this year, participants dressed up as anything from a trash can to a toilet. Due to the shape of the cones, there are many ways to integrate new and creative designs that "knock the socks off of the other celebrators." The cones themselves take a while to construct, held together by things like adhesives, fabrics, decorations, and poster boards. Some can even take weeks or months to build, depending on their design. In fact, the 2026 winner of the parade was featured in an award-winning costume. Amanda Goins, a Virginia local, was dressed in a hand-crafted French croque-mouche, a dessert consisting of a cone made of cream puffs, all held together by caramelized sugar. The puffs were hand-sculpted and painted carefully to represent the true color of the pastry. Another top finalist, dressed as the "Baddest Witch of 2025," was close to winning, but left the event early before the awards ceremony.

A bystander of the event, Magdalena Jones, had a lot to say about the experience. "I was out with my dad and stumbled on it," she said. "There weren't even just people dressed up, I saw a lot of dogs wearing cool cone costumes, which was one of my favorite parts," she said. Magdalena discussed how hectic and abundant the streets of Carytown were throughout the entire day. "There were around 150 cones at the event, and around 150-200 people overall," she said. "All of the costumes were very unique, and each one seemed to have a different meaning to them," she said.



She noted that she thought other people her age might be hesitant to attend, but advised them not to be because everyone is a cone, which makes it a "fun and non-embarrassing event." At the end of the parade, there were awards being given for best costume. "I'm so excited to attend the parade next year," she said. "I'm planning on dressing up as a traffic cone."

Another attendee, Elanor Parsons, had a bit of a different experience. "The idea for the parade came from seeing it on Instagram in December," she said. "After I saw it, I decided to invite my friend, Julia Bowersox." When asked about how long the parade lasted, she said, "The parade lasted about 20 minutes, including walking down the street and back, but I left after the initial walk." She noted that one of the coolest things about the parade was stopping at an intersection to dance. "I liked the beginning where all the cones were gathered in one place, and participants were inspired for the new year."

Although the cone parade had a large number of attendees this year, many people from Eleanor's community did not partake. "The parade isn't really something people at school talk about. I only learned about it online." She noted that advertising the parade more might draw a bigger audience in the years to come and eventually grow this tradition into something known throughout Richmond's entire community.

Everyone knows that the parade is popular now, but how did it grow as much as it has? Well, things such as creative expression throughout the community, like dressing up in wacky costumes to display a different side, and media coverage by news channels to help spread the word are both key factors. Another example is social media and word-of-mouth. Many people started a buzz on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which gained the event more recognition and coverage than it deserved.

Overall, this parade is something that has flourished into a "beautiful Richmond New Year's tradition," said WTVR news. It brings the city together to celebrate a new beginning and bring peace for all. From 2008 to 2026, the tradition stays strong, and it continues to grow, year after year.

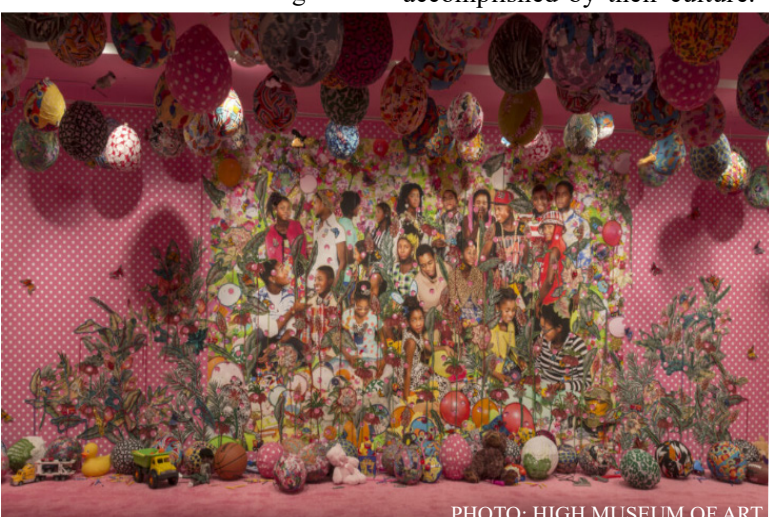


PHOTO: HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Piece of artwork in the VMFA exhibit

Snow Day Traditions

Nina Henley
Online Editor-in-Cheif
Centerspread

Snow days remain a cornerstone of childhood memories, carrying a sense of nostalgia that never really fades. Growing up in Richmond, Virginia, I remember getting snow fairly often when I was in elementary school. Waking up to white, powdery snow covering everything outside my window felt almost magical. I would jump out of bed and rush to put on my snow clothes as if the snow might disappear if I took too long. Those days felt special, like a gift you didn't expect, and they quickly became some of my favorite days of the year. As time went on, though, snow days slowly began to fade. Somewhere along the way, Richmond seemed to stop getting its annual snowfall, and snow days turned into more of a childhood legend than a real possibility.

These past two winters, however, have completely changed that. Last year's heavy snowfall, along with water issues, kept students out of school for over a week. This year, after two separate winter storms disrupted school once again, I can confidently say that snow days are back. Their return has brought a wave of excitement and nostalgia, reminding people of memories they didn't realize how much they missed.

Snow days are not just about having a day off from school, they're about how that day is spent. Growing up, snow days usually started outside as soon as possible. Sledding down hills, even the smallest ones, building snowmen, and throwing snowballs until my hands went numb were all part of the experience. When the cold finally became too much, I would rush back inside for hot cocoa and spend the rest of the day playing Super Mario Bros with my neighbors. Now, in the middle of my senior year,

I can honestly say that not much has changed. One noticeable difference is that I no longer wake up early to run outside into the snow. Instead, I usually sleep in until around 11 a.m., take my time heading downstairs, and catch up with my family before figuring out plans with friends. One of my favorite snow-day traditions now is playing football in the snow with my friends. It involves a lot of slipping, falling, and struggling to stay upright, but it always ends in nonstop laughter and friendly competition. Once the cold becomes unbearable, we head inside, turn on movies, or settle into video games for the rest of the day.

While having a few weekdays off because of snow is always nice, it can get boring after a while. Not being able to drive and being stuck inside for days can definitely test your patience. Still, from sledding and playing in the snow to watching movies and reading good books, snow days are a reminder to slow down, stay safe, and have fun.



Driving in the Snow

Vrusha Pramod
Online Editor-in-Cheif
Centerspread

Slip and slidin' around can be scary when you're driving, but this year it's become a common experience for everybody when driving during our latest snowstorm. Winter driving conditions have hit the entire country quite hard this year. Late January brought us heavy snow that quickly thickened into an icy sheet covering our streets and sidewalks.

The U.S. Department of Transportation reports that as of January 2025, at least 85 deaths have been attributed to winter weather events. Snow and ice are both among the top twenty-five causes of car accidents in the US. These conditions can easily transform familiar local roads into dangerous hazards. However, with experience, preparation, and patience, you can feel relatively safe in most winter conditions. If you are a new driver or are acclimating to a new winter climate, take the time to practice before heading out into the snow.

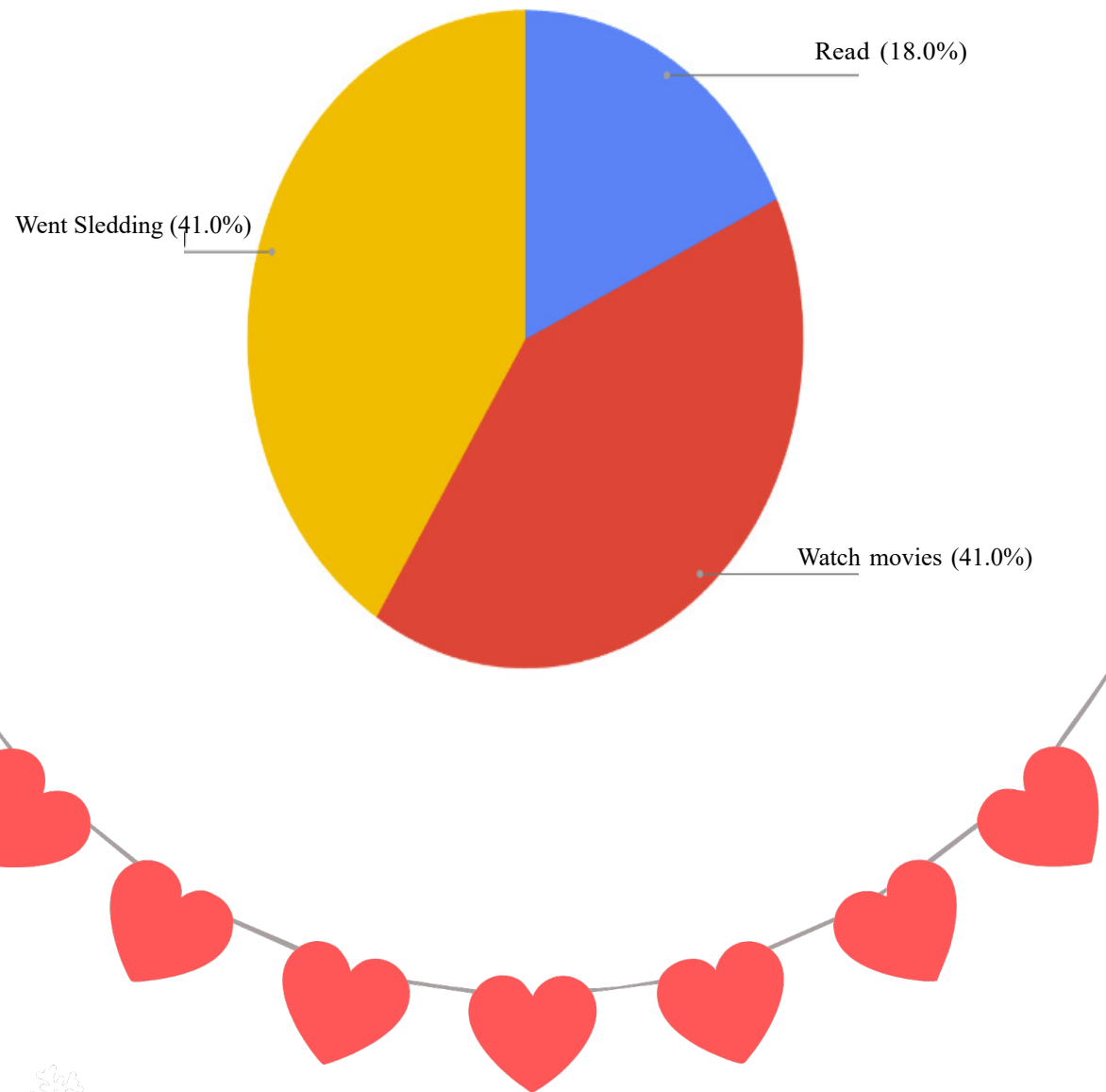
When on the road, don't forget to proceed with caution! You may not notice ice on the road, particularly if it is black ice. The sun's glare can make ice look like a puddle of water on the road, so drive slowly when approaching wet-looking surfaces in cold weather. Approach bridges, infrequently used streets, and shaded areas tend to freeze first and stay frozen longer, so approach these areas with extra caution. Keep a lookout for hazards, particularly in poor-visibility areas. You can follow the tracks of cars ahead of you, but allow yourself to keep extra distance between your cars.

Remember, conditions can change very quickly in the winter, especially with the onset of a bad storm. Be aware of what is happening outside your car and how your car reacts. Sure, all these extra precautions can definitely take extra time, but they ensure that you won't put yourself in life-threatening conditions on the road.



What did Students do over the Snow Days?

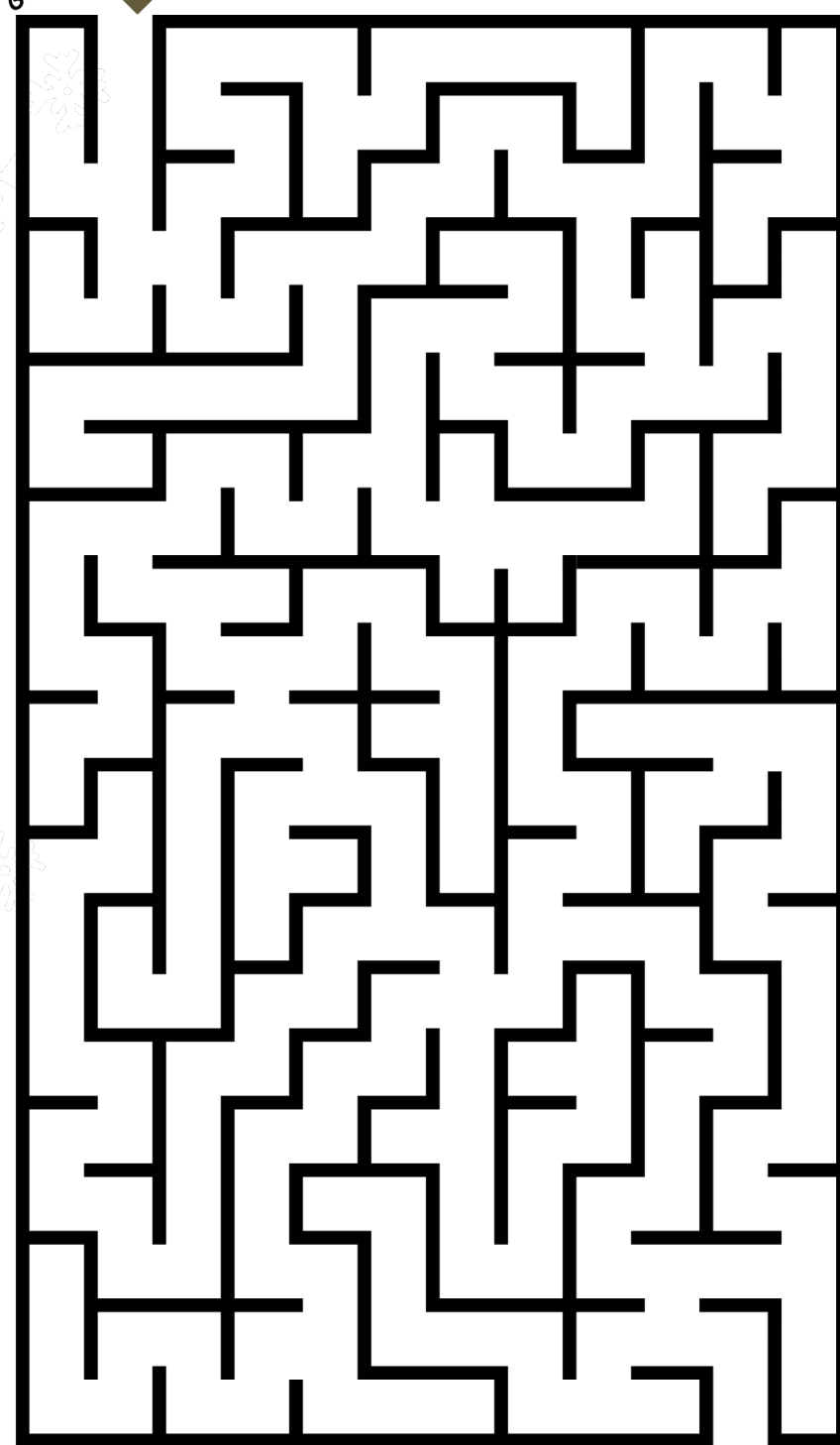
(Based on a poll from the dsfcommentator instagram).



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The History of Valentine's Day

Nina Henley
Online Editor-in-Cheif
Centerspread

Valentine's Day, celebrated annually on February 14, is widely associated with romantic gestures, love, cards, and gifts. Its origins, however, are not rooted in a blend of ancient traditions, early Christian history, and cultural practices. Rather than a single, clearly documented event, Valentine's day originates from multiple historic events.

The earliest influences on Valentine's Day can be traced back to ancient Rome. In mid-February, Romans celebrated a festival called Lupercalia, which was dedicated to fertility and the coming of spring. The festival involved rituals intended to promote health and fertility, and while it was not a celebration of romantic love in the modern sense, it reflected themes of renewal and human connection. By the late 5th century, as Christianity be-

came more established in the Roman Empire, many pagan festivals were either reinterpreted or replaced by Christian observances. Valentine's Day is traditionally linked to early Christian martyrs named Valentine. Historical records from this period are limited, and several saints named Valentine existed, making it difficult to identify a single individual as the definitive origin of the holiday. One commonly cited account describes a priest named Valentine who lived during the 3rd century under Emperor Claudius II. According to later legends, Claudius banned marriages for young soldiers, believing single men made better fighters, and Valentine secretly performed marriages in defiance of the decree. When discovered, he was imprisoned and executed. While this story is popular, there is no firm historical evidence to confirm its accuracy.

By the Middle Ages, Valentine's Day began to take on its romantic associations. In medieval Europe, it was commonly believed that birds began mating in mid-February, which reinforced the idea of the day as a time for love and partnership. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer is often credited with helping to popularize this connection through his 14th-century poetry, which linked Saint Valentine's Day with romantic love. From this period onward, written expressions of affection became more common, including early forms of love notes. The tradition of exchanging Valentine's messages gradually expanded. By the 18th century in England, it was common for friends and lovers to exchange handwritten notes and small tokens of affection. The 19th century saw the introduction of mass-produced Valentine's cards, particularly in the United States, as advances in printing made them more accessible and affordable. Over time, the holiday became increasingly commercialized, with gifts such as chocolates, flowers, and jewelry becoming standard symbols.



A Guide to the best Gift

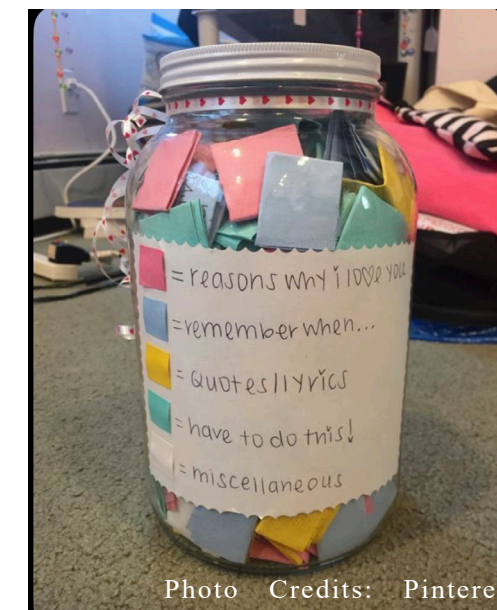
Nina Henley
Online Editor-in-Cheif
Centerspread

Every Valentine's Day brings the same pressure. Find the perfect gift. It is easy to reach for flowers, chocolates, or something expensive and call it done. Those gifts are fine, but they are not what people remember most. What lasts is the feeling behind the gift. Feeling seen, noticed, and understood matters more than anything wrapped in paper.

A thoughtful gift does not have to be big or impressive. It starts with paying attention. Think about their everyday life. What do they enjoy but never upgrade for themselves? What do they mention needing but keep putting off? What small things make their day better without much effort?

The best gifts often solve a small problem or deepen a simple joy. It might be something that makes their mornings easier, their evenings more fun. These gifts work because they show that you notice how they live, and care about their comfort and happiness. Different people value different kinds of gifts. Some care most about experiences and time together. A planned day, a class, or a trip can mean more than any object. Others love comfort and familiarity, things that make home feel warmer

and safer. Some people are sentimental and treasure meaning over usefulness, especially when it comes from shared memories. Even practical gifts can feel romantic when they show care rather than convenience. How you give the gift matters too. A simple note explaining why you chose it can change everything. Hearing "I thought of you when I saw this" or "I got this because I know you" adds emotional weight that no price tag can match. Being present in that moment, without rushing or distractions, makes the exchange feel real. Valentine's Day does not need to be a performance. It is not about competing with anyone else or proving something through grand gestures. It is about connection. Sincerity carries more weight than perfection, and effort means more than extravagance.



Solo to Remember

Emerson Post

Sports Editor & Copy Editor

Every year, Freeman High School holds the annual Winter Assembly in the Big Gym. Students and faculty gather to watch the Freeman's band, strings, jazz band, and chorus perform a variety of Christmas songs to help get students in the holiday spirit, as well as to see the departments show all students and faculty the final product of their preparation behind the scenes. They each play for about 10 minutes, with one collective song at the end to cap it off. But this year, one performance in particular stood out to many people across the Freeman community.

During the Jazz Band's performance of "Christmas Time is Here," Daniel Griffon, a senior at Freeman, performed a saxophone solo that caught the attention of many in the audience. The gym was quiet throughout the entire performance, but during this solo, the gym seemed particularly quiet. Daniel's saxophone traveled throughout the whole gym, with everyone able to hear his performance. Although the solo may have seemed natural to the audience, it was the result of months and even years of preparation. Griffon explained that the Jazz Band "got the music back in the fall and I've been playing that solo for a while."

The decision to perform "Christmas Time is Here" was made about a week before the event, but Griffon said he was excited once it was confirmed. "I was excited because I think that 'Christmas Time is Here' is the best Christmas song that we've played," said Daniel. "I was happy that I'd have the opportunity to play it in front of the school."

The band performs the same music at multiple events before the concert to get a feel for what it will be like. They perform at events like the Lakewood Senior Community and the Winter Concert. "Leading up to that, we practice once a week during Freeman Focus," Griffon said. Because rehearsals are short, students must learn the music quickly to be ready in time.

When it came to performing this solo, Daniel said he felt more excitement than nervousness. "I'd performed that solo twice before, and dozens of times in practice, so I wasn't very worried," he said. Rather than focusing on the nerves, he said he was more excited to perform for his classmates, fellow students, and teachers. "I was just excited to play in front of friends and students, and not just family," said Daniel. "Music is best when shared, and I take great joy in sharing it."

Daniel said the band has played a role in helping him form connections at Freeman. "I'm zoned for Hermitage and am in the Specialty Center, so I come pretty far to get to Freeman and didn't know that many people when I first arrived," he said. "However, the band al-

lowed me to make lasting friendships outside of the Center," Griffon added that his involvement expanded over time. "Freshman year, I was able to make quick friends before school even started in band camp," he said. As he continued in the program, he joined multiple ensembles, including Jazz Band, and later took on leadership roles within the department.

Senior Aaron Shook, a fellow member of the band and jazz band and longtime friend of Daniel, said solos are common for him due to his role in the ensemble. "He's the first alto in our jazz band, so solos are common," said Shook. Although they may be regular for Daniel to perform, Shook noted that he still consistently puts effort into his performances. "But, I'm always excited when he has one since he puts lots of time and care into each one." Shook described Griffon as a musician who goes beyond simply playing the notes that are written down on the page. "A strong high school musician can easily identify notes, rhythms, and key signatures, but Daniel goes beyond that," he said.

The relationship between band members also plays a role in performances like this. Shook said that having long-time friendships within the band creates trust during performances. "When Daniel steps up to the mic, I never get nervous because I know he's going to execute what he's practiced," he said. Spending time together throughout the marching season, rehearsals, and performances can lead to band members building that trust.

Both Griffon and Shook noted that being in the band helps students feel more connected to the Freeman community. Students spend time working together throughout the whole school year, at things like band camp, football games, concerts, competitions, etc. "Friendships form fast and strengthen quickly because of how often you're around each other," said Shook. Support from students and teachers outside of the music department also contributes to the overall experience.

Looking ahead, Griffon said he plans to continue playing saxophone after high school. "I will definitely continue to play my saxophone after high school," he said. "I love music in all forms, and I take every opportunity I can to make more of it; I plan to join groups in college, or maybe start my own so that I continue to share music with the world." Griffon's involvement in music is something he expects to continue beyond Freeman; it's not just the Winter Concert and Assembly that marked one performance.

The Winter Concert and Assembly once again showed the result of the work that Freeman's band, chorus, jazz band, and strings departments put in behind the scenes, and Griffon's solo in particular was definitely a moment to remember.



DSF Band getting ready to perform at the Winter Assembly

Ven Jahn to be the Wicked Witch in Upcoming Wizard of Oz Musical

Juliette Lawrence

Staff Writer



The Wicked Witch in a play

As spring quickly approaches, the theatre department at Freeman is challenged with the new task of preparing and performing "The Wizard of Oz." With casting finalized, it's time to batten the hatches and prepare for their performance, April 23-26, 2026. Ven Jahn, a senior at Freeman High School, will be playing the Wicked Witch of the West. "I like to play big characters," said Ven. "It was the one that best matched my personality." Ven's dynamic acting makes her perfect for the role. "My first impression was how dynamic Ven was," said Ms. Gardner, the drama teacher at Freeman. The wicked witch's role needs a dynamic yet evil actress; Ven fits this description. The Wicked Witch's role has a legacy, which the theatre department may live up to. "One of the most difficult things is that it holds so much weight; it has to be good," said Ms. Gardner. Ven's heinous laugh and conviction got her the part. "One of the things that blew me away was [Ven's] confidence and the laugh in the audition," said Ms. Gardner. "When [Ven's] laugh first hit me, [I thought] that's so awesome." "[I want to bring] a lot of personality to my role. I want to scare little kids. That's my main goal," said Ven. Giving the Wicked Witch a personal touch, while endowing her with a cartoon-like personality, is another one of Ven's goals. "I'm kind of playing her as a cartoony villain," said Ven. Finding inspiration to humanize her characters is a valuable step in Ven's preparation for playing the Witch. "I like to choose a character from a TV show or a movie that I really like who has a similar personality," said Ven. Some of her inspirations are derived from previous actresses/actors, such as the Witch and Jim Carrey. "I kind of base my version off of previous Wicked Witch, [and also] Jim Carrey, his Grinch voice was inspired by [the Wicked Witch]," said Ven. The ability to ask questions and be fearless of the stage is one that Ven conquers well. "It's those moments [when Ven] was comfortable enough to make a choice." Her independence on stage, with-in stage directions, or picking a character action always stood out. "Ven will take the script and the ideas, and then go away, and she will find a voice, find something physical to do, find something she wants to try," said Ms. Gardner. Making choices in theatre is always a prevalent challenge, but Ven has never struggled with it. "In theater, making a choice is the hardest [obstacle], because a director can always say, not

that choice, but [Ven will always respond with] 'let's try something new,'" said Ms. Gardner. Not only is Ven a great student to teach, but also an amazing castmate. "I think her being so into [her] character helps me be [better] in my character," said Reed Hart, a junior at Freeman who is playing the Tin Man in the upcoming musical. "I need to be scared of her," said Reed. "I especially need to be as when playing Tin Man, [because] my character is stiff, tense, and very robotic." Ven helps her cast to bring their characters to life by creating the evil sense of wickedness they need on stage. Working with not just castmates but friends is another pleasure Ven has in playing the Witch. "I think that's gonna be really fun and dynamic to play, especially since I'm friends with the cast and [crew], it'll be me trying not to laugh while trying to scare [the audience and my castmates]," said Ven. Being able to work with her friends adds humor and less pressure to this heavy role. Ven's traits in her friendships help her to learn and challenge herself and her castmates. "She is so funny, and she loves just learning more and putting everything up for a challenge," said Reed. Her creativity has helped the theatre department continue to thrive and produce. "She has done a great job in helping the theatre department, and she has such great creativity." The role of the Wicked Witch is well known and iconic. "It does bring a sort of pressure; this is such an iconic character," said Reed. The factions in playing a terrifying character who possesses a fun and silly side come with the weight of the role. "I think trying to be scary but also trying to make fun of it and be fun at the same time can be demanding." Playing the Wicked Witch comes with its own set of challenges. The vocal strain can be demanding. "I've only had a couple of rehearsals, but I lose my voice every time," said Ven.

Even with limited rehearsals, Ven's vocal strain has been a prominent challenge she's faced. As well as vocal challenges, mental preparation is crucial in playing intense characters like the witch. "She is the main villain, and I don't think the movie would be a movie without her," said Ven. "The mental preparation is practicing, vocals, and just thinking... how would my character react in a situation, rather than myself?" Not only does Ven's wicked laugh reflect the witch, but she can also create something brand new when given such an iconic and well-known character. "You have character actors who are people who can separate from character to character, create something brand. Ven does that perfectly," said Ms. Gardner. Though Ven's role comes with its demands, she is excited for the fun of playing someone evil for the sake of being evil. "I think it's just gonna be really fun to play a villain," said Ven. "The witch, she's kind of just evil for the sake of it, and I think that's going to be really exciting." In previous shows, like "Peter and the Star Catcher," Ven has been chosen to play characters very different from the Wicked Witch. "I liked to do something different and get to be silly, the comedic relief," said Ven. Having the audience laugh at her because they thought she was "funny" felt satisfying. "A lot of female characters aren't comedic reliefs, so getting to play a male character, and [having] people find me funny, and enjoying the show felt really nice." Ven's big personality, laugh, and comfort level on stage and within her character suit her in playing the Wicked Witch. "Big, chaotic characters are [something] Ven is good at," said Ms. Gardner. "[I'm excited for] one of the first scenes where I say the iconic line, 'I'll get you my pretty... and your little dog too,'" said Ven. Her anticipation for certain scenes is evident and is leading to her excitement to perform. "I feel that it is

Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz

Played by:
Lucie Urquhart
Grade: Senior



In regards to playing Dorothy, Lucie is "most excited to be able to do the same scenes and songs that Judy Garland did, as she was such an iconic Hollywood figure," she said. "I'm also excited to sing the classic song 'Over the Rainbow,' and I really hope I do it justice."

Chaos in the Caribbean

Kaylee Bendheim

Staff Writer

Every year, billionaires and celebrities park their yachts at the Caribbean islands to ring in the new year. Recent U.S. military action prompted emergency flight restrictions to protect the public from potential hazards. As some people see this as a lucky opportunity being stranded on a luxury island, others were going through chaos. The U.S. conducted a military operation in Venezuela, launching strikes and special forces, capturing President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. They were taken to the U.S., facing charges of leading a massive micro-terrorism and drug trafficking, using cocaine as a weapon, and collaborating with terrorist groups. Maduro was also associated with human rights abuse, corruption, and dismantling democracy in Venezuela charges. This crisis led to the U.S. and FAA shutting down airspace due to a "worsening security situation and heightened military activity." Flights throughout the Caribbean including other popular destinations such as Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, St. Martin, and St. Thomas in the U.S. Islands were also canceled

during the airspace ban. "We are making schedule adjustments as necessary with the safety and security of our customers and team members top of mind," American Airlines wrote in a statement. Major figures such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Queen Latifah, Mike Tyson, Natalie Portman, Ming Lee Simmons, Shep Rose, and others were left stranded. DiCaprio missed the Palm Springs International Film Festival Awards Gala on January 3, 2026 and sent in a pre-recorded video message via Zoom. Natalie Portman also missed work obligations, with reports mentioning film work she had lined up. Not only celebrities and socialites were left stuck; teachers here at Freeman were too. Mrs. Sweat, a permanent substitute, was stuck in Barbados for five extra days. She found out soon before she was planning on leaving that the airlines were shut down. "We were ready to leave on a Saturday; on the Thursday prior, we noticed that the airlines were not flying out at all, or no one was coming into Barbados, and that was because of the Venezuelan crisis," she said. Mrs. Sweat goes every year with her family, staying at the same resort each year. "This has been a yearly trip for us. We've been

going to this resort for years. We packed up as if we were going to go to another room, but we didn't have to, because nobody was coming in to stay allowing us to have the room," she said. In addition, the extended time gave Mrs. Sweat the opportunity to meet and connect with people, making the trip even more memorable. "Most people that vacation to the Caribbean are mostly Canadian or from the UK. So it's very interesting, their perspectives of all this. They were not having trouble going back, it was just all the American planes," she said. One person that stuck out to her was a child that she met. She was introduced to this child as her granddaughter became her friend along the trip and frequently played with her, "because her parents work for the Salvation Army." She said "Every year, this little girl goes half the year to schools in Canada and half the year to Barbados." Mrs. Sweat expressed that she felt very lucky that her experience wasn't as bad as others, "People are all packed, ready to go, luggage everywhere, right? Some people had to find new places to stay. We were fortunate. We did not have to," she said. Not only is she fortunate with her experience, but also with her perspective of travelling. "I'm not afraid of trav-

eling again. I guess. I think we all have to look behind our backs now when we travel," she said. Mrs. Walthall, a Science teacher at Freeman, didn't get stranded herself, but one of her family members did. "My younger sister did. We were on a family trip, and she and her then fiancé, now husband, got married on the trip. They were planning to come back on Saturday, but they had the air closure, so they had to stay until Wednesday," she said. They were stuck in St. Thomas for four additional days, struggling to find a place to stay "They had to stay until Wednesday, which was four additional days. It was four additional days out of pocket like hotel and food on top of a rebooking fee for the airline," she said. Due to the hotel being crowded, the struggle only got worse as there was chaos managing this setback. "It was really difficult for them to find a hotel that would allow them to stay because a lot of other people were stuck-- it's not going to be covered by travel insurance, because it's an act of war." Even though her sister didn't go through a good experience getting stranded, Mrs. Walthall wanted her to be safe rather than sorry. "I'd rather everyone be safe and stuck, as opposed to in the air questioning, if it's a commercial line ver-

sus a military line?" she said. While some enjoyed the unexpected extended vacation, others were eager to leave. People began returning from St. Barths in waves as the airspace ban was eventually lifted, allowing flights to resume between Jan. 4th-7th, 2026. Celebrities like DiCaprio eventually made it back, facing lighthearted jabs from hosts like Chelsea Handler at awards shows.

We depend heavily on international systems. Airlines, governments, and political decisions are all connected, and when one part fails, everyday life is disrupted.



St. Barths pictured

Girl's Basketball: Off the Court but in the Game

Maria McGill
Opinions Editor

Senior and captain, Addie Morton, and sophomore Jane Miller have been forced to give up their starting positions due to injuries. Though the changes of an altered lineup made students try positions they never played before, the team has stepped up. "Some of the freshmen on the team, the younger players, are now having to play more than they could," said John Larkins, history teacher and head basketball coach for the girls' program.

At the first girls' basketball game against Varina on Dec. 4, 2025, Addie Morton went out at the start of the game due to a torn Achilles, a tendon at the back of the ankle. From taking the wrong step to passing the ball to a teammate, she was down. "I wasn't doing anything crazy or anything like that. It's just an injury that happens to a lot of people, just like walking up the stairs," said Addie. Jane Miller shortly met Addie on the sidelines, two minutes after her injury, with a torn meniscus. She got pushed in the back when heading up for a layup, feeling a pop in her leg.

Coach Larkins was shocked when he realized he lost two starters early in the season. "We were speechless," he said. "I've been coaching basketball for [around] 20 years, and I've never heard of anything like that happening."

Just a week after the incident, Addie had the surgery scheduled, followed by a six-month recovery process. An Achilles recovery starts with a month of no weight on the injured leg. For Addie, this meant riding through Freeman's halls on a scooter. On Jan. 13, 2026, she went back to the doctor to get a boot and crutches, allowing her to have 50 percent of her weight distributed between the crutches and her leg. After a month wearing a boot, she could start walking slowly. "...After I get the boot off, I can walk in normal shoes, but that is when I start PT [physical therapy]," said Addie. When the three to four months of PT are finished, she is expected to be make a full recovery.

Jane's injury involved her meniscus, a stretchy piece of cartilage in the knee. Her recovery has consisted of surgery to fix the tear and rest to ensure a full recovery. She has been determined to do the right exercises and stretches, along with getting enough nutrition to be ready for next season. "I have to watch my diet and eat really good food, drink a lot of water, but mostly take it easy and do a lot of PT," said Jane. She also walks to compensate for the amount of muscle she lost in her leg.

Addie and Jane's injuries impacted them not only physically, but mentally. "When it first happened, I think it was probably the most heartbreaking I've ever been and [the] biggest emotion I've ever experienced," said Addie. She has

played basketball since she was four years old. Even though she knew she did not want to play in college, she wanted to end her senior year strong. "My senior year of basketball was going to be the hardest I've worked, the most effort I've given, and the most passion I put into the sport I ever had," she said. She decided that she wasn't going to let the setback and timing of her injury take away from the sport she loved.

Jane has found it challenging to sit out and not be on the court with the team like she did the previous year. "It's hard to watch our team and have to sit out. Not being able to experience games, practice, and team bonding with them has been difficult," said Jane. Though she can't be on the court, she has found a new way to connect with her teammates by being more verbal on the sidelines. She has grown deeper friendships in different ways. "Creating relationships with them through just talking in school and at practice, really getting to know them on a deeper level because I can't be on the court with them, has been cool," said Jane.

Coach Larkins has admired Addie, Jane, and the entire team's attitude toward the situation. "I think our girls have reacted very maturely, very well, [and] maybe better than I have sometimes to that. It is territory most coaches have never experienced," said Coach Larkins.

Addie and Jane never missed a practice. They continue to dress out during practice and games, cheering their teammates on from the sidelines, and keeping up the team's energy level. Addie, being a captain, knew she still needed to be the positive, inspiring player her teammates viewed her as. "My mindset is either sit there and be miserable or make fun of something and try my best to cheer on the positives...I try my best to bring as much joy as I can," said Addie.

Other members have stepped up to take the uncertainty of winning away from the team. Captains Kayleigh Perks and Shelby Adams have worked to make sure the team knows they can win. "Two of the other captains [Kayleigh and Shelby] have been very positive and try to help the younger girls feel good about playing," said Coach Larkins. Kayleigh and Ryleigh Perks, who have played as defensive players on the team, have started as scorers this year.

Though the team had hoped to be the peak of Freeman Girls' basketball during this season, Coach Larkins believes they gained much more than points. "Overall, our girls have had a good attitude about it all," he said. "I know the seniors were hoping to have a pretty special season, and we thought we were going to be able to compete in the region, but now we're just taking each game one at a time."



Addie and Jane after an AAU basketball game

It's Snow Joke: The Olympics Return

Anna Minkler
Staff Writer

The 2026 Winter Olympic Games are set to start on Feb. 6, 2026, and last for over two weeks. They will take place in the snowy Italian mountainscapes of Milano and Cortina and host 90 countries over the course of the games. Around 2,900 athletes will compete in 16 winter sports, both indoor and outdoor. The games are projected to draw more than 1.7 million spectators worldwide. Initially, 1.5 million tickets were for sale, and about 70% have been sold. International demand has remained strong, while Italian sales lagged due to transportation issues and high prices. This is the first-ever Olympic Games hosted between two cities, Milan and Cortina. All coverage will take place on Peacock.

Sixteen sports will be featured

very entertaining and unique," said junior Carrie Nelson. Many people watch to support their home country, bond with loved ones, and have something to talk about.

According to junior Ella Hytle-gard, the Olympics are a "fun and spirited event" to watch with friends and or family, but the games bring many controversies. Ella said, "[The Olympics] can have a lot of negative environmental impact. I've heard about habitat destruction and fake snow being really bad for the host cities and the environment." "I definitely think that is a downside of the Olympics, I'm not sure what they could do to stop it, but it is a downside," said Ella.

In response to these issues, protests have arisen in Italy over the lack of sustainability measures. Protestors specifically focused on deforestation issues in Cortina, such as the cutting down of over



Promotion of 2026 Winter Olympics

across three venues. The San Siro Stadium in Milan will host the opening ceremony at 2 p.m ET on Peacock. Alpine, sliding, and snow events will be held mainly in Cortina, while ice skating will be held at the Milano Ice Skating Arena, and ice hockey at the Santa Giulia Arena. There are seven main sports, each with multiple branches and events, including biathlon, bobsleigh, ice skating, luge, skiing, and snowboarding. The most popular sports are typically figure skating, ice hockey, snowboarding, and alpine skiing, bringing in millions of viewers.

Junior Reed Jones said he likes to tune in because "[The Olympics] are a bonding experience for [me and my mom]... the Olympics are such a fun time and it's a good conversation starter." "I like the locations that they're held at. It's really cool and gives me ideas on where I want to visit when I grow up," said Reed.

The Olympics also play a big role in uplifting American unity and spirit. Freshman Davis Nelson said, "I think [the Olympics] definitely bring up spirit and make people excited... I like to support the U.S. when I watch."

At Freeman, popular sports to watch are ice hockey, figure skating, and snowboarding. Some said they like to support American athletes, watch others compete in the sports they play, or watch for entertainment. "I like to watch ice hockey, it's interesting and fast-paced. I also like bobsledding because it's

500-year-old trees for the rapid construction of the bobsled track and destruction of natural habitats.

The 2026 Paralympic Games will be held from March 6th to 15th. This year will be the 50th anniversary of the Paralympics, marking a major milestone for inclusion and disability awareness. Sports like para-alpine skiing, para biathlon, para cross-country skiing, para ice hockey, para snowboarding, and para wheelchair curling will be offered. Over 600 athletes will compete, and broadcasts can be found on NBC. Carrie Nelson says she wishes that "the Paralympics had more coverage and were more accessible... in past years [she] found [the Paralympics] hard to find and not broadcast as much as the other games, but [she would] like to watch them more in the future."

Other controversies this year pertain to rigging allegations. According to CNN, Canada was accused of manipulating a skeleton racer by removing athletes and reducing points. They were later cleared in an investigation. "[Olympic Scandals] don't really influence how I view the Olympics because it's usually just the country's fault," said Davis Nelson.

The 2026 Milano and Cortina Olympics will blaze trends in new sports, inclusivity, and unite Americans through shared pride. Reed Jones said, "I am super excited to watch this year's games. I think they'll be entertaining to watch with my family"

NFL Black Monday Coach Firings

Ava Harrison
A&E and Graphics Editor

The 2025-26 National Football League (NFL) regular season has come to an end, and many teams have decided to turn over a new leaf regarding their coaching staff. These teams include the Cleveland Browns, the Las Vegas Raiders, the Arizona Cardinals, the Baltimore Ravens, the Miami Dolphins, the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Atlanta Falcons, the New York Giants, and the Tennessee Titans.

Historically, numerous teams have relieved coaches of their positions on and after Black Monday, the day marking the end of the regular season.

On Jan. 5, 2026, Kevin Stefanski, the head coach for the Cleveland Browns, was the first to go. Stefanski had been with the Browns for six seasons, and he had two playoff appearances along with two NFL Coach of the Year awards with the Browns. On Jan. 5, 2026, the Raiders fired Pete Carroll after just one season. Previously, Carroll spent 14 seasons coaching the Seattle Seahawks. The Arizona Cardinals fired head coach Jonathan Gannon on Jan. 5, 2026, after spending three seasons with him. The team ended the season with a 3-14 record, and overall had poor performance

from both the offense and defense.

On Jan. 6, 2026, John Harbaugh was relieved of his coaching position after 18 seasons. Harbaugh has had many wins with the Ravens, including a Super Bowl victory in the 2012-13 season, but this season they ended with an 8-9 record and barely missed the playoffs.

On Jan. 8, 2026, Mike McDaniell, the head coach for the Miami Dolphins, was fired after ending the season with a 7-10 record. This was the fourth year McDaniell had been with the Dolphins. He was hired to address the offensive struggles that the team was having. McDaniell achieved this early on in his career by leading the league in offense, but the team's defense eventually exposed weakness for them. The team began to make a change towards the end of the season, but it was too late to clinch a playoff spot. Owner Stephen Ross took this into consideration and the fact that they had continuous losing seasons when he made the decision to fire McDaniell.

Another shock for NFL fans occurred on Jan. 13, 2026, when the Pittsburgh Steelers head coach, Mike Tomlin, announced that he was stepping down from his position after the team's loss to the Houston Texans in an AFC Wild Card playoff game. Tomlin was head coach for the Steelers for 19 years, making him the NFL's longest permanent head coach in the

current franchise. Although Tomlin was not fired, this departure will give the Steelers a chance to rebrand. Pittsburgh is currently on the search for a new head coach.

The Atlanta Falcons parted ways with head coach Raheem Morris on Jan. 4, 2026, after they ended the season with an 8-9 record. Morris had been with the Falcons for two seasons, but the team's record this season was not enough for him to keep his job. On top of that, the Falcons have not made the playoffs since 2017, which is the second-longest time frame in the NFL. Owner Arthur Blank realized that the team needed to switch things up and decided to fire Morris. The Falcons are currently looking for a new head coach.

Just over halfway through the regular season, the New York Giants fired their head coach, Brian Daboll, after their third consecutive 2-8 start to the season. Daboll had been with the Giants nearly four years before being fired. During his time with them, he had a playoff appearance and was awarded Coach of the Year honors in 2022, but the Giants recent struggles forced the hands of the Giants ownership, President John Mara, and Chairman Steve Tisch, to let Daboll go. Assistant coach Mike Kafka stepped in as interim head coach for the remainder of the season. Now that

NFL Head Coach Hirings

John Harbaugh to the New York Giants



Kevin Stefanski to the Atlanta Falcons

Jeff Halley to the Miami Dolphins



Robert Saleh to the Tennessee Titans

Notable Head Coach Hirings

the season is over, the Giants are looking for a new head coach.

The Tennessee Titans decided to part ways with their head coach even earlier in the season. On Oct. 13, Brian Callahan was fired after a 1-5 start to the season. Mike McCoy, the former head coach of the San Diego Chargers, was named interim head coach. The Chargers are now looking for a new permanent head coach and

have reportedly had interviews with many potential candidates.

As of right now, nine teams in the NFL, more than 25 percent of the league, are looking for new head coaches. Some of these teams and many others are also looking for new general managers, offensive coordinators, defensive coordinators, and quarterbacks coaches. More NFL coaching updates to come.

Marty Supreme Ping Pong's Into Success

Annie Ainsworth
Staff Writer

The first widely-known movie about ping pong, "Marty Supreme," hit theaters on Christmas Day and has since bounced its way to fame and success. Since its holiday release, Marty Supreme has grossed nearly \$100 million worldwide and has become the production company A24's highest-grossing film domestically, taking the title from "Everything Everywhere All At Once," released in 2022. Only a few months after its release, Marty Supreme has made history as the highest-earning film about ping pong worldwide, above "Balls of Fury," and "As One," both of which never surpassed \$50 million globally.

Critically acclaimed, Marty Supreme's success continues. It has been nominated in nine categories for the 2026 Oscars, including Writing, Production Design, Cinematography, Best Picture, Film Editing, Directing, Casting, and Timothée Chalamet for Best Actor in a Leading Role. Almost all actors from Marty Supreme are already being recognized by the public for their performances. "There wasn't a bad actor in the movie, and there were a lot of new actors, too, who held their own against people like Timothée Chalamet. Tyler the Creator, Kevin O'Leary, the guy from Shark Tank, and Odessa A'zion, and this was her big blockbuster," said Jack Harris, a senior at Freeman.

Lead actor Timothée Chalamet

was also awarded the Critics' Choice Award for Best Actor on Jan. 4, 2026, for his role as Marty Mauser, where he became the youngest winner in the category. "I think he deserves it. He did a really good job making [himself] not a bad main character, but a complicated one that the audience wouldn't like," said Eleanor Parsons, a junior at Freeman.

Following fictional Jewish-American table tennis player, Marty Mauser, Marty Supreme is a sports drama, comedy, and thriller that takes inspiration from real-life table tennis player Marty Reisman, who played professionally from the late World War II era into the early 2000s. The character Marty Mauser is a poor shoe salesman who dreams of becoming famous for his ping-pong playing abilities.

Over the course of the movie, Marty shows an unhealthy obsession with the game and an aspiration towards stardom, which makes for a difficult life filled with hardship and actions that make him an unlikable character. His goal throughout the movie is to become the best ping-pong player in the world, which is driven by his relentless ambition and fueled by a manipulative nature. Senior Cameron Burns said, "Marty does a lot of things that [would make you dislike] the main character. So you get really involved, but you're rooting for the wrong guy. I think that's very entertaining sometimes."

The movie's style of storytelling is unique and non-linear,

which can make for a confusing watch, but it is tied up neatly when the story is concluded. Eleanor Parsons said, "[The plot] was definitely all over the place. I could not understand what was happening until the movie was almost done, because nothing pieced together, but then it did [at the end]."

The movie ends with Marty Mauser becoming a father, accepting reality instead of staying "supreme," and not making it to his goal of the official table tennis world championship tournament. It made the audiences feel differently. Eleanor said, "I think the ending was pretty satisfying. Marty had to be a father, and I think he was a bad person, so he didn't get what he wanted, and his dreams didn't come true. He wasn't able to play at the big ping pong championship."

Meanwhile, Cameron Burns said, "[It's] unsatisfying because Marty gets what he wants in the end [beating rival player, Endo], but the whole movie is him ruining other people's lives. It feels unfair that his life would [end well] when everyone else's is ruined because of him."

Despite the movie's wild initial success, it is not without errors, like all other films. Marty Supreme somewhat lacks exposition and a backdrop for Marty's story and motivations, as well as background information on characters. Instead, the movie drops viewers in blind without the characters' history. Jack Harris said, "The holes in the movie are mainly

in the characters themselves. A lot of the characters feel not fully fleshed out, like Tyler the Creator's character, or how Marty meets his romantic interest, or [how he gets] into table tennis. We never get a full exposition of the story."

Marty Supreme initially popped up on audiences' radars from unconventional and creative marketing tactics employed by Timothée Chalamet and the production company. Such tactics include a brightly colored orange blimp with the movie's title being flown over parts of California and Texas, Timothée Chalamet being featured on a rap song with Es-DeeKid where he mentions Marty Supreme, and Timothée Chalamet becoming the first person to climb atop the Las Vegas Sphere, which was temporarily displayed as an orange ping pong ball.

These marketing events successfully pulled viewers in. "All of the advertising that Timothée Chalamet did everywhere on the

Internet, specifically Instagram, is what got me. He was on top of the [Las Vegas] sphere, and it was insane, being the first person to ever do that, and the orange blimp. It was incredible," said Jack.

Marty Supreme offers multiple interpretations of its ending, and thus multiple messages viewers can take away from the film. On what he thought the moral of the film was, Cameron said, "It shows what not to do. People miss that and kind of idolize [Marty], but I think it shows the dangers of having way too much ambition and how only wanting fame can lead your life to a bad place."

Despite mature plot lines, serious messages, and an R-rating, viewers still recommend this movie for high school students, warning that certain scenes are not meant for all audiences. "The target audience is older teenagers to young adults, and there are a lot of scenes that would be questionable, but I think it's fine for [high schoolers]," said Cameron.



Marty Supreme movie poster

Timothée Chalamet in movie.

Netflix Acquiring Warner Brothers

on its specific strengths and market, improving competitiveness. It also acknowledges the reduction in traditional cable TV viewers and the growth potential of streaming services and studios.

On Dec. 5, 2025, Netflix announced it had entered a merger agreement with Warner Bros. to acquire the assets of Streaming & Studios. "The equity value of the deal is \$72 billion, with a total enterprise value of approximately \$82.7 billion," said CNBC News. The acquisition will happen after the separation of the two TV networks, now expected sometime in Summer 2026.

Equity value is the monetary amount of all the shares of a company, or how much shareholders are collectively willing to pay to own a piece of the company. Enterprise value shows the true economic value of the company, reflecting what someone would pay to buy it outright.

"[Acquiring Warner Bros.] is going to help us achieve our

mission to entertain the world and to bring people together through great stories," said Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos.

As part of the deal, every person who owns a share of Warner Bros. Discovery will receive "\$23.25 in cash and \$4.50 in shares of Netflix common stock for each share of WBD common stock," following the close of the deal, said CNBC News.

Meanwhile, Paramount Skydance (PSKY) also wanted in on the deal, a couple days later on December 8, their CEO, David Ellison, submitted a hostile takeover bid for all of WBD, Streaming & Studios as well as Discovery Global, which challenged the Netflix deal, said Variety News, Paramount's all-cash offer "equates to an enterprise value of \$108.4 billion...with an equity value of \$77.9 billion." This surpasses Netflix's offer by \$25.7 billion.

A hostile takeover bid is when one company tries to buy another without their board of directors' approval, in this case, by going straight to the shareholders with a premium offer.

"Our proposal is superior to Netflix in every dimension," said Ellison, "Paramount's strategically and financially compelling offer to WBD shareholders provides a superior alternative to the Netflix transaction." PSKY is backed by \$40.7

billion in capital from Ellison's father, Larry Ellison, and government-owned investment funds from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi, as well as Affinity Partners, the investment company started by Jared Kushner, according to a document the company filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission.

The three Middle Eastern funds and Kushner's Affinity Partners will be strictly investors, Paramount said. "[They] have agreed to forgo any governance rights — including board representation — associated with their non-voting equity investments."

Ultimately, Warner Bros. Discovery shareholders are the ones to decide which bid to accept. The WBD Board of Directors evaluates all bids and then provides its recommendation, but the shareholders will cast the final vote. WBD's board and management favor the Netflix offer, which would solely acquire Streaming & Studios, while Paramount's hostile bid is for the entirety of the company and is actively lobbying WBD's shareholders to convince them to vote for the PSKY deal, said Reuters News.

As of January 2026, Netflix and WBD are still in the merger agreement while Netflix is preparing an all-cash version of its bid, and WBD's board remains firm in backing them. Samuel Di Piazza,

Chair of the Board of Directors, said, "The Board unanimously determined that Paramount's latest offer remains inferior to our merger agreement with Netflix across multiple key areas."

Paramount is still fighting legally and politically, but is facing setbacks. Shareholders were mailed a briefing on the current bidding process in which the Board of Directors urged shareholders to vote for the Netflix deal, and stated that there is a "lack of certainty in PSKY's ability to complete the offer." If PSKY were to fail to close the deal, WBD's shareholders would be left with shares in a business that had been "restricted from pursuing key initiatives for up to 18 months."

Since WBD and Netflix are already in a merger agreement, if the shareholders were to vote for the PSKY offer, "WBD would be obligated to pay Netflix a \$2.8 billion termination fee." Since the company wouldn't end up splitting, WBD's debt won't be redistributed, causing a "\$1.5 billion fee for failing to complete [their] debt exchange," according to the Board of Directors.

In conclusion, Warner Brothers Discovery's board is firmly backing Netflix while Paramount Skydance aggressively fights for the whole company, leading to legal maneuvers and shareholder appeals.

Ellie Brooks
Staff Writer

Warner Brothers Discovery (WBD), home of major film studios, TV networks, popular franchises such as Harry Potter, and streaming services like HBO Max, announced its plan to split into two companies in June 2025. One company will be Streaming & Studios, getting to keep TV, Discovery Channel, HBO Max, and gaming assets while the other, Discovery Global, the global networks part, will encompass CNN, TNT, Discovery+, and other cable channels, as according to Warner Bros. Discovery.

So why the split? According to Warner Bros. Discovery's latest financial reports, the company's total debt is approximately \$33 billion. A major goal is to deleverage the combined company, with a significant portion of debt being allocated to the global networks division. The split will allow each company to concentrate



Warner Bros Pictures Image

PHOTO: WARNER BROS PICTURES

Bow Tie Cinema: A New Era

Sophia Tluchak
Staff Writer

The Bowtie Cinema renovations were introduced to the public starting Dec. 25th, 2025.

The new theater includes "50-foot wide screens, Dolby Atmos sound, and electric recliner seating...luxury electric recliners with integrated tables; increased screen sizes in multiple auditoriums...a family-friendly arcade and duckpin bowling experience," said Ben Moss, co-founder of Bowtie Partners.

Movieland is the only independent, family-owned multi-screen movie theater in the Richmond area making it a valuable part of the local entertainment scene. It is owned by a connection of Bow Tie Partners, "a multi-generational family-owned entertainment and real estate business, with roots in Vaudeville and early motion picture theaters," says Ben, highlighting the theater's long-standing commitment to preserving the tradition of community-centered cinema.

The theater is located at the intersection of North Arthur Ashe Boulevard and Leigh Street and has been a "catalyst to Richmond's popular Scott's Addition neighborhood," said Trevor Dickson, a reporter of the Bowtie Cinema. Boulevard Square, where the cin-

ema is located, offers free surface parking for more than 750 cars, making it very "convenient" for the public coming to the theater.

The building was originally constructed around 1887, beginning its life as a Richmond steel facility. It was not until Feb. 2009 that the space made its debut as a theater, becoming the first movie theater in its area in over 25 years. Despite the more modern interior renovations, the building still remains with its historic industrial character, blending Richmond's past with a present-day entertainment experience.

The addition of a bowling alley and arcade area to the cinema has been debated ever since the renovations. Many are considering whether or not it truly elevates the theater or distracts from its original purpose. "I think a bowling alley is a bit weird. You're not going to the movies to bowl," says freshman Harper Kepier. While other people, like junior Sam Whipple, say the addition "sounds exciting."

One of the more popular renovations is the customizable reclining chairs that include a personal table for your drinks and food. "They were better cushioned," said Sam, and "it made the watching experience more enjoyable." This comfortable addition has brought happiness to many cus-

tomers. "I feel like you always lean back in a movie theater because you're always in the same posture. I definitely like the idea of reclining chairs," Harper said.

Many fans of the theater are pleased with the new additions; however, some question the prices and whether the experience is worth the added sense of luxury. The adult tickets are 16 dollars each and children's tickets are 12 dollars each, which has sparked mixed reaction among customers. "I think the prices match what you get. But if you are going to just see a movie may-

be it is not worth it," says Sam.

The service and bar at the theater have also been renovated, with an expanded menu and additional staff hired to improve the overall luxury experience for the customers to create a comfortable and attentive atmosphere. Sam noted that the last time he went to the theater "It [had] very good service," and the staff made him feel "prioritized" during his visit, reinforcing the theater's focus on customer satisfaction.

The sound and video quality in the theater was improved through the addition of Dolby

Atmos sound, a technology designed to create a more immersive viewing experience. This addition makes the sound feel like it moves all around and above you. This 3D experience allows a first person perspective in the movie, making you "feel more involved in the film," Harper said.

The owners of the cinema hope to gain profit and public attention from this multi-million dollar investment. Being one of the only theaters in the city to obtain such establishments like reclining chairs and bowling alleys attracts local and tourist visiting the area.



Inside the new theater.

PHOTO: GOOGLE MAPS

The 2026 Grammys

Maggie Walton
Staff Writer

Students at Freeman are anticipating the upcoming 2026 Grammy Awards for music recognition, broadcasted by CBS and Paramount+. However, it's more than just an awards show. It's also a few hours of musical entertainment as artists from many genres take the stage in performance.

Over the next few weeks, voting will take place by Recording Academy voters, including songwriters, musicians, engineers, and producers. Two rounds take place after an initial screening of potential nominees: one that composes the nominee list, and one that chooses the winner. Voters are expected to vote only in the categories they actively participate in or are well acquainted with.

Nominees for categories such as "Album of the Year," "Song of the Year," and "Best New Artist" have been announced in the past week, and a nomination alone is a big thing for artists. It represents a great accomplishment and reward for their songwriting and production effort; it is a goal in many artists' lives to receive one, and hopefully win.

The narrow pool of nominees doesn't leave a lot of guesswork; each category only has eight. From "Album of the Year," Puerto Rican singer-songwriter Bad Bunny sits at the top of the list, something students celebrate. "I really hope that Bad Bunny wins a Grammy for 'DtMF.' It's a really beautiful album about life, tourism, and history. Honoring that album would be pretty cool, also it's really fun to dance to," said sophomore Violet Arias. Sabrina Carpenter is another

contender in the "Album of the Year" category for her album "Man's Best Friend." Her prominent presence in the media has made those who may not be too familiar with her believe she'll win in this category. "For best album... The only artist I really know is Sabrina Carpenter, so I'll go with that," said junior Anaya Kaul.

Carpenter's fame plays a role in student and staff predictions, even surpassing their own opinions. "I think 'Man's Best Friend' could win, and I love Lady Gaga, but I don't know if 'Mayhem' would win, so I'm going to go with 'Man's Best Friend.' I feel like that's the most popular, I see it the most," said chorus teacher Ms. Gilleland.

While most of the talk surrounding the Grammys has been positive, a student here, asking to remain anonymous, believes the Grammys aren't as authentic as they seem. "It just makes rich people [richer] and tries to make famous people more famous than they are," they said. "Art doesn't need to be recognized if it's good."

Some don't find themselves disagreeing with the Grammys as a whole, but rather the choices of Academy voters. Not all of the nominees belong, according to some here at Freeman. "Addison Rae, I didn't even know she made music, because that's the TikTok star, right? That seemed like an odd choice," said senior Evan Donnelly, disagreeing with Addison Rae being nominated for the "Best New Artist" category.

Junior Natalie Bowers also disagreed with an Academy selection for "Song of the Year." "I think least deserved is 'Anxiety' by DoeChii," she said.

On the topic of deserved-or-not nominations and wins, Beyoncé's win with "Cowboy Carter" at last year's Grammys made controver-

sial waves on social media, and students at Freeman questioned the win as well. "Billie Eilish, I feel like, partially caused this on herself," said Evan Donnelly. "Past Grammys she's won, or nominations, she's said, 'Oh, I don't deserve this, I don't need this.'"

However, he doesn't believe she truly deserved to lose. "I do think she should have won the Grammy for her album. It was much better than Beyoncé. It

Another big name that won't be featured in this year's Grammys is Taylor Swift; however, most aren't surprised. "I'm a Swiftie, so I love when she wins and takes all the things, but I also think it's okay that she wasn't in it this year," said Ms. Gilleland.

Winning is not always related to musical quality, in Evan Donnelly's opinion, and some albums seem to be relying on the artist's fame alone for suc-

Some students, like Natalie Bowers, keep up with winners, nominees, and what attendees wear through Vogue. Ms. Gilleland prefers to see it all live. "I usually watch it," she said.

Other avid music listeners, such as AP Human and AP Psychology teacher Mr. Lovering and sophomore Audley Anderson, don't follow the Grammys due to different music preferences and not much curiosity about pop culture.



PHOTO:NPR

Olivia Dean accepting the award for best new artist during the 2026 Grammys.

cess. "Now you get this album that feels like it's pushed out for the sake of, 'I'm Taylor Swift. Here, listen to my album 'The Life of a Showgirl,' and it was very underwhelming," he said. Finally, how well do students and staff follow the Grammys?

Music lovers and casual listeners alike all had something to say about the Grammys, which speaks to its prevalence and student interest in pop culture. Overall, the Grammys, like other awards shows, remain an area of keen interest here at DSF.

A New Adventure Unfolds with the Release of Disney's "Zootopia 2"

Charlotte White
Staff Writer

The well-known animated movie "Zootopia" welcomes its audience back as it releases its sequel, "Zootopia 2." The new movie arrived in theaters on Nov. 26, 2025, and has been rising in the charts ever since. Within the first week of the movie's release, it grossed over \$100 million, making it one of the highest-grossing recent animated movies. The popularity continues



PHOTO:YOUTUBE

Teaser trailer thumbnail for "Zootopia 2" on Youtube.

to grow as it remains in theaters and attracts larger audiences.

"Zootopia 2" made its mark in theaters as it was released and quickly began to break records. It had strong attendance in theaters, as it had a record-setting \$556 million global opening in the first five days. The film quickly crossed the \$1 billion mark globally, becoming the second movie of 2025 to do so.

The sequel revisits the thrilling adventures of Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde as they work together to overcome the many challenges they face. They serve as partners in the Zootopia Police Department and are striving to earn their spot with the team. Throughout the movie, they face many obstacles with each other and additional characters. As Judy is the city's first rabbit police officer, she aspires to prove herself in a world where she is seen as smaller. While her partner, Nick, brings contrasting perspectives to the partnership, bringing humor to many situations.

"Zootopia 2" also introduces new characters that were not seen in the original movie. These characters include Gary De'Snake, Nibbles, and Cattrick Lynxley. These characters are all a part of the adventure that Judy and Nick embark on. Within the movie, the characters have also gained popularity as they each bring new personalities and humor to the movie. "There was a snake who

was really funny and adorable, and that was one of my favorite parts," said junior Carys Watts.

"Zootopia 2" would not have gained the popularity it has without the original Zootopia movie. This movie came out in 2016 and became the fourth-highest-grossing film of that year. It has also received an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, and an Annie Award for Best Animated Feature Film. The large time gap between the original movie and the sequel added suspense and allowed for a large range of ages to be interested.

were very cinematic. They did a really good job with the music and all of the lights," said Owen.

This opinion was shared throughout many of the reviews and stood out as one of the most apparent contributions to the movie. "I thought the animation and cinematography were good. I thought all of the songs really elevated the scenes themselves, and I would say it was a lot more action than the first one and even more cinematic," said Carys.

The animation may have gotten lots of attention, but the behind-the-scenes work has also been noticed. The voice actors in this movie include Gennifer Goodwin voicing Judy Hopps and Jason Bateman voicing Nick Wilde. Gennifer Goodwin has received a Voice Arts Award for Outstanding Motion Picture Animation, along with a nomination for Behind the Voice Actors Award for Best Female Lead. Jason Bateman also received accolades such as a Voice Arts Award nomination and an Annie Award for Voice Acting.

This movie was an addition to the many animated movies that have been produced by Disney

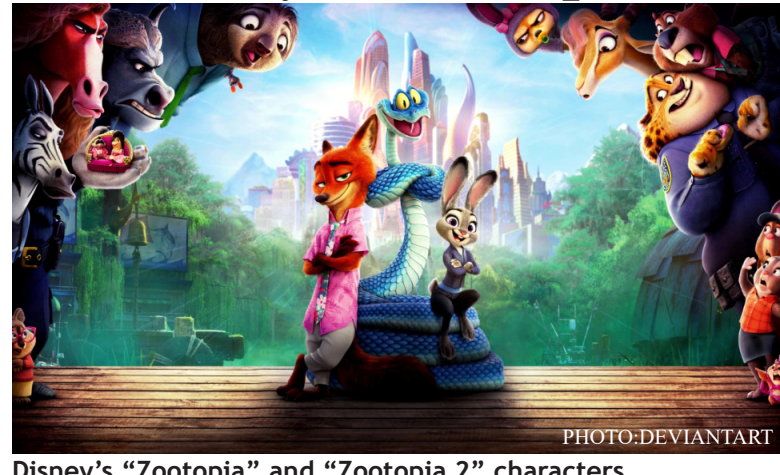


PHOTO:DEVIANART

Disney's "Zootopia" and "Zootopia 2" characters.

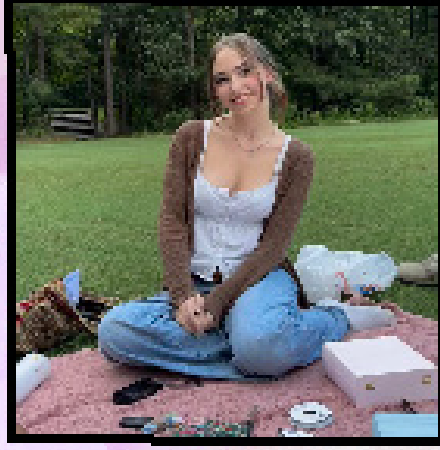
and have definitely made their impact with their new approach. "Clearly, this is not your 'typical' Disney movie. The story is much more dense and complex, and the emotional journey is challenging for Judy and the roguish Nick," said a Leonard Maltin movie review. This differing perspective made the movie stand out compared to other Disney movies, drawing in even more attention.

The movie's overall impact on the audience is evident and widely discussed. From young kids to older teens, the opinions that came

out of it were almost all positive. "The whole movie was great, really, from the start to the finish. It was action-packed," said Owen.

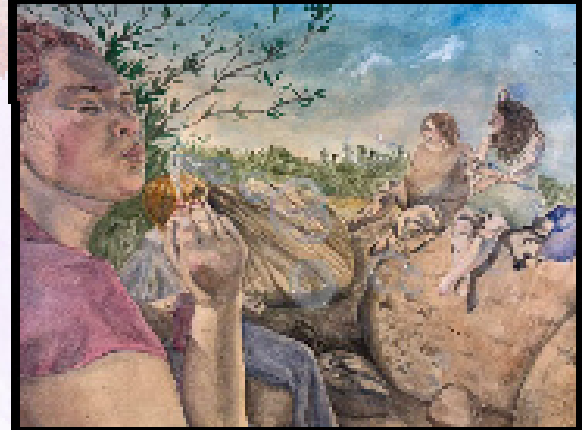
"Zootopia 2" continues the story of a familiar animated world while introducing new characters, settings, and challenges. The sequel expanded Zootopia's fandom and brought out a wide and enthusiastic audience, contributing to its success and popularity. It has added a new chapter to Disney's animated movies and created nostalgia for those who grew up with the original movie.

Student Artist of the Issue



At the moment, Kat "really loves painting. [She's] drawn to gouache paints as they're really versatile, and [she] can easily change the consistency to what works for [her] piece," she said.

Senior Kat Ranson "was inspired by the art in picture books [she] read as a child. [She] wanted to create [her] own drawings for the stories [she] would come up with," she said.



GRAPHIC BY HARRY

Reckoning



Alex Pretti

On Jan. 24, Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old ICU nurse and U.S. citizen, was fatally shot multiple times in Minneapolis as Border Patrol agents tried to arrest him as he was recording immigration officers on his phone. ICE agents were pursuing an immigrant from Ecuador, Jose Huerta Chuma, when they shot Pretti. This incident sparked a major political and civil crisis. The aftermath has been defined by nationwide protests, a federal civil rights investigation, and a primary threat of a government shutdown.



Renee Good

Renee Good, 37 years old, was shot and killed by an ICE agent during a federal operation in Minneapolis on Jan. 7. Good was observing ICE raids when federal officials claimed she had “weaponized” her vehicle. While her actions have been described as “domestic terrorism,” bystander videos and forensic analysis suggest she was turned from the agent before being shot. An autopsy confirmed she sustained 3 gunshot wounds, including a fatal shot to the head. Minnesota state authorities have sued the federal government for blocking access to evidence.



Minneapolis protests

In 2026, Minneapolis became the center of a national crisis following the fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti. Protesters launched a “National Shutdown,” disrupting the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and major highways. The deaths reignited debates over law enforcement accountability and racial inequality. The shutdown caused flight delays and blocked key routes, drawing national attention. Activists called for official resignations and systematic reforms.

Content by Ellie Brooks

Kaylee Bendheim

Staff Writer

A 13-year-old boy—identified as Devison Rocha Dantas—was tragically killed in a shark attack at a popular tourist beach in Brazil. Dantas was swimming and playing with friends in the waters of Del Chifre Beach in Olinda, Brazil, when a shark appeared out of nowhere. The shark attacked the teen from behind, biting on his right thigh before going into cardiorespiratory arrest. The teen was transported to Tricentenário Hospital in Barrio Novo, but by the time he arrived, he was already sadly deceased. “He had a fairly extensive injury to an artery in his lower limb, and because that injury was so extensive, he probably lost a lot of blood. And that’s what led to his death. He arrived at the unit already deceased,” Dr. Levy Dalton, who treated the teen, told the press that afternoon. The teen’s cousin, Lidia Emanuele, told TV Globo that the teenager was pulled out of the water by his friends after the attack. “[The shark] ate almost his entire leg. We called the ambulance, but they didn’t arrive in time. So, his

Israel to Reopen the Crossing Between Gaza and Egypt



Rowan Kelley

Staff Writer

The strife between Israel and Gaza was set to be over when a ceasefire was put in place on January 19th, 2025. This ceasefire plan was later suspended and traded out for Trump’s current 20-point plan that was pushed in late September. Since this plan was established, an important step has been taken. Israel announced on Friday, January 30th, that the passage connecting Gaza to Egypt, the people’s only access point to the outside world, would be reopened on Sunday, February 8th. The Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which is Israel’s military body in charge of coordinat-

ing aid to Gaza, expressed that the movement across this newly opened crossing will be limited to a certain number of people. It is unclear on both sides how this passage will work after being shut down for nearly two years. COGAT said the Rafah crossing will open up both ways this Sunday, but it was also mentioned by Ali Shaath, the newly appointed head of the Palestinian administration, that the first trial of this operation will not occur until Monday. The crossing will also be supervised by European Union border patrol agents, and every Palestinian either entering or leaving Gaza will be screened in a corridor under the eye of the Israeli military. The crossing was seized under Israeli control in May of 2024, and had a small window

where it was reopened during the previously mentioned ceasefire that failed before being shut down again. Many Palestinians will be let through both ways with medical evacuees, and those who fled the country have first reserved crossing spots. “Thousands of Palestinians inside Gaza are trying to leave the war-battered territory, while tens of thousands who fled the territory during the heaviest fighting say they want to return home,” said the Associated Press. The reason medical evacuees are granted this reserved spot is that health system availability was nonexistent during the war, severely limiting access to desperately needed surgical procedures. Around 20,000 Palestinians require treatment outside of what Gaza can currently provide. This

re-opening will provide a gateway to better health care that several wounded Palestinians need. The restored access to this crossing would’ve been considered the second phase of the diminished ceasefire agreement that was in place last year. This “second phase” would also incorporate the demilitarization of Gaza and the creation of an alternate government that would then watch over the rebuilding process of this territory. “This week, Israel’s focus is on disarming Hamas and destroying its remaining tunnels. Without these steps, there [will] be no reconstruction in Gaza, a stance that could make Israel’s control over Rafah a key point of leverage,” Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s Prime Minister, said.

EU Declares Iran Guard Terrorist

Sophie Tluchak

Staff Writer

The European Union has officially labeled Iran’s Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization, intensifying pressure on Tehran, the capital city of Iran, after a violent crackdown on nationwide protests. The Guard is a powerful paramilitary force that has previously been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and Canada.

The EU finalized its decision as a response to the savage suppression of protests for women’s rights, an end to government repression, and broader political change in Iran. The Revolutionary Guard carried out mass arrests and killed over 6,000 people. “Any regime that kills thousands of its own people is working toward its own demise,” said the EU’s foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas.

Listing the Guard as a terrorist organization does only serve as a symbolic movement, it also allows the EU to freeze any assets linked to the Revolutionary Guard within its borders. Iran

strongly condemned the EU’s decision, naming it politically motivated and a “PR stunt,” said Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. Iranian officials argue that the Revolutionary Guard is a legitimate branch of the country’s armed forces, not a terrorist group. In response, Iran has threatened to take possible retaliation, including labeling the European armed forces as terrorist organizations.

Kallas mentioned that this decision will put the regime “on the same footing” as groups like al-Qaida, Hamas, and the Islamic State group. This comparison sends a strong diplomatic message and proves that the EU is officially treating the Guard not just as a part of a state’s military, but as an organization responsible for actions considered terrorist under international law. The designation is expected to further strain diplomatic relations between the EU and Iran, potentially complicating future negotiations. The decision aligns the EU with other Western nations taking a harsher stance on



PHOTO: BBC

The Army Assembled

Iran, showing that such violent crackdowns on protests may result in international consequences.

Young Life Lost: Shark Attack at Tourist Beach

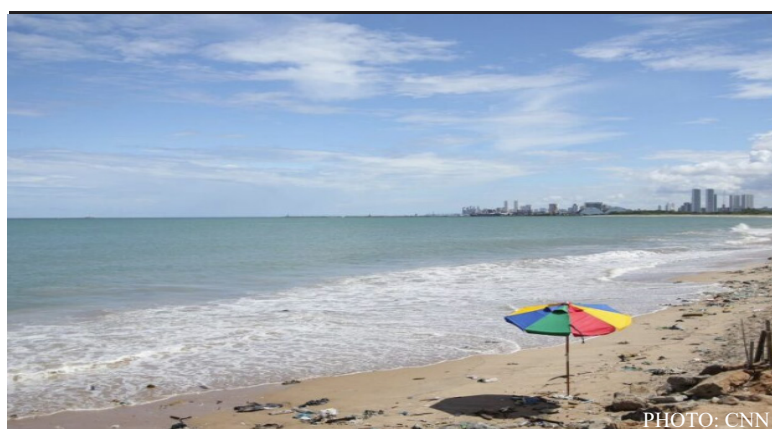


PHOTO: CNN

Del Chifre Beach, where the incident took place

own friends, who were the same age as him, pulled him out,” Emanuele said to the news station. The teen’s cousin also told the station that Dantas left home without his mother knowing. “I was at my grandmother’s house. She lives right next door [near the beach], on the second floor. I had gone downstairs because my uncle had called his [Deivson’s] mother, because he came to the beach secretly, and his mother didn’t know. Then, when I got here, his friend was already shouting and saying the shark had gotten him,” he said. This isn’t the first time a shark attack has occurred in the area. O Globo stated the coast of Per-

nambuco is notorious for vicious shark attacks and considered one of the most high-risk coastal areas in the world. The state holds a record of 82 incidents since 1992. 27 of those attacks were fatal during that time, according to the State Committee for Monitoring Shark Incidents. The State Committee for Monitoring Shark Incidents stated that there are 13 signs in the area, warning beachgoers against swimming. Four of the signs are on the Praia Del Chifre beach, where the teen was attacked. Dr. Levy Dalton called his death a “tragedy”.

Next Federal Reserve Chair

Charlotte White

Staff Writer

President Donald Trump has recently selected former Federal Reserve official Kevin Warsh as his nominee to lead the U.S. central bank. If confirmed by the Senate, Warsh would replace current chair Jerome Powell, whose term is set to expire later this year. The nomination must be approved by the U.S. Senate before Warsh can assume the role.

This decision was made with confidence from the President. “I would say that this was the perfect candidate. This was the man that’s most qualified, top student, best schools, everything was perfect, the youngest person ever to serve on the Fed. Got the whole package,” said Trump.

Warsh is a well-known figure in global financial and policy circles. He served on the Federal Reserve’s Board of Governors from 2006 to 2011, a period that included the global financial crisis of 2008. After leaving the Fed, Warsh worked in the private sector and remained active in economic policy debates, frequently offering views on inflation, interest rates, and the in-

dependence of central banks.

The Federal Reserve is one of the most influential financial institutions in the world. It sets interest rates, regulates major banks, and manages monetary policy in the United States, decisions that affect global trade, investment, and currency markets. This makes the selection of the official a very important and rigorous decision.

The president ultimately landed on Warsh as the suitable candidate, however it was a close decision. National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett, Fed Governor Christopher Waller and BlackRock’s Rick Rieder were the 3 other candidates in the running. “Christopher Waller, Rick Rieder, and others, were interviewed for the Fed position. They all would have been outstanding, and have a great and unlimited future with “TRUMP.” Such amazing talent in our Country,” said Trump.

As Kevin Warsh’s nomination moves through the Senate, lawmakers and economists will closely watch how his leadership could influence interest rates, inflation policy, and financial regulation. The outcome of the confirmation process may signal the future direction of U.S. economic policy and its impact on markets around the world.