

Davidson Academy students enjoy fruitful first year

Blooming brilliance

By Pat McDonnell & John Trent, '85/'87, '00M.A.

Thirty-four students came to the newly founded Davidson Academy of Nevada in August 2006 from throughout the United States, and one arrived from Australia. Their ideas, aspirations and abilities to solve problems make these 11- to 17-year-old independent thinkers and doers — who once frustrated school administrators with their brilliance — a source of intellectual energy.

The students' mere presence makes the three classrooms in the KNPB Channel 5 building at the north end of campus hum with a feeling of community, and of growth.

"These kids are bright enough that they could blast through the subjects really quickly. But we're trying to teach the kids to learn deeper more than quicker," says academy co-founder Bob Davidson. "We've taken the approach that we're going to move as quickly as appropriate for the students. But we also want to have them learn deeply, so that students have a greater understanding."

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Photo by Jean Dixon

The Davidson Institute has received national media attention, from a New York Times feature to a profile in a CNN special. ABC Nightline reporter John Donvan interviewed Bob and Jan Davidson in Morrill Hall on the University campus. His report on The Davidson Academy of Nevada, "Profoundly Gifted" Students Find Home in Reno," aired June 4, 2007.



Davidson and his wife, Jan, fund the nation's only state-supported, free public school for profoundly gifted students. These students have intelligence quotient levels at approximately 145 and above, and tested at one-tenth of 1 percent of the highest ability level throughout the country. They are the brightest of the bright. And they're all coming back to resume their studies for the 2007-08 academic year.

Thanks to Bob and Jan Davidson's \$15 million gift creating the on-campus Davidson Mathematics and Science Center, the academy will move to the Jot Travis Building — closer to the academic center of the campus — in fall 2008.

What follows are three profiles of the many success stories to have developed within the Davidson Academy in its first year. These are students who have traveled from as far away as Australia. And they are students who literally can trace their youth to this campus. In sum, they represent students with boundless potential. Students who have, happily, found a home.

AS WINTER TURNED INTO SPRING Down Under, Max Oswald-Sells, 12, was a comfortable only child with untapped potential living at his home in New South Wales with his mother, Gael. He had studied at a start-up school for gifted children in his native country, but his mother, now an algebra teacher at Reno's Coral Academy of Science, knew that a boy who taught himself to read at 3 would come home from his classes in hometown Sydney saying, "This is a waste of time."

"Max has special needs," Gael says. "That's why we're here. It was a case of seeing what else was out there. Some might say it was a radical move to come here, but parents with a child



Photo by Jean Dixon

Davidson Academy of Nevada students Emma Schmelzer, left, and Rachel Ellison discuss an English paper with McKenna Rose, University English department lecturer. Schmelzer, at 14, has already written a novel.

with a special gift, for example in ballet, might seek out a special school. The Davidson Academy was too good of an opportunity to pass up."

On leaving his homeland before his teens, Max says, "We felt that we might as well give it a try. It'll be an experience."

Max displays the self-confidence and analytical mind of a boy who has matured before his time. He reaches for a hearty intellectual challenge like some kids his age would grab a juice drink in their cafeteria.

If he had more time, he'd more fully study military history — especially the ways military leaders effectively coordinate combat arms. He's doing his spring semester project on a book he's read 10 times, Christopher Duffy's *Fire and Stone*, which describes the history of artillery fortification from 1660 to 1860. Max might write his own book on the subject before the decade is up.

He's not perfect, as he admits to being a procrastinator in his academy studies. In Sydney, he says, there's not the huge emphasis on grades as there is here. There's no credit system at all.

To graduate from high school in New South Wales, you have to pass the final exam.

"I'm a computer gamer," he says, when asked about his free time. "I wouldn't mind being a game producer, especially to create games of strategy."

Bob Davidson says students like Max, who are getting unique opportunities for personalized study of subjects like cellular and molecular biology with University of Nevada School of Medicine researcher Ruth Gault, are focusing their potential to achieve valuable breakthroughs in health, science, technology and the arts, at an extraordinarily young age.

"The University is a necessity for these children because we're able to make use of the wealth of campus resources in biology, math, English, and even student guidance," Davidson says.

Gael is happy to find a university and a free, public specialized school for prodigiously gifted children that allow Max to delve into his academic passions. But she and Max's Colorado-based father are not rushing

their preteen son to attend college courses on a regular basis and earn an undergraduate degree — an option open to academy students.

“He’s already flagged six University courses for next year, but we’re not in a rush to go to college,” she says.

Not when there are so many games to be played, and so many historic battles to be studied.

EMMA SCHMELZER’S LIFE HAS ALREADY accelerated. Before she was 13, she had skipped the fifth and eighth grades in her hometown of Columbus, Mont. Things were moving so quickly she attended her high school prom when most students are in the sixth grade. “That was actually very fun, very cool,” she says with a smile. “I was the youngest person to ever go to prom.”

Yet now, after a year of attending the Davidson Academy, Schmelzer would like to slow down. From the social aspect to academics, the experience of sharing learning with an equally talented cohort of students has been so positive, Schmelzer is in no hurry to move on to college. At least not for another year or two.

“I could graduate next year,” she says, her voice measured with a maturity that seems to go well beyond her 14 years. “But I don’t think I’m going to. I’m enjoying the environment so much.”

And then, she pauses. Her eyes light, and her expression softens to that

of teenager.

“I don’t think I want to be going to college at 15 anyway,” she says. “I want to keep having fun here for a while longer.”

Like all Davidson students,

Schmelzer has taken advantage of the Davidson Academy’s unique agreement with the campus, which allows the academy’s talented students to rack up college credit in addition to their high school work.

Schmelzer has impressed her college-level instructors with her preparedness.

“Emma brought her laptop and set it up for note-taking at every session,” says University philosophy department lecturer Guy Axtell, who taught World Religions – a 200-level course – to Schmelzer in the spring. “I wondered before the semester began if having a student of her age would present any special difficulties. What I found was that age certainly doesn’t matter, as she was the top point-getter on the midterm.”

Axtell says Schmelzer, though she does look young, did not appear to be anything out of the ordinary to her college classmates. That is, until one day.

“The other students were oblivious to the presence of a student so young, until the TV cameras arrived one day to film her in class,” he says. “When the crew left, the students wanted to know why the camera was there, and I mentioned it was for Emma. When someone asked how old she was and Emma replied ‘14’ it amazed them ... especially when I took the opportunity to point out that she was also the only student with a ‘100’ on the exam.”

The move to Reno with her parents hasn’t been without shortcomings. Schmelzer loves the outdoors and open spaces of what writer Bud Guthrie long-ago dubbed The Big Sky Country of Montana. Columbus, not far from Billings, Mont., has a population of about 2,000 people. That population figure doesn’t include the 18-stall horse arena that was on the Schmelzer’s 20-acre property.

“We are horse owners ... we own 15

horses,” says Schmelzer, an aspiring novelist who loves anything by J.R. Tolkien or Clive Barker. “We’ve always had between 20 and 2,400 acres, and I’ve always enjoyed living in the country. I can remember being 8 years old and vowing never to live in a city.”

Schmelzer, whose mother, Kerry, is doing drinking water research for the University’s Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Science, and whose father, Lee, is working on his master’s degree in animal science, at the campus’ College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources, notes that the family brought “four of our horses here at Christmas.” She says the family’s new home in the North Valleys with a dog, two cats and a canary is called *horse property* ... “it’s an acre, but it’s really only an acre of sagebrush.”

Still, the trade feels like it has been worth it.

“When I first heard about the Davidson Academy, it sounded like my dream school, and it really has been my dream school,” says Schmelzer, whose activities include piano and singing. “My peers have just been amazing. I’m not sure if there is a typical conversation that we have ... we talk about anything and everything. Even though I miss Columbus, it’s been a good move.”

ALL PARENTS KNOW THEIR CHILD is special. But for Kambiz and Simi Raffiee, the realization that their daughter, Misha, had intellectual abilities above and beyond the norm came earlier than most.

“From the time she was about one and half years old, her instructors were all saying that Misha had some very unique abilities, whether it was in music, art, drawing, painting, swimming,” Simi says.

When Misha was 4 and in kindergarten, “The facilitators wouldn’t let me

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College of Business Administration Associate Dean Kambiz Raffiee and his wife, Simi, have enjoyed watching their daughter, Misha, progress this year as a student at The Davidson Academy of Nevada. Raffiee, a 12-year-old violinist who was the youngest person to play with the Reno Philharmonic, has dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon.

read," Misha says. "They insisted that they wanted to read the book to me."

"Her teachers came to me and they said, 'She reads!'" Simi says. "I remember saying, 'Yes, I know. She has been able to read for quite some time.'"

Today, her first year at the Davidson Academy behind her, Misha has continued to excel in ways that few could imagine when thinking of the average 12-year-old.

Earlier this year, Misha, who was about two and half years old when she started playing the violin, auditioned and earned a spot in the Reno Philharmonic, becoming the youngest person to ever play for Reno's most prestigious orchestra.

"Misha has always had a violin in her hand," Simi says. "When she was 3, 4, 5, you would see her all day long with it, playing with it, composing songs in her head. She enjoys music so much."

"I've always felt that music was a part of me," says Misha, who learned violin from the University's finest player, the recently retired professor of music and former concertmas-

ter for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Philip Ruder. "It's always kept my mind active. And it's always been a challenging endeavor for me, to constantly work on improving my playing."

Kambiz Raffiee, associate dean for the College of Business Administration, Foundation Professor, director of the college's masters of business administration program and a Nevada faculty member since 1983, says that Misha's successes in music and in the classroom are a tribute to her native intelligence, hard work and Simi's endless encouragement.

Kambiz is a gracious man who speaks and moves with an understated fluidity. He notes that Simi was a professional herself before they were married, working in the San Francisco Bay Area's world of finance. "I'm always so impressed when Simi and Misha get together and schedule and plan their tasks for the day," he says. "It's incredible. They have amazingly busy days, it's not easy by any stretch, but they always manage to fit everything in."

Simi says that if there has been one thing she has tried to bring to Misha's busy days, it has been a sense of balance.

"It's a good challenge to have everything in balance," she says with a smile. Her voice lingers evenly over the word "good," as if to emphasize that having an incredibly intelligent and talented daughter is not a burden, but a joy. "For Misha, there are always various tasks that need to be completed in regard to her Davidson Academy and University classes, and she has limited time to do it. So you have to work wisely."

Misha, who in her short life has learned five different languages, says the interaction she has had with students of similar abilities has been remarkable.

"Almost all the kids there are willing to stick up and be there for you," she says. "It's interesting, too, because almost all of them feel that music could be something good in their lives, that it can contribute to their overall well-being. So there is a lot we have in common."

"One of the more significant characteristics of the Davidson Academy is they never say, 'No, you can't do this.' In many aspects, the sky is the limit at the academy. This has become a reality thanks to the vision and commitment of Mr. and Mrs. Davidson."

Surprisingly, Misha doesn't anticipate making a career in music. Even with all the enjoyment she gets from playing classical music or her other favorite, jazz, she hopes to major in pre-med in college.

"I want to become a neurosurgeon," she says. And then, perhaps remembering that she has always been a student with boundless potential, without any real limits, she adds, smiling, "But on the side play violin and piano." ■