

# Spotlighting local Valedictorians of the Class of 2023

*Currents salutes, congratulates and celebrates all graduates of the Class of 2023 from the Northeast Ohio region! This class was one that was forced to endure lockdowns and shutdowns during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and most likely emerged stronger, more flexible and better students as a result. Meet three of our area's best and brightest and read about their paths to educational success and the classes, extracurricular activities, and other key factors that were key in guiding them toward the exemplary young adults they are today.*

By LAURI GROSS

This year, Anna Rarick is the valedictorian at Gilmour Academy, the private Catholic, K-12 co-ed school in Gates Mills. Anna says that she knew Gilmour would be challenging and early on, she did not consider the possibility of becoming valedictorian. "I never thought it was in the cards," she says, "but in the second semester of my junior year, I knew it might be a possibility so then I keyed in and turned into a perfectionist." She explains that it's common for Gilmour students to compare their GPAs. "It's a competitive environment and, hearing other people talk about how they thought it would play out, I knew I was in the area to win it." Of the AP classes she took, chemistry in Anna's junior year was the hardest. "That class was the one I learned the most from because I hadn't really had that level of challenge in a class before. It really instilled a good work ethic in me. I was always going in for extra help and studied for hours and hours. It really taught me if you put in the hard work, you'll get through it." Although Anna's college plans do not include chemistry, she still appreciates that AP chem showed her that she could handle harder classes such as AP calculus, which she tackled her senior year. "Maybe before I took AP chem, I would have not selected AP calc because it is known as one of the harder classes," she explains.

As a four-year member of Gilmour's volleyball team, Anna competed for the state championship every year. "We got third place my freshman year," she recalls. "We won states sophomore and junior year, and in my senior year, we got runner up." The experience, she says, taught her about teamwork and leadership. In addition, she was in a club called Baking for Rainbows throughout high school. "It's a monthly bake sale," Anna explains. "We sell the goods at school and the money goes to Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital." In Anna's senior year, she took a leadership position in the group. "I always love baking," she explains. "So I took my favorite hobby and used it in a constructive way to help others and it was really fun."

Even though grades were always important to Anna, she says she kept things in balance by remembering that she should be able to have fun and spend time with friends, compete in sports, etc. even if it often meant late nights. "I could do stuff with friends but then also come home to do homework," she says. "A balance is definitely possible."

Anna says a strong network of friends helped her succeed. "They are all super. We keep each other in check. We won't distract each other from our goals and we always encourage each other." In the fall, Anna will be part of the Honor's College at the University of South Carolina, where she plans to major in international business.

Indira Zsuzsanna Katiyar is a 2023 graduate of Laurel School, the K-12 all-girls school in Shaker Heights, and the winner of the school's Lyman prize. In lieu of naming a valedictorian, Laurel presents the Lyman prize to the student with the highest cumulative GPA in her time in the Upper School.

Through high-school classes and extracurriculars, Indira found fulfillment, challenges and no shortage of surprises. For instance, taking Honors Chemistry online during her sophomore year in the midst of the pandemic, is something she says she wouldn't wish on anybody. Then, after a year off from chemistry, she took AP chemistry her senior year and recalls, "I worked hard throughout the year and, well, I made it through, so I'm really proud of myself for that." Indira took seven other AP classes, including AP Chinese and AP English. Outside the classroom, Indira participated in synchronized swimming, acted in school plays and served on the stage crew, participated in Laurel's Judicial Council, ran cross country, and worked as a camp counselor.

Through synchronized swimming, she says, "I learned



**Gilmour Academy valedictorian Anna Rarick will be studying international business at the University of South Carolina in the fall. Photograph by Jennifer B. Photography.**

so much about working as a team, making friends, and dealing with mental pressure in high stress situations." The school plays were, "some of the most trying and most rewarding experiences I've undertaken," Indira says. Serving on the Judicial Council for four years taught her "a lot about how a school works and how discipline in a school is a balance." Her camp counselor gig was at the pre-school where she had once attended as a camper herself. Being there as a counselor, she says, "reminded me of the joys of curiosity and kindness."

And then there was the track team. "In the very last semester of high school, I accidentally stumbled upon track, having done only one year of cross country the semester before," Indira recalls. Neither the coach nor Indira herself had high expectations for her track abilities when she tried the 400-meter on a whim. "Little did I know that the 400 would become my event, and that running it in a relay would take me all the way to regional finals alongside a team of passionate, caring and fun-loving teammates," she explains. "I surprised everybody - including myself - with how far and how fast I could go. This was really important to me because it showed me that there are so many things I don't yet know about myself that I can uncover if I just try."

Indira describes the balance in her life as a "pendulum that swings back and forth," as she explains that sometimes she spent 13-hour days at school, and other times she squeezed in a few silly YouTube videos. "School isn't everything," she concludes. "The things that help you get



**Laurel graduate Indira Katiyar is planning a dual major in biological engineering and Asian languages and cultures, but her many other interests include pre-med, forestry, and education.**

University School, the all-boys private K-12 school with campuses in Shaker Heights and Hunting Valley, names an Alumni Award winner each year. The award goes to the top-ranked student in their class. Nicholas James Wojnar is this year's recipient.

Of the 10 AP classes Nicholas took, he enjoyed U.S. history and physics the best although he says Latin was by far the most challenging and also the class in which he learned the most. Of his extracurriculars, he says, "I found volunteering as a peer tutor and my part-time work as a server to be some of my most rewarding experiences beyond high school. Additionally, I enjoyed being a leader of my school's academic challenge team, with the opportunity to help underclassmen improve their skills." Nicholas also enjoys playing chess and weight lifting.

He says that, together, all his extracurriculars enabled

through the day, like conversations with friends, or silly jokes, are things that you should try to encourage in your life. And give yourself space to make mistakes and mess up. Sometimes a walk around the neighborhood does wonders."

Indira is also grateful to her support group. "I am really lucky to have family, friends, and teachers who believed that I could keep going and make something great, even when I didn't myself," she says.

In college, Indira will continue to pursue varied interests. "I'm thinking of a dual major in biological engineering and Asian languages and cultures, but I'm also interested in pre-med, forestry, and education. We'll see what the future holds!"



**Nicholas James Wojnar finished at the top of his class at University School, earning the distinction of this year's Alumni Award winner. He'll be studying physics at Yale beginning this fall. Photograph by Ripcho Studios, Inc.**

and to seek help from their teachers because they are always willing to be supportive of you."

In the fall, Nicholas will be studying physics at Yale University but first he'll be taking his first trip beyond North America when he heads to Paris with his family. After college, he says, "I hope to pursue a career in physics research and become a professor one day."

Throughout my journey in high school, the encouragement of all my teachers allowed me to rekindle my love for the arts and humanities, in addition to just science. Additionally, University School offered me numerous advanced, specific courses in every field I wanted to pursue. Now, I have a great passion for learning that I hope to take with me through the rest of my life."

## Gilmour Grads are going places.

Congratulations to the Class of 2023!

