

GRADUATION

STEM-loving Taunton teen's journey takes her from science fair to Harvard



Donna Whitehead

The Taunton Daily Gazette

Published 4:00 a.m. ET June 5, 2022

This is one in a series of articles on members of the Class of 2022 who are headed to Ivy League colleges and universities this fall.

TAUNTON — Kayla Parrett’s seventh-grade project on food science was the first of many over the years that developed her growing interest in microbiology and immunology, two fields she plans to study at Harvard University this fall.

“My latest projects revolved around microbiology,” said Parrett, who will be majoring in molecular and cellular biology.

Throughout her career at Taunton High School, Parrett accumulated numerous science awards, including several first place finishes at the Massachusetts Region III Science Fair, the David R. Vito Award in Micro-Molecular Biology, the Moderna 2nd place prize at the Massachusetts State Science Fair, and the U.S. Air Force Certificate of Achievement for Outstanding STEM Project.

She is a Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair finalist and Massachusetts state delegate, as well as the recipient of the National School Development Council Award for Academic Growth and Student Leadership in Learning.

Her recent international science fair project explored the effect of natural antimicrobials on ampicillin resistant E. Coli and E. Coli K12.

Parrett said her advanced placement biology teacher Amanda Machado has been one of her biggest supporters.

“Ms. Machado guided me through several science fair projects over the years,” she said. “I wouldn’t have made it to the international science fair without her mentorship and I am grateful for all of her help these past four years.”

Eye-popping Taunton-area home sales: 'Resort-like' waterfront home in Dighton sells for almost \$700,000

Parrett initially had plans to attend Harvard, but after the university’s information sessions she fell in love with it.

“I loved their emphasis on diversity and inclusivity which I feel is not always highlighted when people imagine a life at Harvard,” she said. “Next year, I’ll get to meet people from all over the world with a multitude of experiences that differ from my own which is pretty cool.”

Parrett said she learned a lot about herself while working on her college admission essays. The process led her for the first time to talk openly about being a person of mixed race.

“I had to figure out the key elements that defined my life these past five years and while it can seem daunting, it is extremely rewarding because you come out of the process with a better idea of who you are,” she said.

“For instance, in my case, I talked openly about being a person of mixed race in my essays and the micro aggressions I have dealt with because of it. It is evident when you first meet me that I am not simply white or Black, but I never took the time to fully reflect on the implications this has had on my interactions throughout my life.

“I am biracial and I never questioned that but I never fully acknowledged the pent up emotions I had over the way I was treated at times.”

Here's the plan: Invasive weeds in Lake Sabbatia will soon get their reckoning

She now has a passion to increase representation for biracial individuals in America.

“I think the college admissions process helped light this fire in me, that we need to talk about these issues,” she said. “There is great power vested in the tiny box labeled for identity.”

Parrett is on the advisory board of the National Girls Collaborative Project, a nonprofit dedicated to facilitating access to STEM education for young girls, primarily those from minority backgrounds.

“Harvard has groups that promote diversity in STEM and I would love to be a part of them,” she said.

In addition to competing in science fairs, Parrett was a member of varsity tennis and swim teams, serving as captain. She was president of Key Club and Model UN and secretary of the National Honor Society and the NextGenMed club. She earned the Key Club Single Service Project Award in the New England and Bermuda District and volunteers through the Interact Club and at Our Daily Bread.

She encourages other students to participate in activities they enjoy during high school

“I think many people worry so much about how many AP classes they have to take in order to reach a certain GPA or be in the top five of their class,” she said. “They think this is what defines them in the college admissions process.

“Stop worrying about what you may think a college is looking for and just participate in activities that you enjoy and can learn from.”

After college, Parrett said she hopes to attend medical school and then pursue a career in immunology and infectious disease either in a clinical research setting or as a physician.

Staff writer Donna Whitehead can be reached by email at dwhitehead@tauntongazette.com.