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## **Genuine Geneticist off to Solve the World’s Problems**

### ***SEBHS Valedictorian off to UGA to Chase Her Dreams***

Melissa Mackelprang is the valedictorian of Southeast Bulloch High School’s (SEBHS) 2019 graduating class. She’s off to the University of Georgia this fall to major in biology as she pursues her dream to be a geneticist.

“I am really excited about the possibility of going in and helping people with these problems that they never had any hope of fixing,” Mackelprang said. “Well, until someone like me comes along and says, yes, this is possible.”

In eighth grade, Mackelprang read the Leviathan series, a collection of science fiction works set in World War I, where allied forces in the book use genetically modified animals as war machines.

“There are entire ecosystems inside these animals,” said Mackelprang. “One of the major benefits of living organisms is that they can repair themselves, and they’re very efficient. I was amazed and realized that biology is cool, and that got me started on genetic engineering.”

In ninth-grade Biology class with her teacher, Danielle Hibbs-Heizer, Mackelprang learned how genes can be modified.

“Genes partially cause a lot of psychological problems including depression and anxiety, but can also cause physical problems like obesity,” Mackelprang said. “I have a friend who is going blind, and his retinas are closing. Even if doctors were able to prevent it from getting worse, the damage is irreversible because it’s coded in his genes. Genes can also be used to make new organs. So, my friend who is going blind, I could potentially create new eyes for him.”

Hibbs-Heizer also coached Mackelprang in Science Olympiad for four years and is the advisor for the school's STEM Club. She helped guide Mackelprang through the college decision process, and she wrote numerous letters of recommendation for her.

"She's the best teacher. She makes me feel better about myself."

"She's brilliant," Hibbs-Heizer said. "Melissa is not just smart. She is kind, funny, creative, musical, forward-thinking, inclusive, persistent, responsible and curious. Her passion for genetics was clear to me the second she walked into my biology classroom four years ago. I can't wait to read her first scientific publication and see what she discovers. For her, it is not a question of if, it's when."

Originally from Cumming, Georgia, Mackelprang moved to Bulloch County in the sixth grade and enrolled in Southeast Bulloch Middle School, where she found her other passion, band. She started as a saxophone player in the SEBMS Band and is now part of a saxophone quartet at SEBHS. This seven-year hobby helped earn her a spot in the Southeast United States Honor Band.

"Melissa is genuine," said Matt Olsen, SEBHS's band director. "She has been a soloist on three different instruments and can be counted on to play whatever part is needed."

"In an age of online personas and kids trying to fit in, Melissa is always true to herself," Olsen added. "She is a kind, caring and hard-working individual, all of the ingredients for someone that will make the world a better place."

The qualities that Melissa's teachers see in her are ones her parents, Darren and Mercedes Mackelprang, taught her. They raised her to be self-reliant, disciplined, and hardworking while also striving to remain honorable, true to her values and kind to others. Mackelprang's father is a software developer and works from home, so the two share a few hobbies including videogames and camping. Her mother is an accountant at Georgia Southern University and makes family dinners a priority.

Mackelprang is very active in her faith at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints while embracing science and logic wholeheartedly.

"I always found a way for those two to fit, until of course, I didn't," said Mackelprang. "I think my purpose is to get as close to the truth that I can. In quantum mechanics, you can know where something is, but you can't know where it's going at the same time. Maybe the truth isn't a set point, but a realm of possibilities."

At UGA, Mackelprang expects to bike around campus, sit at the front of her classes and ask questions, and be on the hunt for research opportunities. After finishing her undergraduate degree, she hopes to be accepted to an Ivy League university for graduate school.

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