

Center for Gifted Education
College of William and Mary

**Creating Alternatives in Talent Development:
A Student Takes Action**

by Janine Lehane

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In the summer of 1999, Jennifer Stewart Harris Hix, a grade 10 student of Fr. Walton Beach High School in Destin, Florida, attended a tennis camp at the College of William and Mary. During her visit to the campus, Jennifer, who is known as Muffin, along with her mother, initiated contact with Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Director of the Center for Gifted Education at the College. In the course of her conversation with Dr. VanTassel-Baska, Muffin spoke of the difficulty of fully pursuing her academic and artistic interests within the framework of the high school schedule, whereupon Dr. VanTassel-Baska encouraged her to assume a self-advocacy role within her school. Muffin duly followed this suggestion, and with the help of Ms. Alexis Tibbetts, now principal of the school, an independent gifted studies class was created.

The class is "customizable," Muffin explained in an interview with the managing editor of *Systems*. A student may apply to undertake the class and, with sufficient reason, or a prior background that indicates that he or she is capable in a particular area, a course of study may then be developed in conjunction with a sponsor. Students are paired with a sponsor through a careful process that includes matching areas of expertise. The sponsor must also be a certified gifted teacher. A student conveys to the sponsor the goals and objectives of the proposed study and a timeframe for achievement is negotiated. The goals and objectives of the project form the basis for evaluation.

A student later makes contact with his or her sponsor to meet the required number of hours in the classroom and to show the extent of progress towards prearranged goals and objectives. The sponsor is also available should the student need assistance. "Other than that," Muffin commented, "the student has 'free run.'" The process allows the student freedom to allocate his or her time to preferred tasks, which, as Muffin said, "is refreshing in high school."

Ft. Walton Beach High School is a large school of approximately 2500 students, and Muffin believes it a "miracle that I got to create this class because it had been lost." The class had once been offered at the school, but this had not been the case for some time. Muffin indicated that one of her particular reasons for embarking on this endeavor was that "in elementary school and in middle school there is a strong gifted program in which you either go to external programs or have classes during the school day. In high school, in your freshman year, you are given the opportunity to take one gifted class, which is not homogeneously gifted. It's gifted/honors, and after that, there's nothing. My school offers AP (Advanced Placement) only, unlike other schools in the area which also run the IB (International Baccalaureate) program."

Muffin is an articulate and self-assured young woman who has an extensive list of honors and awards to her credit. She has a very full schedule of classes and activities and used the independent gifted studies class time to assume editorial responsibility for the creation of a

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literary magazine which she called *Soliloquies*. She also contributed original poetry to the anthology. Her written contributions and those of her peers are complemented by fine arts photography, including her own award-winning photographs. She remarked: "I probably could not have created the anthology this year without this class. It has given me so much time.... Before there was no class - now, more students are selecting this option because they are being given an opportunity."

In a subsequent letter to Dr. VanTassel-Baska, Ms. Tibbetts wrote: "It was a pleasure for me to assist Muffin Hix in receiving credit through a gifted independent studies class in Okaloosa County this year. When Muffin first came to me with the desire to complete an independent study by creating the literary magazine for Ft. Walton Beach High School, we were unsure how she could achieve course credit. In perusing the Florida Course Code Directory, we were able to locate a course that awards credit for independent study by gifted students. In completing this publication, Muffin continued her photography and writing skills, enhanced through a trip to Europe in the summer of 1999. We are so proud of Muffin and her accomplishments in the Okaloosa County Schools and in publishing this incredible product."

Soliloquies has been well received by audiences within the school and throughout the community. Banks and resorts, for example, have purchased copies for their waiting rooms and use them as gratuities for their clients. The Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation also sponsored the project, the first literary work to have been sponsored by that association. Muffin declared the board of the Foundation to be comprised of highly influential people who have given her and her fellow staff members much assistance and access to many contacts. When asked about her own contributions to the anthology, she commented, "Poetry is something that I do when I'm sitting around. My photography is my passion."