

Willingboro valedictorian builds on district's engineering legacy

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer



Daniel Nguyen was the top student in his class for all four years at Willingboro High School

WILLINGBORO — [Principal] Kimberly Ash first met Daniel Nguyen when he was a sophomore at Willingboro High School at the annual Burlington County Academic Achievement dinner in April. The event, sponsored by the Burlington County Principals and Supervisors Association, recognizes the top students in the sophomore, junior and senior classes in each high school in the county. Little did the principal of Willingboro High School know, that wouldn't be the last time she'd see him.

"We had dinner together my first year here, and we've been having dinner together once a year ever since," Ash said. Daniel, the 2016 valedictorian, has been at the top of his class for all four years at Willingboro. The Class of 2016 will graduate on Monday at 6 p.m.

"I didn't know how big of a deal it was until now, well, until probably sophomore and junior year. Then I knew it was a big deal. So now senior year, it's very exciting," Daniel said. Daniel, who was a member of the National Honor Society and the math, chess and science clubs, will study computer engineering at Rutgers University's School of Engineering in New Brunswick in the fall. He said his parents helped spark his interest early on. "I was always interested in technology. I think my dad introduced me to a lot of

technology as well, and I liked to fiddle with things and play with software. And I've always had an interest in technology since I was little," Daniel said.

He isn't the first valedictorian from the school to decide to pursue the discipline. The school's last three are all in engineering programs in college. Quacy Mars-Dolphin, the 2014 valedictorian, just finished his sophomore year at Rowan University studying mechanical engineering. He credits his high school teachers with getting him interested. "It started with Mr. (Christopher) Orlando's physics class," said Mars-Dolphin, 20. "That was pretty much where I fell in love with physics itself." He said his teacher assigned the students to build certain projects, but they weren't allowed to go out and buy items they thought would fit best. They had to find items around the house and build the assignment out of what they had. Mars-Dolphin said that as someone who loved building things with Legos when he was younger, this was right up his alley.

Ash credited her teachers' ideas, work ethic and love of their subjects for inspiring students. "Our teachers that are in that track are very passionate about what they do, and I think they create a wave of energy about what they do," she said. "If a kid has an interest there, it kind of just hooks on."

Board of Education President Kimbrali Davis, who works in the engineering field as a research project manager for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, said she credits the teachers and the district's science and math curriculums for inspiring the students. "Our teaching staff is providing the necessary tools for our students to succeed. They're providing the passion, the desire, the interest (for students) to pursue careers in engineering, and that's coming from a school that's not just focused on engineering," said Davis, who got her degree in engineering from Rutgers University.

Superintendent Ronald Taylor said he is very impressed by the students and the teachers who helped them achieve this success. "It means the world to know that students are leaving our district and pursuing the most challenging of careers," Taylor said.

[Former valedictorian] Mars-Dolphin said besides helping him in the classroom, his teachers gave him confidence to pursue his goals, even if they were challenging or difficult, something he sees his classmates struggling with. "They feel like they can't do it, and I know I can do it," he said. "We're pushed to do the maximum level we can, our maximum potential." Mars-Dolphin said he hopes to work for the government, in particular with military technology, after he finishes school.

Ash said students like Daniel, Mars-Dolphin and 2015 valedictorian Isaiah Harrison, who is studying civil engineering at Rutgers, are great examples of the work her staff and students put in. "Folks seem to diminish the quality of our degree," she said. "My scholars that leave here go out and compete in the world with everybody else with all of the other schools, and they hold their own."

Davis said she is also proud to see these students come out of the district and pursue challenging STEM programs. "What Willingboro is showing is that, still through the traditional learning track, our students are successfully prepared to go into any of the sciences or engineering (fields) and be successful," she

said. Taylor said partnerships with local organizations such as Lockheed Martin have exposed the students to what a career in a STEM field would look like. The school board recently approved a partnership with the DOT to bring after-school STEM-focused programs to the elementary schools as well, he said.

For Daniel, he hopes to continue his academic success at Rutgers and explore new technologies, such as 3-D printing and virtual reality. Ash believes he will be successful based on his track record. "I'm honored to be a part of (Daniel's) journey, and my part is coming to a close, but I do think there's a part of what I tried to instill here that Daniel and the others will take with them, and they'll always be a part of me as well," she said.

Source: http://www.burlingtoncountytimes.com/news/local/graduation/willingboro-valedictorian-builds-on-district-s-engineering-legacy/article_f10f46f8-349e-11e6-9f7b-7bb7c3bbcda9.html