



# Horizons

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## A SPECIAL "Q & A" WITH OUR "CLASS OF 2021" VALEDICTORIAN AND SALUTATORIAN

High School Principal, Chris Cook, recently announced the Class of 2021 Valedictorian and Salutatorian. Melody Cheng was named Valedictorian and Alexander Vasilakopoulos was named Salutatorian.

Melody's GPA throughout the end of her junior year was 105.4 and Alex's GPA throughout the end of his junior year was 105. These students are impressive in their academic achievements!

Melody and Alex recently participated in a special "Q & A." We thank them for this opportunity to get to know them better.

### ***How has Hauppauge School District prepared you academically and personally for the future?***

***Melody:*** Academically, the rigor of the classes Hauppauge offers has helped me to hone my skills as a thinker, writer, and researcher. As an Advanced Placement veteran, I've learned to memorize and regurgitate copious amounts of information with relative ease. As an International Baccalaureate Diploma Candidate, I've discovered the importance of gaining multiple perspectives and seeking out opportunities which combine creativity, action, and service.

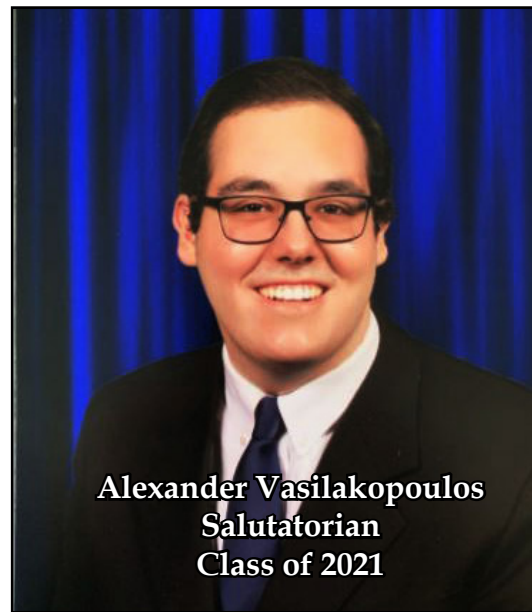
Personally, the caliber of the people Hauppauge cultivates has made me into a keen leader, listener, and companion. Being a part of this community has taught me to celebrate infinite diversity in infinite combinations, take risks when no one is willing, and be unafraid to upend others' expectations. Over the years, the relationships I've nurtured with students and staff have provided me with a support system I can always turn to, and a family I can always count on.

I'm confident that my experiences here have prepared me for anything anywhere. Hauppauge has both challenged my intellect and championed my aspirations in ways I could not have gotten at any other school district.

***Alex:*** Hauppauge has prepared me academically by offering me a chance to challenge myself with the AP and IB course offerings. I was able to do the IB Diploma Program whilst also taking eight AP classes. This challenging course load has allowed me to realize that I can meet any challenges that lie ahead. Personally, Hauppauge has shown me how to advocate for myself. I noticed the absence of a Quiz Bowl team at the school, so I met with administration and started it myself. In seventh grade, I advocated for myself in requesting to double accelerate in math and science classes. Hauppauge has shown me that it is always important to stand up for yourself and your beliefs.



**Melody Cheng**  
Valedictorian  
Class of 2021



**Alexander Vasilakopoulos**  
Salutatorian  
Class of 2021

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## **What are your future plans?**

**Melody:** *In the future, I hope to attend a four-year college, finish medical school, and open a private practice in neurology.*

**Alex:** *Currently, I plan on attending college and later medical school, in hope of becoming a pediatric infectious disease specialist, helping to treat children with various diseases. I would love to work for Doctors Without Borders or the World Health Organization; I would be able to treat those in need whilst fulfilling my dream of traveling the world.*

## **What helped you focus on what you wanted to do in the future?**

**Melody:** *New discoveries are being made in STEM-related fields every day, discoveries that facilitate progress. I want to be part of a future in which I can have a direct, tangible, and lasting impact on the lives of others. Through a career in medicine, I'll not only be able to provide treatment for the people I meet, but I'll also be able to contribute to research that will benefit people I may never meet.*

*For how integral a role the central nervous system plays in the body, there is still much to be learned about how it functions. As a student of neuroscience, I'll have the chance to draw upon biology, chemistry, and psychology to grapple with human issues. For instance, I'd like to combat the brain's extremely limited capacity for regeneration by finding ways to prolong brain cells' lifespan.*

**Alex:** *Although I've known that I wanted to pursue medicine ever since I was eight years old, the classes that I've taken and the clubs I've been involved with have made me even more determined. I plan on pursuing a double major in Biology and French. My experience with Science Olympiad has reinforced my love of science and interest in medicine. My involvement with the French department has inspired me to continue my passion for the language, as I aspire to become fluent one day. This does relate to my career goals; fluency in French would help to treat patients in Francophone countries.*

## **What is your favorite memory of Hauppauge High School or your previous time in elementary or middle school?**

**Melody:** *Getting to visit the elementary schools through the Junior Achievement High School Heroes Program was a trip down memory lane which helped kindle my passion for helping others. I got to teach my teachers' kids (Hey, Juliana, Liam, and Patrick!), meet my friends' siblings (Hi, Angelina and Joseph!), and hang out with family friends (Stay awesome, Nathan and Kiran!).*

**Alex:** *My favorite memory from my time here in Hauppauge would definitely have to be the school trip to France. We were so fortunate to be able to go (schools shut down only a few weeks after we came back). It was right after we landed in Nice and we all ate lunch on the beach together. The 15 of us just sat there eating our sandwiches, calmly watching the Mediterranean Sea. It was just so peaceful and serene; I don't think that I will ever experience another moment as thought-provoking and introspective. It truly was magical.*

## **Who do you admire at Hauppauge HS? Who has influenced you the most and how?**

**Melody:** *I'd like to show my appreciation for individuals who have made my time at Hauppauge particularly special. Ms. Heck has made every student who walks into her classroom feel like part of her family. I've never seen anyone who cares about her students so much, whether it's as an AP Chemistry teacher or as the coach for Quiz Bowl. Through Theory of Knowledge, Mrs. Barry has completely reframed my view of the world and my place in it. Every day, I'm closer to becoming the rockstar she says I am, and I'll never forget that the map is not the territory. For almost two years, Mr. Salvaggio has been picking up what I'm putting down and smelling what I'm cooking. Without his sarcasm, anecdotes,*

'Sal-isms,' or Junior Achievement, I doubt I would've had remotely as much fun as I've had junior and senior year. Mr. Petercsak and Mrs. Becker have been phenomenal as mentors for Science Olympiad and as a comedic duo. The two of them helped me grow more confident in myself, find my voice, and make great fluxing puns. Coach Messina has always looked out for me and pushed me to be the best version of myself both on and off the court. In many ways, he made me realize I was someone my peers could look up to. And last but certainly not least, my IB cohort has served as a constant reminder that anything is possible. Running on three hours of sleep, Monster Energy, and the sheer concentrated power of will, they've accomplished some truly incredible things.

All of these people have shaped me into the person I am today, and I wouldn't have it any other way

**Alex:** I would have to say my peers. The Class of 2021 is so accomplished—I have never met such a group of smart and talented individuals. I mean look at Aidan Lobenstein and Luca Iallonardi, who were both recently selected for "All-Nationals" for music. Or A'Kai Littlejohn who was on Project Runway Junior and owns his own fashion line. I could go on and on like a proud grandma about the Class of 2021. This year's senior class has really shown me the importance of being true to yourself and following your passion. Every single person in the Class of 2021 has contributed to each other's high school experience and I can't wait to see where everyone ends up!

### **How does it feel to be awarded this honor?**

**Melody:** It feels incredible knowing I was able to work hard for something and earn it. I was told that my kindergarten teacher said I would finish at the top of my class. It's crazy to think that 12 years down the road, her words were so prophetic. Ms. Czachor, if you're reading this, I want to thank you for being one of the first to see what I was truly capable of. Because of you, Clownfish Three has learned to flourish outside of her anemone.

**Alex:** It is definitely humbling. This honor is a culmination of years of hard work, sleepless nights, and many heart palpitations. I am truly excited to receive such an honor.

### **Do you have any advice for your underclassmen?**

**Melody:** If you're a freshman, make sure to introduce yourself to your guidance counselor and speak to them a couple times throughout the year. If you're a sophomore, make sure to meet with your guidance counselor at least once every quarter. If you're a junior, make sure to see your guidance counselor at least once a week; you might as well make arrangements to move into their office. Come senior year, you'll be best friends with your guidance counselor. Also, don't be afraid to try new things and take advantage of all of the opportunities Hauppauge has to offer. :)

**Alex:** As simple as it sounds, don't spread yourself too thin. This was something that everyone kept telling me and I refused to listen to them. While I definitely enjoyed all of the different activities that I participated in, I made school much harder than it had to be. Waking up at 6 a.m., school from 7:30 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. (with no lunch period of course), clubs from 2:15 pm to 4:00 p.m., working from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., and then going home to finally eat dinner and spend hours studying and doing homework. It really isn't worth it, even if they are all activities that you enjoy. You need to cut yourself some slack: it is okay if you did not finish homework for that one class. That you're too tired to study for your physics test. That you miss a club meeting to take a nap. No matter what anyone says, everyone needs to take a break at some point and it's okay to do that. Essentially, my advice is really to cut yourself some slack, you deserve it.

### **What is one thing you would change about the world if you could?**

**Melody:** I'd want people to live each day with integrity and compassion. Rather than working to satisfy an ulterior motive or fulfill their self-interests, people should commit themselves to helping others for the sake of the common good.

If you know what to change, one thing can change everything.

**Alex:** Intolerance. The simple existence of people who refuse to acknowledge other views and accept change pervades our society. It is impossible to force people to grow and tolerate societal progress, but I strongly believe that education is the answer. Education allows other perspectives to be not only acknowledged but understood.



### ***If you could be someone else for a day, who would it be and why?***

**Melody:** I'd be Batman. By day, I'd be Bruce Wayne, industrialist, billionaire, playboy. By night, I'd be Defender of Gotham, The Dark Knight, The Caped Crusader, World's Greatest Detective. Through thick and thin, my moral compass would not waver, and I'd exist as walking proof that you don't need superpowers to be a superhero. After all, it's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me.

That, and I could say "I'm Batman" and, you know, not be joking.

**Alex:** I would love to be James Holzhauer. For those who know me well, I am a huge Jeopardy! fan. Watching his run on Jeopardy! was simply awe-inspiring. I not only envy his wide-reaching grasp of trivia, but his courage and boldness. I simply couldn't believe the risks he would take and the amounts he would bet, being fully aware that one wrong answer could cost him thousands of dollars and his title as Jeopardy! champion. As a self-described introvert, it often takes lots of courage for me to do simple things. I didn't get over my fear of public speaking until recently, only because of my experience in "Model UN." The fearlessness in Holzhauer's face as he would motion "all-in" is something I could only dream of.

### ***What do you like to do in your spare time?***

**Melody:** When I'm not volunteering, studying, or filling out Q&As for Vals and Sals, I'm eating ice cream (preferably Häagen-Dazs or Ben & Jerry's, but beggars can't be choosers), listening to music, writing poetry, and binge-watching quality TV. It's not for everybody, but "The Boys" features fantastic writing, first-rate humor, and phenomenal social commentary.

**Alex:** While most of my time is spent working on school work, participating in extracurricular activities, or working part-time at the library, I try to do some different things to relax. While some scientists say that it's unhealthy, napping plays a surprisingly large role in my free time. Besides that, I love hanging out with my friends and family. My favorite hobby is traveling, and I've been extremely fortunate enough to travel to 14 different countries. I also enjoy playing tennis, as it is an easy way for me to release my stress. I love watching Jeopardy! on TV and nearly every sitcom on Netflix and Hulu (currently I'm watching Scrubs). Many people don't know this, but I love to bake whilst listening to The Beatles; I've found that this tends to be one of the best ways for me to de-stress.

### ***What type of community service have you performed?***

**Melody:** By volunteering at the Hauppauge Public Library, I've run the gamut of community service experiences. Whether interacting with the youngest participants of the "Summer Reading Club," working alongside Ms. Michelle Vamos or Ms. Theresa Maritato of "Theresa's Programs," sorting food at "Long Island Cares," decorating signs for children in the "Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Program at Stony Brook Children's," or crocheting hats and scarves for neonates at the "Good Samaritan Hospital Centers," I've found many ways to help those in need.

In the "Junior Achievement High School Heroes Program," I prepared presentations and lesson plans to teach elementary school students introductory business concepts. By fostering an entrepreneurial spirit in young students, I've met the future inventors of a robot that assembles hot dogs at the speed of light, an entertainment syndicate led by the next generation of famous TikTok dancers, and the eventual CEO of a company renowned for manufacturing upside-down toilets.

As an ambassador for "HOBY (Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership)," I've had the pleasure of attending the "NY-Metro State Leadership Seminar and the World Leadership Congress." I'm an editor for "The Tomorrow Project," a student-run organization filled with fellow "HOBY" alums dedicated to uniting communities through mental health advocacy and education. For the first time, I've completed the "HOBY L4S (Leadership 4 Service) Challenge" for being involved in over 100 hours of community service in a year.

**Alex:** I have participated in a bunch of different community service projects. Currently, I have been completing my IB CAS project with my friend Aaryan. We have been serving as assistant coaches for the “Science Olympiad” team at the middle school. The “Science Olympiad” team has been really successful throughout the past few years, so we really wanted to continue its legacy here at Hauppauge. Besides that, I have volunteered as the Assistant Coach for the “Battle of the Books” team at the public library. Last year, I was one of three student volunteers who helped to create the graduation website for the Class of 2020. I have definitely enjoyed being able to find unique ways to help serve the community through my own personal strengths.

### **Do you participate in any extracurricular activities at the high school?**

**Melody:** Of course! I’m the president of “National Honor Society,” president of “Science National Honor Society,” secretary of “Spanish Club/La Sociedad de Honoraria Hispánica,” and Chair of Public Relations for “National Art Honor Society.” I’m also a member of Hauppauge’s “English Honor Society” and the “Rho Kappa Social Studies Honor Society.” I’m the co-president of “Science Olympiad” and the co-founder of “Quiz Bowl.” I’ve played on the Varsity Girls’ Tennis Team since 8th grade and I’ve been a captain since 10th. I also participate in the “Women In Science and Engineering (WISE) Program” at “Stony Brook University,” in which young women collaborate with mentors in various aspects of STEM.

**Alex:** My favorite part of high school has definitely been all of the extracurricular activities that the school offers. By being involved in all of these activities (and overextending myself a little bit), I have learned to explore my interests in so many different ways. I have been involved in “Science Olympiad” since sixth grade, being fortunate enough to qualify for the state tournament on four separate occasions and earn 16 medals. I helped to found the “Quiz Bowl” team at the school since I am such a huge trivia nerd. I have also been involved in “French Club, Model UN, Varsity Tennis, Chamber Orchestra, Pit Orchestra, Book Club, Science National Honor Society, English Honor Society, Rho Kappa Honor Society, Tri-M Music Honor Society, and National Honor Society.”

### **What class at Hauppauge HS has benefited you the most?**

**Melody:** AP Chemistry has been one of the most challenging courses I’ve ever taken, but also the most rewarding. The knowledge I’ve gained from the class has helped cement that a career path in STEM is right for me. I got to create silver test tubes using Tollens’ reagent, watch covalent bonding take place in my tie-dye shirt, perform a lab experiment at “Stony Brook University,” and teach kindergartners how to make their own ice cream using freezing point depression. I also got to try s’mores for the very first time, and what better heat source to use than a Bunsen burner?

**Alex:** I would definitely say that my involvement in Chamber Orchestra has benefited me the most. While all of my classes have contributed to my knowledge, I feel that my involvement in orchestra really helped me to develop as a young adult. While the rest of my classes focused on curating my academic side, orchestra allowed me to entertain my creative side. I grew not only as a musician, but as a person. You can tell when a teacher really cares about their students and there isn’t a teacher who cares as much as Mrs. Paese. She truly demonstrated the importance of hard work and focus, but most importantly, kindness. Her classroom offered an escape from the harsh and stressful realities of chemistry and calculus. Other students had free periods, but second period was where I was able to feel free.

### **If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?**

**Melody:** If it were up to me, I’d be living my best life in Zermatt, Switzerland. I’d spend my days climbing up the Matterhorn, snowboarding over the Theodul Pass, and ‘studying’ gastronomy at world-class restaurants renowned by Michelin and Gault Millau.

**Alex:** Antarctica. It has always been a goal of mine to travel to all seven continents (and hopefully all of the different countries of the world). With the continuing effect of climate change, I am worried that Antarctica won’t be around for much longer. It offers an escape from reality, being able to truly experience nature in one of the most untouched locations on the planet.



## Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

**Melody:** Since the odds of indulging in savory Swiss victuals are currently quite low, I hope to be in my PGYs (post graduate years) and completing my medical residency.

**Alex:** In ten years, I hope to have graduated from both undergraduate and medical school. By then, I think I would be a resident. I sincerely hope that I've been able to see more of the world, ideally finally achieving my personal goal of becoming fluent in French. While it is important to focus on my career path, that is not the only thing that I am focusing on. If I've learned anything over my time in Hauppauge, it is to not measure your success based on your career, your grades, your friends. It is important to focus on your own happiness and well-being. True success is being happy with yourself whilst always striving to improve and help others.

Here are a few extra photos of Alex and Melody. We thank them for this thoughtful, and informative interview.



## Hauppauge High School Class of 2021



Melody  
Cheng  
Valedictorian



Alexander  
Vasilakopoulos  
Salutatorian

## HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS ARE NAMED “2020 SUFFOLK ZONE PHYSICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS OF THE YEAR”

Hauppauge Athletic Director, Daniel Butler, is proud to present the “2020 Suffolk Zone Physical Education Students of the Year” from Hauppauge High School. This year’s female recipient is Alicia Inkeles and the Male recipient is Alex Oh.

Alicia Inkeles is a standout performer on the Soccer, Winter Track and Lacrosse teams here at Hauppauge, where she has been recognized with the Scholar Athlete Award. She is also a member of the honor roll, as well as the National Honor Society and National French Honor Society and Concert Choir. Alicia also volunteers her time with Natural Helpers and working with children with special needs within the community. Alicia will be attending LIU next year where she will play lacrosse. Congratulations to Alicia Inkeles!

Alex Oh is a standout on the volleyball and baseball teams at Hauppauge. He carries an unweighted average of 93 while enrolled in the IB Program. He has been a consistent member of the High Honor Roll during his time at Hauppauge. Alex is a member of the National Honor Society, Science Honor Society, DECA and Interact Club. He has also volunteered his time at the Hauppauge and Smithtown Public Libraries, as well as the Breast Cancer Association and the Northeast Chapter of the American Littoral Society. Alex hopes to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point next year. Congratulations to Alex Oh!

We congratulate Alicia and Alex, and wish them the best of luck in their future endeavors. We know you will make us proud!



**Pictured are: Daniel Butler, Athletic Director, with  
Alex Oh and Alicia Inkeles**



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