

# Black Horse Pike Regional School District “Spotlight on Alumni” - HIGHLAND

APRIL 2021

**Nicholas & Jennifer Santamala, class of 2007**



*“Jen is currently a pharmacist at a New York hospital. After graduating Highland, she attended the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia.”*

*“Nick is a Mission Systems Engineer Manager for the Navy. After graduating Highland, he attended Drexel University in Philadelphia.”*

~ Dr. Sarah Smith, School Counselor, Triton HS

## 1. AA: Upon graduation, what post-secondary path did you take and why?

**Jennifer:** Upon graduation, I decided to pursue my Doctor of Pharmacy degree by enrolling in the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy's 0-6 program. The 0-6 program meant that I was able to directly enter as an undergrad student and was guaranteed a spot in the college of pharmacy instead of having to apply after 2 years of undergrad training. During pharmacy school, I knew I wanted to practice in oncology clinical pharmacy, which would allow me to work directly with physicians, other health care professionals and patients to ensure that the medications prescribed for patients contribute to the best possible health outcome. Therefore, after pharmacy school, I completed 2 years of post-graduate residency training which allowed me to accomplish my goals. During high school I was always interested in both science and mathematics, so when it came to looking for a post-secondary path pharmacy was the perfect combination of both those fields in addition to being able to help others.



**Nicholas:** When I graduated Highland I attended Drexel University for Electrical Engineering. Initially I thought I wanted to go into mechanical engineering but after attending a few college open houses at prospective universities, I realized I had much more of an interest in the electrical side of technology than the mechanical side. I always had an interest in math and science and was really drawn to Drexel's Co-Op program, which gave me the opportunity to go to school for half the year and get real world working experience for the other half of year.



## 2. Looking back, would you have done anything differently and why?

**Jennifer:** Looking back, I believe that everything I experienced, up until this point in life, has helped shape me into the person I am today. I can honestly say that I wouldn't have change anything. I believe that all of the growing pains we experience as a teenager are beneficial later in life, although it does not always seem that way as we are going through the motions. I am a firm believer that the more you work through them the more they will teach you valuable lessons later in life and can help you to overcome obstacles that you never thought possible.

**Nicholas:** I can't think of anything I would have done differently. I didn't do everything perfect by any means, but I think each person has their own unique path through high school and I really believe mine shaped who I am today. Including the lessons, I learned from my mistakes.

## 3. AA: Describe your career/profession today?

**Jennifer:** After 2 years of residency training I accepted a position as a lymphoma clinical pharmacy manager at New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center. My day to day responsibilities include

taking care of lymphoma patients who are admitted to the hospital for either chemotherapy or for secondary complications due to their cancer treatment. My current job is focused on evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of each patient's medications, including how each drug works, dosing, adverse effects and drug interactions. I work to support the health care team's efforts to educate the patient on what to expect from chemotherapy as well as to provide education to the medical team and to make sure all medications are safe and appropriate. I also work with the pharmacy department to implement many new policies and procedures regarding medication safety within the hospital.

**Nicholas:** I am the LPD 17 New Construction Mission Systems Engineering Manager for the US Navy. It is a lengthy title but boils down to this: I am a civilian engineer for the Department of Defense and my job is to ensure that new equipment and engineering decisions made during the construction of the LPD 17 Class Navy Ships has been put through the proper technical rigor to ensure it's safe for the sailors and meets the requirements for the Navy. Naval ships are unlike any sort of construction effort in the private sector, specifications for these ships are often written years before the ship is ever built and because of that sometimes there are better solutions to meet the Navy's intended need when the ship is finally under construction. My job is to make sure I speak with technical experts, other engineers, and even sailors out in the fleet, and to incorporate this feedback into a case for why, or why not, a specific change should be made. I work specifically with Missions System, so that includes Weapons system, Search and Rescue, Cargo Handling, and any other equipment the ship needs to perform its mission. I get a chance to work on a variety of pieces of equipment and every day is a new challenge that often requires me to familiarize myself with engineering concepts and equipment I've never seen before. This keeps me engaged and continually pushes my own knowledge boundaries. It's a great position that has allowed me to travel around the world as well as feel the reward of really making a difference by applying my engineering skills to make sure equipment and changes are safe, while also incorporating the most up-to-date applications of technology and fabrication to further advance our Navy's ability to build ships.

#### 4. AA: What impact did your BHP high school have on your career path/profession?

**Jennifer:** Highland High school greatly impacted my career path because I was challenged and taught to never give up. Highland pushed me to greater levels by enabling me and providing me the opportunity to take advanced courses and pursue extracurricular activities all which helped me become a well-rounded individual. There were so many supportive teachers at Highland and I never felt alone or that I had nowhere to turn to if I was going through a rough period. Highland felt very inclusive to me and enabled me to be myself by not having to fit into a certain mold. This enabled me to have the confidence and drive to not give up in college, even when some courses seemed impossible. I was always taught to keep going and that the end result would be worth it.

**Nicholas:** My experience at Highland High School really opened me up to a variety of people from all types of backgrounds and walks of life. Highland had a very inclusive culture that I didn't realize until later in life was a deliberate by-product of the faculty and their willingness to give each student the same experience and opportunity to discover themselves and explore their interests. I didn't realize until

*I got to college that many students had a very homogenous high school, with their student body being made up of pretty much the same types of people. At Highland you got to be friends and classmates with people of different race, religion, ethnic background, and sexuality. Open discussion was encouraged and students were treated with the respect and their backgrounds and identities were celebrated. The student body at Highland really embodied our Tartan mascot. We truly were a tapestry woven from the types of diversity that make this country the melting pot we've come to see it as. It was from this experience that I learned to understand and accept people for who they are and what they bring to the table as unique individuals. I work with many different types of people, with different types of personalities and different types of life experiences and I attribute my ability to listen and deal with people from my time as a student at Highland. I took for granted how many of my peers had never been surrounded by a diverse group of people until they arrived at college, and some, until they joined the work force.*

**5. AA: Were there specific teachers, coaches, counselors, administrators, secretaries or other professionals that had a major impact on you while in school, and if so, who were those professionals and describe how they helped you along your HS journey.**

***Jennifer:** One of the most influential people I had the pleasure of knowing in high school was my guidance counselor, **Ms. Smith**. Ms. Smith was one of the most supportive and dedicated mentors that I have come to know. She made sure that my course work in high school challenged me and reflected my true potential. When it came time to apply for college, she spent numerous hours working with me to make sure that every application was complete and that I was showcasing my best self. She was available any time of the day if I needed to talk to someone and she believed in me and enabled me to see that I was capable of pursuing anything I set my mind to. She always wanted what was best for me and was willing to put in the time and effort it took to make sure I knew that. Another professional that had a great impact in my life was my principal at the time, **Mr. Frank Palatucci**. Mr. Palatucci was a huge supporter and advocate for Renaissance Club which promoted team spirit and collaboration within our high school. In my below comments, I reference some of the great memories I had participating in this club, which would not have been possible without Mr. Palatucci's continued support.*

***Nicholas:** Highland was full of memorable faces and I do really feel that **each faculty member** I had personal experiences with really helped mold me into the person I am today but I will try to point out a few who really stick out for me. **Mr. Mannino** taught a Computer Aided Design (CAD) course that, I sometimes joke to people, helped me get every job I ever had. Mr. Mannino's course on the basics of AutoCAD gave me a foundation in computer drafting that I brought up during my first Drexel Co-Op interview at Vineland Electric Utilities in Vineland, NJ. During the interview, they seemed very impressed that I knew AutoCAD and they mentioned their Co-Op position is mostly AutoCAD focused and they have had trouble getting people who had experience. I discussed my experience with the drafting program and within the week I had a follow-up call offering me a position. I spent that summer drafting repair drawings for the lineman to use when they went out to fix damaged power lines. My 2nd Co-Op was with the US Navy and during the interview they were once again impressed that I had experience with AutoCAD. I not only got hired for a 2nd Co-Op, one which I returned to for my third co-op cycle and*

then eventually received a job offer upon graduation, but I also spent much of my time using AutoCAD to develop installation drawings for shipboard repairs. I sadly don't get to use AutoCAD much these days but I will never forget something that Mr. Mannino taught me. He said that when you know something like AutoCAD, that's a skill that no one can take away. You can take it with you from job to job and you always have that experience. It's a practical hands-on skill and it's important to have those sort of skills. **Ms. Smith** was my guidance counselor and all around pillar of my high school experience. Many of my days included a trip to her office either to chat or to help her with some task. She is an excellent person who really provided a guiding light and voice of reason when it came to pursuing higher education and navigating the sometimes hectic world of high school. We had many conversations about what I wanted to do after high school and she encouraged me to pursue certain courses in Highland in order to help develop those interests. **Mr. Schoening** was my physics teacher, and even though I still don't like physics much (sorry Mr. Schoening) he was one of the first teachers that showed me that science has real-world applications. It's all around us, which he reinforced with practical video examples of physics in action. He had a great way of keeping you engaged long enough to actually learn something and his ability to combine learning and fun is something I think would really help a lot of younger people get more interested in science.

**6. AA: Which school clubs, sports, activities, etc., if any, did you participate in when you attended your BHP high school? If so, were there any moments or experiences that you can recall that helped you become the person you are today?**

**Jennifer:** During my time at Highland high school I participated in many various activities/clubs including Renaissance Club, Yearbook, Drama club and the National Honor Society. I also participated in many events throughout the years such as flag football and prom fashion show and helped organize many pep rallies and fundraisers in conjunction with the Renaissance Club. For me, I enjoyed that Highland did not make you feel as if you need to be labeled in order to fit in. I was able to participate in many various clubs and organizations without needing to be labeled as a 'bookworm' or 'jock'. Every organization was accepting and allowed members to pursue goals that fit their individual needs. For me, Renaissance Club was an organization that greatly shaped me into the person I am today. It enabled me to have a voice in a larger organization by being a part of a group that really cared about school spirit and fundraising in order to make high school an enjoyable place to not only learn, but to grow. Renaissance Club was aimed at being all inclusive and really tried to engage every student into whichever activity they were organizing. I recall going to Florida with the Renaissance Club for an annual conference and presenting, for the first time, to a large group on the ideas and accomplishments that we had achieved within our Renaissance program. It was an amazing experience for me to collaborate with other high schools and to learn and gain ideas from them as well. I have carried this love for team spirit, inclusion and unity throughout my entire life thus far.

**Nicholas:** I was involved in the National Honor Society where I held the position of Treasurer and I was also involved in the One Act Plays. I can't think of any experience that really shaped me but I did get handcuffed during a One Act Play rendition of Sherlock Holmes where my costar lost the key to the handcuffs and we spent a long time after the performance trying to search the stage looking for it, wondering if we were going to have to call the police to get me out of the cuffs! We did eventually find

the key. That experience didn't necessarily "shape me" but it's something I never forgot and probably the reason I'm so insistent on double checking that I have my house keys before I leave the house.

## **7. What advice would you give to our current student body? What would you have done differently in high school if you could turn back time?**

**Jennifer:** My advice for current students is to take a hold of every opportunity that you can. Whether that is joining a new organization, signing up for a class that may be a bit more challenging or joining a club which you have thought about for some time. My advice is to DO IT. You can never get back those experiences and some of the other students you meet within these organizations can show you a different perspective on life and can enable you to be more open minded. You will realize later in life how important it is to pursue those opportunities that make you scared as those are the ones you are most likely to grow from. I also would say to embrace being yourself. I know this is at times difficult as a teenager, however being true to yourself is one of the greatest values that you can have as you go throughout life and pursue future education/career paths. And always remember that the faculty at Highland high school are there to push you to new limits and to help you grow. They truly believe in you and want you to be successful and achieve your goals.

**Nicholas:** As far as advice for the current student body goes I have a bit of unconventional advice: do not feel pressured to pursue college. College is not an end-all-be-all. It's something that should be pursued if you feel your eventual career or interest can only be achieved through furthering your education, but if you enjoy working with your hands don't be shy to pursue a trade job such as a mechanic or an electrician. I spent many years working on ships, working with teams of mechanics, electricians, and welders. These people took a fresh college kid (me) and really turned him into the person he is today, at least in regards to my knowledge of Navy Ships and equipment. These people had real hands-on experience when I walked onto a ship for the very first time and I didn't even know what direction I was facing. I've had mechanics get me out of more jams (literal and figurative) than I could possibly count, and teach me how to fix equipment that school never taught me. I've had electricians show me how to troubleshoot an electrical system when no electrical engineering textbook would have been able to come to my aid. These skilled jobs are important and the backbone of my current position. I would be nowhere without the skilled labor of these folks. I had many peers in college who dropped out of engineering because it wasn't as "hands-on" as they wanted, and I understand that urge. That drive to want to take everything you see apart and put it back together again. Pursue what interests and engages you, that is the key to success. That passion to tinker and explore makes someone a great electrician just as it makes someone else a great electrical engineer. It just depends if you want to be more involved with the theory and design (engineering) or the practical hands-on side (electrician). There are a lot of skilled labor positions out there and I think many high school students tend to look down on these or not even consider them as career paths. Don't discount them.



**Where Inspiring Excellence is our Standard and Student Achievement is the Result!**

