Swotting away end of year fears

Over the next few months, The Age will follow six students as they finish year 12, and reach for – or revise – their dreams. Konrad Marshall introduces the dedicated and diverse class of 2013.

It would be easy to look at Nathan Fistric, sprawled on the couch inside his Eltham North home recently watching The Simpsons after sleeping in until midmorning, and surmise that the long-haired 18-year-old is not the uber-studious type.

The business end of the school year is fast approaching and Nathan is, after all, one of 82,886 students who will be sitting at least one written VCE exam in 2013. Those exams begin on October 30 – less than two weeks away – and will form the basis of the all-important ATAR, the number that so often determines who does and does not get into their university course of choice.

“But the score doesn’t really matter to me – it’s not really important,” says Nathan, his laissez-faire manner belying the pressure inside. “You want to get a decent mark, but I picked my subjects because I enjoy them.”

The St Helena Secondary College student has that luxury. His chances of scoring a decent mark, and not extra classes in English, doesn’t go anywhere near that far, but he’s using his hands for something better than bloody lugging timber and concrete around all day.

Yet Nathan still works those long, dextrous fingers to the bone. When the television goes off today, he will spend five hours practising licks and riffs and power chords. He plays for hours daily, practises with his group, Road Train, three times a week, has a lesson every Friday, anchors most school performances, and has constant rehearsals with the senior jazz band.

His musical proficiency is equally a product of desire and dedication, and it is this marriage of passion and routine that he has in common with many year 12 students – and most certainly Katie Blunt, Trevor Brown, Heidi Beasley-Ellieh, Luqman Haruwarta and Jennifer Zeng.

Together, these six students from different schools, suburbs and backgrounds form “The Year 12 Club”, a cadre of teenagers (and one adult) who are chasing their respective dreams through education.

Fairfax Media will be following them on the final stages of their secondary school journey – from today into next year – checking in as each big moment comes and goes.

For most, muck-up day is now a memory and exams are approaching, followed by results packages, first-round offers and then … life on the other side of high school.

JENNIFER Zeng can’t wait. The Chinese-born eastern suburbs girl was dux of year 11 at high-performing Glen Waverley Secondary College and has been tutored outside of school hours since she spent six months in China when she was nine, and saw what was required there.

“They learn so much. It’s incredible,” she said. “The kids around me could read newspapers and were learning hardcore maths. In year 3, you would do two to three hours of homework a night.”

The bubbly and outgoing Jennifer doesn’t go anywhere near that far, but does have extra classes in English, specialist maths, maths methods and chemistry, mostly on weekends.

“I have school every day,” she said. “But it’s been that way for a long time so I’m used to it now.”

She also finds ample time for a teenage life: to go to parties, or shopping with friends, or indulge her biggest distraction of all, Max, the family’s golden retriever (and her own personal stress reliever).

She watches television series The Vampire Diaries religiously and went to a Rihanna concert this month.

Her dream job is in international finance, working for a multinational, jet-setting between Australia and China, and using her fluency in Mandarin to liaise between corporations and nations. She sees this year as one of many hurdles – the highest to date.

She has a carefully crafted plan, however, which entails ploughing through past exams and hitting the difficult questions hardest to work out what she doesn’t know. She prefers to be daunted now and revise later.

“I’m stressed. I don’t think I’ll feel the calm until maybe a week before the exams, when I’ve got everything ready and I’m prepared,” she said. “When I’m not prepared, I don’t feel the calm.”

LUQMAN Haruwarta perhaps feels calm enough for both of them, even though he has more exams to face than any of the VCE students in The Year 12 Club.

The softly spoken teen studies the prestigious International Baccalaureate diploma, a qualification established 45 years ago that now constitutes a globally recognized standard of university admission.
recognised form of assessment. Each of his subjects has at least two, and in some cases three, final tests, meaning he will sit a total of 15 exams over one hectic fortnight in November.

One of four children of Indonesian immigrants who live in Hoppers Crossing, Luqman commutes more than an hour each way (one bus and two trains) to attend the Australian International Academy of Education, a Muslim school in Merlynston. He is gunning for a place in the competitive science program at the University of Melbourne.

He seems quietly serene today, perhaps owing to his latest visit to the local mosque. Prayer is an essential component of his day, and one that ramps up when he is not in school. A typical day without classes, for instance, might include going to a mosque five times: first at 5.30am, then at 1pm, 5pm, 7.30pm, and finally at 9pm.

"We're devout, but not, like, extremists," he says, laughing. "It kind of keeps me focused because I can study then go to prayer, then study again. It's better than studying and studying and studying with no variety in your day."

In between, he has time to eat, watch Arsenal in the English Premier League, or maybe play the online game League of Legends. Games were a big part of what led him to pursue the complicated field of mechatronics.

"I'm good at maths and physics and stuff like that, but I also like intricate little mechanical systems," he said. "When I was little, I would open up my toys to see what was inside. It's interesting to me."

THE motivation to study is something Heidi Beasley-Ellich knows well, but it took a frank conversation with an academic adviser last year to light the fire inside.

Heidi is deaf, as are her parents and grandparents, but she is not enrolled in an all-deaf school.

Heidi studies VCE at Forest Hill College with the aid of interpreters and a specialist deaf resource centre at the school. So far, she has received encouraging grades.

She is aiming for an ATAR of 75 and hoping to study primary teaching, but the work is harder for her than for students who can hear. Whether the subject is textiles or media, she is required to absorb and process information in Auslan, convert it to English in her notes, then ask any questions in Auslan.

"We find they get exhausted," said Amanda Purcell, manager of the deaf facility at Forest Hill College. "When they get home, they just don't have the energy to put in the two to three hours of work that the other kids are doing."

Heidi counters this by spending free periods studying on her own or seeking help from deaf teachers. She knows she can be a role model for other deaf students.

"I used to be quite complacent with my studies," she said through an interpreter: "But now I've realised that it's my responsibility to do this – to be keen and work hard."

The challenge is daunting, and she admits to being scared of the "deep questions" the exams will ask. But she will be ready.

"I'm happy, too, that year 12 is finishing, but at the same time I don't want to leave the school because any time I had a problem I could access a deaf teacher and ask them. In the real world, you're on your own, pretty much."

HAVING lived in a van for the past six years, Trevor Brown knows something about being alone. The 43-year-old now lives in shared rental accommodation in Reservoir and began studying this year at the Centre for Adult Education, resuming the high school education he felt chased out of in his youth.

Trevor grew up in Bright, a beautiful place, but one that had an ugly side in his eyes. He was skinny as a boy, had chronic asthma and later alopecia – a condition that caused him to begin losing his hair as a teenager. As a result, he was bullied relentlessly.

He drifted from school, worked as a tobacco picker, a truck driver, a hay carter, and even an IT specialist. He eventually ended up by himself, living in a van and almost freezing through one particularly bad winter in the Buckland Valley. It was then that he began writing. He now has his sights on a creative arts degree at La Trobe University.

"The worst-case scenario is a few nice lines on a resume," he said, "but it also gives me three years to play with my writing and see where it can go."

He has been published three times this year in The Big Issue, and is busy writing a book – a science fiction novel...
that's now roughly 174,000 words.
Good versus evil, and more twists and turns than a shark attack.”

KATIE Blunt's path is less jagged. The bayside local found water polo in grade six, and she discovered she was good at it, too. She now plays and trains at the elite level and has done so since she was first “talent IDed” as a pre-teen.

Katie is one of a dozen girls on a Victorian Institute of Sport squad whose members range in age from 16 to 27. Two of her teammates are former Olympians, so competing for Australia at various world championships is a big part of her ambitions.

Thankfully, the latter portion of year 12 at Lauriston Girls' School has coincided with water polo's off season. “I'm only training five times a week now,” she said, “instead of 12.”

She has also been able to relinquish her role as school captain, and with it the duty to make speeches, set up charity projects and co-ordinate outreach programs. In the lead-up to exams, she is actually less busy than at any point so far this year; meaning she can study at her own pace, procrastinating only by way of switching subjects – putting down Tirra Lirra by the River and picking up her chemistry notes instead.

“I think it's important to realise we're not machines. If I notice my focus is starting to fade, I have a half-hour break so I can get back into it with energy,”

Katie's options next year remain open, but her sights are set high. Competitive water polo, perhaps a US college scholarship, and, ultimately, she would like to study medicine with a view to being a neurologist or endocrinologist.

She senses the exams looming, but likens them to a comma rather than a full stop.

“I'm excited. I've been working towards them for 13 years. They're coming at me pretty quickly but I guess it's a chance to show how hard I've been working and to bring one stage of my life to an end.”

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Heidi Beasley-Ellich
Jennifer Zheng, 17
Glen Waverley High School, Glen Waverley
Jennifer is the only child of two accountants, and dux of year 11. She would like to study economics and commerce, and work in high-level international finance.

Luqman Haruwarta, 18
Australian International Academy of Education, Melton
Luqman is a devout Muslim and is doing the International Baccalaureate program. He would like to study mechanical engineering or mechatronics, and work in that field.

Katie Blunt, 18
Lauriston Girls School, Armadale
Katie is school captain, and also an elite water polo player with the Victorian Institute of Sport. She would like to study medicine and pursue neurology or endocrinology.

Heidi Beasley-Ellich, 18
Forest Hill College, Burwood East
Heidi studies at a mainstream school despite being deaf (like both her parents and grandparents). She would like to study primary teaching and be a teacher for the deaf.

Nathan Fistric, 18
St Helena Secondary College, Eltham North
Nathan has played guitar since he was 8, and plays in a rock band in his spare time. He would like to study music and become a full-time musician (or a music teacher).

Trevor Brown, 43
Centre for Adult Education, Melbourne
Trevor is a returning mature-aged student who was homeless for six years. He would like to study creative arts and pursue work as a freelance writer and artist.

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