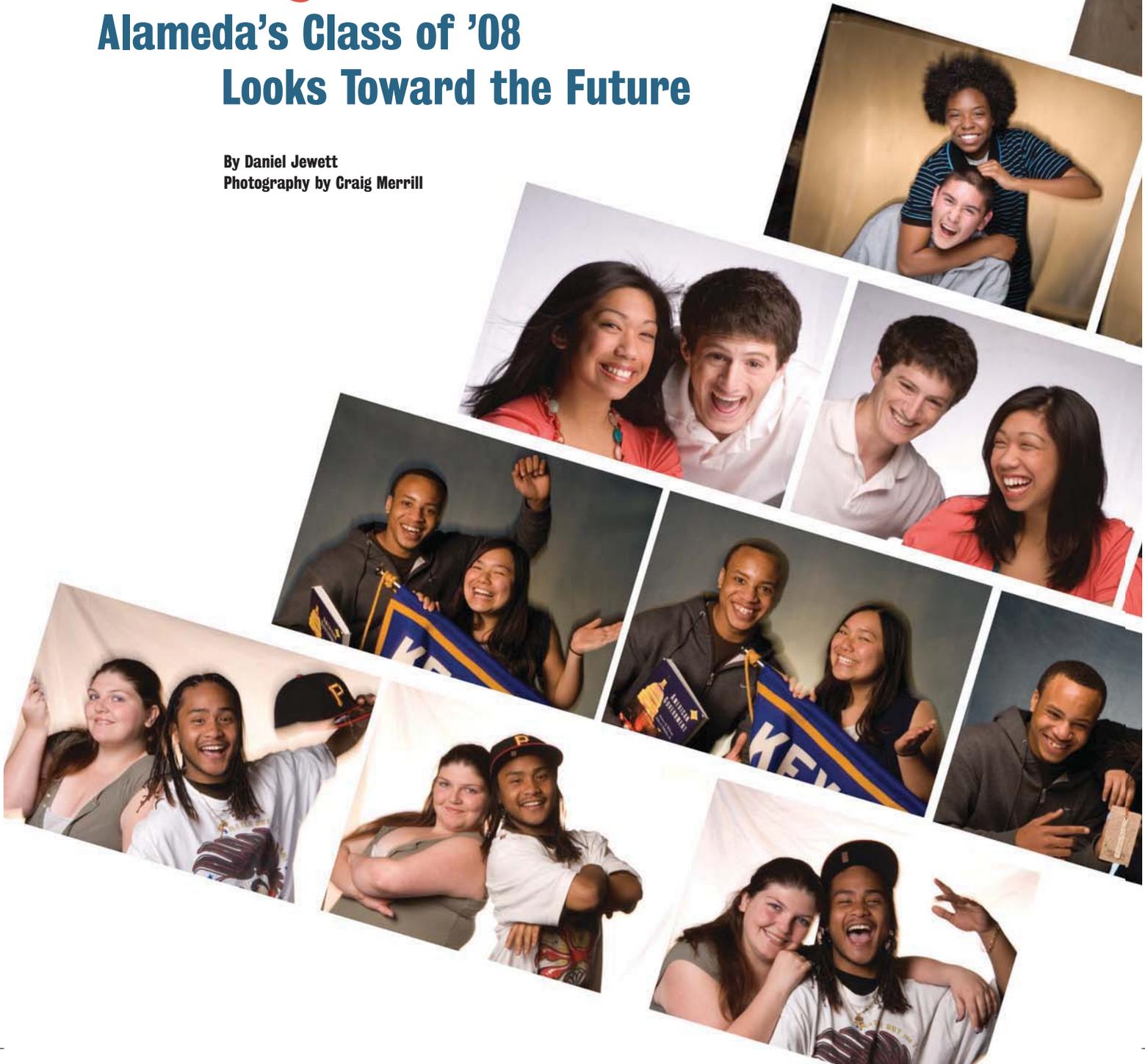


GREAT GRADUATES

**Alameda's Class of '08
Looks Toward the Future**

**By Daniel Jewett
Photography by Craig Merrill**





The class of 2008 is an inspiring one. Each of the seniors in *Alameda Magazine's* annual top students profile has a different story and a different background, but all are up to amazing things. Some have traveled to Cuba, Spain or Guatemala, while others have spent their time becoming black-belt martial artists or star pitchers. Some have had to overcome such challenges as coping with family drug problems, dropping out of school or having a child, but all have found a way to turn these challenges into positives. What can we expect from the class of 2008 in the future? We may be looking at tomorrow's surgeons, forensic scientists or novelists. But some have much simpler goals—they just want to see koala bears in Australia. >>

ALAMEDA HIGH SCHOOL

 **Melissa Nicole Lim** is one high school senior you don't want to mess with. Melissa is a black belt in Kuk Sool Won, a martial arts discipline she has spent the last six years perfecting and an art form that has shaped who she is today.

"Martial arts has taught me the importance of dedication, hard work and self-discipline," she says. "I love everything from the exhilaration during tournaments to the intensity of a long workout."

Indeed, Melissa is no stranger to hard work, earning high academic honors as well as awards for swimming, water polo and martial arts. Through it all she also finds time to tutor students in French and math and play piano, volunteering to perform at nursing homes. But it is martial arts that has made the biggest impression in her young life, offering constant inspiration: "I have learned so much by training with people who continue to inspire and motivate me."

College Choice: Undecided
Major: Undecided
Dream Job: Undecided

 **Jordan Thomas Pries** is used to curve balls in life. Despite an injury as a baby that cost him a quarter of his right index finger, Jordan has gone on to deliver many a fast ball as the star pitcher for the Alameda High School baseball team, leading the 2006 team to the first North Coast Section title in school history.

"Only a small group of people could predict what was to come, and those people were the 21 of us wearing gold uniforms," Jordan says about that magical season. "As a bunch of friends who just happened to have some game on the diamond, that 2006 squad had a type of chemistry unmatched in the area."

With all that athletic success, it would seem that a future in sports is in the cards for this young honor student, but Jordan plans to conquer another field



and earn a degree in civil engineering with the intention of one day becoming a construction project manager in urban development. Still, he will always have that 2006 season: "We were on cloud nine. ... Nothing compares to what occurred in that season; I will never forget it as long as I live."

College Choice: Stanford University
Major: Civil engineering
Dream Job: Urban development



ALAMEDA COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER

 **Jeremy Nathan Kharrazi** loves getting to the root of the matter. That is just what he did when his family traveled to Cuba four years ago to trace its roots and visit his great aunt's grave.

"Let's just say that Cuba is not a place everyone has on his list of places to travel," the honor roll student says about the birthplace of his grandfather. "I went there not only to tour around but to discover the history of my family. ... Personally, I found a connection to the people of Cuba."

Jeremy plans to expand on his curiosity about the world and use it to fuel a study in cultural anthropology and linguistics. He wants one day to become a professor and share his passion with others. His trip to Cuba, his first trip outside the United States, taught him much: "The trip gave me not only a better understanding of my family's background, but of the world around me."

College Choice: Vanderbilt University

Major: Anthropology, linguistics

Dream Job: Professor of cultural anthropology

 **Precious Amethyst Herrera** has a lot of goals in life, including traveling to Spain, seeing koala bears in Australia, snowboarding in Japan and, one day, having a big family. It's a good thing, because she loves big crowds, like the more than 3,000 people who showed up for a church-sponsored track and field event she recently helped organize.

"It felt good to be a part of something so big and so meaningful to others," says the sports fanatic. "I took pride in knowing there was nothing too small or too big I couldn't accomplish."

It is all good practice for Precious, who hopes to combine her love of science—she is already taking college classes in physics—with her love of sports to one day work with athletes in sports medicine. But it isn't all work and no play for this ambitious high school senior who has one overriding passion when she gets time off: "I love watching college football!"

College Choice: University of San Francisco

Major: Sports medicine

Dream Job: Working with athletes

ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL



Rachel Leann Brewer claims most people don't see the fierce competitor behind the calm exterior, but her actions betray her, particularly those of Oct. 16, 2006. That was the day Rachel decided to give school "a second try" after dropping out for six months.

"I was wasting valuable time. I wanted to go back and give it one last try," she says. "Coming back was the first of many adult decisions I had to make."

Since coming back and enrolling at Island High School, Rachel has totally redirected herself and connected with teachers, staff and students in a whole new way. This new direction has led to a spot on the honor roll and some volunteer work for Toys for Tots and the Red Cross. "Since re-enrolling in school I have been on the honor roll and grown up a lot; school is important to me now," says the college-bound senior. "I want to be somebody, and I want to graduate." And that is just what Rachel is going to do.

College Choice: Undecided

Major: Undecided

Dream Job: Forensic scientist



Jeann Dionne Tacson says Friday the 13th may scare some, but he views it as the luckiest day of the year. "To me it is a blessed day," he says, as it is the day his son, Jayin Dushane Tacson, was born. "My son changed my whole life."

According to Jeann, he would be "buried six feet under the ground or behind bars" without the birth of his son last year. "I know now I need to be a big role model in my son's life," he adds. Jeann is off to a good start, earning a 3.6 GPA this year and throwing himself into his education, finishing 18 credits this semester. He plans to go to college and pursue a degree in social science, law or criminal justice.

The biggest lesson Jeann has learned this year is that sometimes change can be good. "My son makes me need to be successful in life and to stay strong no matter what or who brings me down," he says. "I love my son; he is the best. Being a father in my son's life is the best experience in my life."

College Choice: Undecided

Major: Social science

Dream Job: Criminal justice



ST. JOSEPH NOTRE DAME HIGH SCHOOL

 **Andy Nguyen** lives in the San Antonio neighborhood in Oakland, one of the most diverse in the city, and he loves it. Last year Andy spent a lot of time working as a community builder for the nonprofit San Antonio Neighborhood Network, an experience that was very educational.

“The job was time consuming and difficult, and all my co-workers were adults,” he says of the job that included such complex duties as grant writing. “Despite my age, I was hired because I was highly qualified with strong facilitation, interpersonal and leadership skills.”

Somehow, when not volunteering for the Oakland Youth Advisory Commission where he also serves, Andy also found the time to focus on his studies and he did pretty well, ranking No. 1 in his class. Believe it or not, Andy also hopes to learn more languages beyond the ones he already knows, which include Vietnamese, English, Spanish and French.

But sometimes the life of a busy high school student can take its toll as it did for Andy last year when volunteer activities encroached on his study time. “Through [my job with the neighborhood network] I also learned my limitations when I had to quit after it became too stressful.”

College Choice: Stanford University

Major: Cell biology

Dream Job: Surgeon

 **Rocio Michel Molina-Garcia** wants to write a novel by the age of 30. It all started when Rocio joined the Spanish Honors Society because she thought it would look good on her resume and wound up with something much more important.

“We were all provided with candles, and our moderator said that the art of language is a skill that illuminates the world,” the honor student says. “She expertly voiced the reason why I study language and made me decide to spread its light.”

But the study of language is important to this bilingual student for

other reasons. “Since childhood, I have spent hours with my grandparents in hospitals as their translator. Usually the doctor quickly gives us a vague answer,” Rocio explains. “The language barrier prevents my grandparents from receiving adequate service. This experience has made me appreciate the ability to help others through [a knowledge of] Spanish.”

Rocio hopes to one day help many more people and become a surgeon. To that end, she is planning to attend Stanford University, where she has already been accepted, and study biochemistry and linguistics. For this high school student, that seems like a perfect combination.

College Choice: Stanford University

Major: Biochemistry

Dream Job: Surgeon



ENCINAL HIGH SCHOOL



Anthony Chibueze Anekwe Jr.

returned home from school one day only to find his mother asking him to pack his bags.

“I knew something wasn’t right,” he remembers. “It had never occurred to me that my mother’s addiction was so powerful it would someday get us evicted.” But that is exactly what happened, and things were about to get worse as Anthony and his sister were soon placed in “the loop,” moving through various foster homes.

Instead of feeling sorry for himself or using the experience as an excuse, Anthony “came to realize that if I wanted a brighter future and a successful lifestyle, I would have to take charge of my life.” And that is just what he did, getting up at 5 a.m. all through middle school in order to take BART to meet with teachers and keep his academics up. This drive led Anthony to become the first African-American valedictorian at Encinal High School and inspired him to find the one escape that really matters—playing classical piano. “Nothing makes me happier than to be able to sit at the piano and express my thoughts and emotions through classical music.”

Today Anthony is well on his way and setting his sights high, striving to become a neurosurgeon. His life so far can best be summarized by this quote from his favorite author Kenji Miyazawa, “We must embrace adversity and burn it as fuel for our journey.”

College Choice: Princeton University
Major: Neuroscience
Dream Job: Neurosurgeon



Cicely A. Li

traveled to another country to find something she was missing: confidence in herself. Last summer, Cicely spent six weeks in Guatemala through the nonprofit leadership organization Summer Search and, while volunteering there with the group Safe Passage, saw another side of life as she spent time with families who work in the Guatemalan city dumps.

“I learned about the tragic history of Guatemala,” she says about the experience. “But I also realized my dreams and my potential to do great things. My trip to Guatemala gave

me the confidence and the self-esteem I had lacked because I came from a family of low income.”

Cicely keeps herself busy in high school, earning a spot on the honor roll, as well as serving as the highest ranking officer in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps and as senior class vice-president, but it is her experience abroad that has most influenced her: “My experience led to my decision to pursue a career in international relations.”

College Choice: UC Berkeley
Major: International relations
Dream Job: Legislator

BAY AREA SCHOOL OF ENTERPRISE



Brianna Joy Thompson knows the importance of education, pulling herself from a 2.0 grade point average to a 3.56 GPA in just two semesters and earning a spot on the honor roll. But education is about more than just numbers for this high school senior who is never afraid to speak out.

“My grandfather was a lawyer and my grandmother an occupational therapist; education brought them everything,” Brianna says. “My mother never finished college, and I see her and my sisters struggle.” Brianna will be the first of her sisters to go to college, and that is very important, she says.

To that end, Brianna plans to go to college and earn a master’s degree in education, giving her the chance to teach others the importance of a good education. “BASE really showed me how important it is to get an education and to strive for everything you want in life. ... Never give up.”

College Choice: Sacramento State University

Major: Education

Dream Job: High school teacher



Nicholas Cervantes was shaped by two events early in life—one almost tragic, one inspirational, but both influential. Tragedy was narrowly avoided as his two sisters survived getting run over by a van, and inspiration was found in an elementary school teacher who recognized the talent Nicholas showed at any early age.

“My elementary school teacher taught me to do my best in school and ‘fly high like an eagle,’” Nicholas says. “Overall, she is the one who molded me to be a good student.” But it was the near-tragedy that left an equally permanent impression on the young student’s life. “The experience with my sisters taught me that life is borrowed and can easily be taken away.”

But his sisters survived, and Nicholas now enjoys a whole new dynamic relationship with them. “I am the first in my family to go to college,” says the student who found his way into the Young Entrepreneurs at Haas program at UC Berkeley. “I am the oldest in my family, and I try to influence my younger sisters to do good in high school.” With a role model like Nicholas, it is hard to believe they won’t. ■

College Choice: UC Berkeley

Major: Electrical engineering

Dream Job: Electrical engineer

