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## Civics in action

Class challenges students to work on issues they care about most

By Magdalena Wegrzyn

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LONGMONT — Legalizing same-sex marriage. Overturning a ban on pit bulls in Denver. Steroid use among student athletes.

If it's a litigious issue, chances are students in Silver Creek High School's college-prep government class are on it.

The 66 juniors in Mary Ellen Graziani and Justelle Grandsaert's government classes are finishing a Civics in Action Project this week. Students chose topics and then carried out three civil actions to defend them.

Graziani and Grandsaert are field testing the pilot program for the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation. Teachers in California, Illinois, Nevada and Pennsylvania also are testing the curriculum.

Students began working on the project in mid-September and will turn it in Monday. To cap off the project, the government classes will hear from City Council and school board candidates this morning on topics that many students addressed in their projects.

School board candidates will discuss the district's cell phone policy and answer questions about school funding. City Council candidates will focus on laws that cover cell phone use in vehicles, and explain a tax for street maintenance and how fees are used to fund city services.

But not all students focused on those topics.

Samantha Bush wants to see the pit bull ban in Denver overturned.

The 15-year-old has interviewed behavioral specialists at the Longmont Humane Society and is circulating a petition to present to the Denver City Council. She also hopes to distribute educational information at one of the society's upcoming fundraisers.

Bush, a self-described dog lover, is also a volunteer at the Humane Society and said pit bulls are often her favorite dogs to walk during her Sunday morning shift.

"I was talking to my friend about doing this, and my friend was like, "You're *actually* working with pit bulls? They're so scary,"" Bush said. "People just don't understand them."

TJ Adams, 17, is focusing on implementing random steroid testing for student athletes.

Adams, who plays football and basketball, said he chose the topic because it's a hot-button issue in the athletic world. His partner for the project, 16-year-old Keenan Olsen, is on the school's football and baseball teams.



Silver Creek High School junior Samantha Bush pets Samantha on Sunday near the Longmont Humane Society. Bush is working to reverse a ban on pit bulls in Denver as part of her Civics in Action Project for school. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

Together, the boys wrote a letter to the Times-Call and to the school board. They also surveyed coaches and students for their thoughts on steroid use.

“We surveyed about 45 kids and more than half actually said they’d like to see random drug testing for steroids,” Adams said.

The environment is the topic of choice for Tylar Neu. The 16-year-old presented a class on global warming, air pollution and hazardous waste to third and fourth graders at Northridge Elementary on Wednesday morning.

“When they’re younger, that’s when they’re the most easily influenced,” she said. “I know that when you get older, you get into habits and it’s harder to break them.”

Afterward, Neu asked students to create posters with information about preserving the Earth.

Neu said the project is one of her favorites so far in high school.

“It’s kind of like we assigned ourselves something to do, and I’ve never done something like that,” she said.

Zoe DeBrohun immediately assigned herself her pet-cause: legalizing same-sex marriage.

“I knew that’s what I was going to do,” said the 16-year-old. “No question about it.”

DeBrohun has written an editorial defending her opinion that she hopes to publish in the school newspaper and other publications.

And the project has been “an eye-opening experience, to say the least,” she said.

“It’s probably one of the best projects I have ever done just because it’s not just writing an essay only your teacher will see,” she said. “It’s making something that everyone will see.”

Grandsaert said the project has exceeded her expectations and helped combat the notion that government class is boring.

“I’m hoping they will realize they have a voice and that voice can be heard,” she said. “Even if you create awareness, they are creating a small change.”

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