

# Fighting That Contagion of the Classroom, Senioritis

By MAREK FUCHS

Instead of coasting through the final weeks of her senior year in high school, Greer Lanzet is fine-tuning punch lines and working on a stand-up routine.

Andrew Feldman, a Scarsdale High School classmate, is learning to play the sitar, while other seniors are working alongside nurses and cooks.

The goal of such projects is to keep students engaged and to ward off the traditional senior slump, also known as senioritis. Its symptoms flare the moment college acceptances arrive, and they include a lackadaisical effort in all things academic.

More and more schools are reacting to senioritis in innovative ways. Last month, the New Jersey Department of Education assembled dozens of schools to exchange ideas about what initiatives work and what do not.

One of the oldest programs intended specifically to fight senioritis was created at Woodlands High School in Hartsdale, N.Y., in 1973 when experiential learning was in vogue. The program, the Wise Individualized Senior Experience, is now running in 60 schools in more than a dozen states, said Victor Leviatin, a founder and president of the nonprofit organization.

Mr. Leviatin, now 64, was a young history teacher at Woodlands when he was introduced to the managerial nightmare that is the second half of the senior high school year.

"School always reacted punitively to seniors once they got into college," Mr. Leviatin said. "They'd increase the number of requirements, eliminate senior privileges, or threaten to write to their colleges." None of it worked, he said, and the school would lose its connection with students who were at the cusp of the biggest transition of their lives: leaving home.

"High school seniors are leaving the only world they know," he said. "And even though they're crabbing about that world the whole time, they are terrified."

WISE involves seniors' doing an internship or taking part in a project for some of their senior year. Students choose a topic or field they want to pursue. With a faculty mentor and an outside supervisor, they keep a journal, and the program finishes with a presentation before a panel of teachers, students and community members.

WISE was originally intended to span the entire second semester, be for academic credit and take the place of all classes. But many schools use a scaled-down version of the program. Whether academic credit is given depends on the individual school.

"We want seniors to learn how to play an instrument, get their scuba license or jump out of an airplane, we've even had extreme sports," said Gretchen Bushnell, an organizer of the program at Old Saybrook High School in Connecticut. "But you have to do it all before or after school."

At Scarsdale High, however, students are given the last six weeks of the year to pursue their projects and internships on a pass/fail basis, said David Greene, the program's coordinator. "For 11 1/2 years, we've been telling them what to do. For six weeks, they get to choose."

Greer Lanzet knew she had found her outside supervisor when she read a newspaper article about a comedian who graduated from Scarsdale High in 1996.



Richard L. Harbus for The New York Times

Jennifer DosSantos, left, a senior at Woodlands High School in Hartsdale, N.Y., gets responses to her presentation about staging rock concerts for children.

She called the woman, Julie Klausner, and asked her to be the supervisor of her project. Even though Ms. Klausner was familiar with WISE, having done a short film in her senior year, she was taken aback.

"I heard Greer's pixie little voice and I kept saying, 'Who is pranking me?'" said Ms. Klausner, who recently completed a one-woman show, "Fancy," at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in Manhattan.

Commuting twice a week into New York City, Greer said she worked on the finer points of comedic delivery with Ms. Klausner. "We sat and hung out and talked about techniques," Greer said. "I learned about beats, that the funny part of the sentence should come at the end, and that jokes often come in threes."

Ms. Klausner gave Greer reading material, including a book on "Saturday Night Live." Greer observed people in her native Scarsdale, from elementary school students to women at the nail salon. "I eavesdrop politely," she said.

Under Ms. Klausner's guidance, Greer began creating sketch characters, such as a Scarsdale mother writing a letter to

a self-help program that her daughter attended. "The mom thanks the self-help group for everything, even the family dog who they thought was dead but came back to life," Greer said. On Friday, Greer, who is headed to the University of Vermont, will give her presentation, a half-hour of stand-up monologue.

For many, these presentations are rites of passage. At Woodlands on a recent morning, a panel of students, teachers and community members was joined by a classroom full of students to see the presentation of Cori Barrer, who spent the second half of her senior year working at the pediatric nursery at Westchester Medical Center.

Cori went into WISE wanting to be a psychologist but emerged with plans to be a nurse. With accompanying photographs and props, she recounted the day-to-day tasks required of her, before touching on the emotional toll of the job.

"I became friends with a little girl who lost her hair from chemotherapy," she said, "and I was in her room one time when her older sister was playing with her own hair and saying out loud how much she loved it." The older sister

should have known better, Cori said, pausing to compose herself. "Later," Cori said, "the little girl told me all she cared about in life was getting a chance to ride a bicycle."

Jennifer DosSantos, who gave the next presentation, said she had planned to stage a number of rock concerts. Her goal was to bring alternative music to suburban children, and she sent out a prospecting letter to bands that began with the words "I have no history booking shows but..."

She got nibbles that led to a single show that proved a comedy of errors, with a no-show sound technician, a concert room that she had to clean herself just before show time, the need to reach into her pocket for \$50 to pay the headline band and only 40 people attending instead of the 200 she anticipated.

"That was really sad for me," Jennifer said. "I wanted to cry. I was so embarrassed."

Jennifer shifted gears. Instead of

## Schools try to keep students engaged after the college acceptances arrive.

putting on more concerts, she worked at a college radio station but, she said, she learned a lot about the organizational skills needed to put on an event. She also learned that she did not want to go into concert promotion.

"When I'm, like, old, I don't want to deal with these crazy bands," she said.

Even supporters of such projects concede that because of their self-directed nature, there is a chance for abuse.

"You can abuse the system, you can fudge," said Andrew Feldman, who learned to play the sitar. "I could have stayed home eating potato chips, but I didn't. At the end of the day, you have to present everything you've done and it does work."

Greer added: "It's an easy thing to mess up on but why would you want to? Look what they're letting us do. If you are able to choose what you do and still don't do it, you're going to have a problem in college anyway."

There are educators, like Nancy Faust Sizer, the author of "Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year" (2002), who strongly support such programs but say they should be linked to the work or academic world.

"It has to have something to do with their future," Mrs. Faust said. "Rock climbing just doesn't do it."

In a drive to make academic work itself more relevant, Newton High School in New Jersey offers community college course work to their seniors. Brian Doherty, its principal, said that credits from college courses were more likely to be accepted by colleges than those from advanced placement classes, so the incentive is high.

For Mr. Doherty, success in combating senioritis lies in nurturing rather than punitive measures.

"We take the carrot approach rather than the stick," he said.