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## Enumclaw FFA getting down to bees-ness with new colonies

By **RAY MILLER-STILL**  
Editor

Enumclaw High School FFA students are buzzing about a new project — beekeeping.

The leaders of the local chapter — Liah Arnold, Maddie Blechschmidt, Allison Dofelmier, Alyssa Seldal, Cody Seldal, and Jordyn Thompson — pitched starting their own hives to the queen bees of the district (the school board of directors and district administration) last November, and the powers-that-be approved the venture during the Jan. 18 board meeting.

“We’re basically doing this mainly as a learning experience for kids,” Dofelmier said in a recent group interview. “Bees have a lot to do with agriculture, and there’s a lot of issues... with bees right now, so it would be a learning experience for kids, to show them what the problems... are going on with them, and how we can help, locally.”

One of the issues, Thompson said, was that bee populations across the country have been in decline; according to the United States Department of Agriculture, managed bee colony numbers have decreased from 5 million in the 1940s to just about 3 million today.

Tracking bee populations is tricky work, and it’s not always clear whether the overall population of an area is decreasing, or if the colony loss is just part of an annual cycle.

For example, according to the nonprofit Bee Informed Partnership (BIP), beekeepers in the U.S. lost more than 45 percent of their managed bee colonies between April 2020 and April 2021, the second highest annual loss on record since the group started tracking colony losses more than a decade ago.

According to BIP’s Science Coordinator Nathalie Steinhauer, normal or acceptable annual turnover is around 20 percent.

“We should remember, however, that loss rates are not the same as population decline,” she told Auburn University’s newsroom last year. “The recent numbers of honey bee colonies in the U.S. are relatively stable despite those high losses, but that’s because beekeepers invest a lot of time and effort to increase their operation size to mitigate their losses.”

Washington beekeepers lost more than 52 percent of its colonies in 2016/2017, BIP’s interactive colony loss chart shows. The following year, it was just over 48 percent; in 2018/2019, 66.5 percent; 2019/2020, nearly 58 percent; and last year, close to 57 percent.

Given that overall colony loss seems to be on the rise, the ultimate goal of the high school project (beyond education) is to produce enough bees through its colonies to give out to the local community.

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PHOTO BY ALEX BRUELL

The afternoon of Jan. 24, second graders in Lynda Smith’s Mountain Meadow Elementary school grilled Ella Roehr with questions like: “Do you like cake?” “What’s your favorite color?” and “Do you have a brother?” during Roehr’s visit to the class. Smith is one of Ella’s former elementary school teachers.

## For Buckley’s Miss Washington Teen candidate, it’s “Life 2.0”

By **ALEX BRUELL**  
Reporter

Talking publicly about your body is not high on most teenagers’ wishlists. For Buckley teen Ella Roehr, there wasn’t another option.

For most of her life, Ella had trouble eating and maintaining a healthy weight. Pain in her stomach, vomiting, dizziness and blurry vision followed her everywhere, especially when she exercised. Her health problems became especially pronounced around elementary school, and the pain became so great that she couldn’t eat solid foods for two years.

Classmates would say things like “go eat a burger” or “try some food,” Ella said, and by middle school, many of them assumed she was anorexic.

But she wasn’t suffering from an eating disorder. Ella, now 17, had Median arcuate ligament syndrome (MALS), a condition in which connective tissue in her chest area compressed a major artery and the nerves surrounding it. It caused excruciating pain, especially when she ate, and starved many of her organs of the blood they needed to function.

Things are different now. After years of work to learn about her illness, Ella finally received the surgery to correct her MALS in August. Eager to get the word out and help other young people like her, she interviewed for and successfully became Miss Pierce County Teen last spring, and this weekend, the White River High School senior is competing to



PHOTO TAKEN BY TACOMA PHOTOGRAPHER AMANDA HOWSE

Buckley’s Ella Roehr is this year’s Miss Teen Pierce County.

become Miss Washington Teen.

But years ago, young Ella and her family didn’t have the four-word name for her condition. They just knew she was in pain, sick with a condition that eluded understanding.

“Many doctors compare the pain of this to pancreatic cancer,” Ella’s mom Annie Roehr said. “To see that kind of pain in your child, it kills you.”

In 8th grade, a classmate told Ella she should start going to the

gym to gain some weight.

“I know the girl meant it innocently, but it really stuck with me,” Ella said.

And “that was a point where I realized people didn’t understand that I was sick,” she continued. “If you look at your classmate who’s 5’4” and 70, 80 pounds, there’s no other conclusion you can go to. I realized, if I’m not going to talk about what’s wrong with my body, no one’s going to know. My friends aren’t going to know what to do if I’m being quiet, sitting in the corner alone.”

She’s now taking that conversation from the school hallway to the stage.

For Ella’s mom, the last year has meant more than just relief and pride in her daughter. In a way, the day of Ella’s surgery — Aug. 4, 2021 — felt like a kind of rebirth.

“We call it Life 2.0,” Annie Roehr said.

### “A CHANCE OF LIVING A NORMAL LIFE”

Ella still doesn’t know for sure what caused her MALS, but it might be related to her additional diagnosis of Ehlers-Danlos syndromes (EDS), a group of connective-tissue disorders that can cause loose, highly-flexible joints and joint pain.

Whatever the cause, Ella has spent most of her life dealing with health problems caused by her MALS. Those included gastroparesis, in which her stomach muscles had trouble moving; Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), which caused an imbalance of her gut bacteria; and

Postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, which caused dizziness and circulation problems.

Ella experienced roadblocks throughout her treatment when many physicians simply couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her.

“I’d go through the treatments, and nothing would change,” Ella said.

Progress picked up when, about three years ago, Ella began seeing Dr. Bisher Abdullah, a pediatric gastroenterologist at Prime Health Clinic in Puyallup.

Physicians at Prime kept researching her condition as her illness worsened, as well as delivering Ella weekly or semi-monthly infusions over the last year that kept her out of the hospital and let her maintain at least a moderate level of activity.

Heidi Elliott, the registered nurse at Prime who delivers infusions, pointed out that you can’t just tell patients with gastrointestinal issues to eat or drink more water. Their ability to do so is, itself, part of the problem.

“As much as we know in healthcare, there’s a lot more to be discovered,” Elliott said. “We’re still learning a lot about these syndromes.”

If it wasn’t for the support of Ella’s physicians, she would have had to use a feeding tube, Annie Roehr said.

Annie’s own research led her to learn about MALS, which seemed to match many of Ella’s health issues, and she brought that suspicion to Dr. Abdullah. He’d

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## Enumclaw City Council chooses municipal flag

By **RAY MILLER-STILL**  
Editor

Enumclaw has a new municipal flag — all that’s left is the paperwork.

Out of 50 designs submitted for the contest, the city council decided during their Jan. 24 meeting to adopt the design created by Kyle Miller, who moved to Enumclaw about a year ago.

“I’m thrilled that the city chose my design to represent the awesome place we get to live in. When I was making it, I was really trying to find symbols and colors that represent Enumclaw that long-time and new residents of the city would relate to,” Miller said in a recent email interview. “I can’t believe I’ll get to drive by city hall and see this flag everyday. It truly feels great to get involved with the place you live and leave your mark.”

The Enumclaw City Council voted unanimously to adopt Miller’s design, but when council



members discussed which flags were their favorites, three council members preferred Miller’s, while two others preferred the design created by another finalist, Evan Moulden (two council members were absent).

Miller’s flag, as seen above, is loaded with symbolism and metaphors.

First, there are the colors

— the green, the dominant color of the design, represents the nature that surrounds the city; the golden yellow “is a nod to the farming industry that our community was founded on” (as well as the “beautiful sunrises and sunsets”); and the white “represents the purity of open space and nature that we are privileged to live in,” Miller



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Kyle Miller

wrote in his explanatory statement about his design.

Then we have Mt. Rainier and the evergreen tree.

“Enumclaw is the gateway to Mt. Rainier and the golden box and golden intersection shapes bring the eye to the center of the flag, representing an entry to the mountain,” Miller wrote. “The prominent tree represents nature and how close we are to

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# Roehr

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seen MALS before and agreed that it appeared to match her symptoms.

"It's really essential for the provider to believe the patient, and their family," Abdullah said. "It's a balance between what the patient feels is the health issue, and you as a provider with your experience, putting that puzzle together to see if that's the case."

It took months more of testing last year with specialists at the University of Washington until, around May, Ella was finally diagnosed with MALS.

"When you have (MALS), the function of these organs decreases," Abdullah said. "There's a tremendous amount of pain, nausea, vomiting and weight loss. Any organ, in a human being, when it has less blood supply ... it triggers a pain signal. It's a way to alarm us that there's a problem."

Ella flew to Connecticut around August to finally receive open MALS surgery by Dr. Richard Hsu. She spent a month there while preparing for, undergoing and recovering from the four-hour operation.

"They cut me open, in my stomach, all the way back to my spine," she said. "They took all of my organs out slowly, and they cut out the nerves ... a tendon ... and they cut and sewed up my diaphragm to release the compression on my celiac artery, so my organs could get enough blood flow."

Was she scared? "Yes," Ella laughs. "Very."

"But I was more looking forward to having a chance of living a normal life and not being in pain everyday," she added.

Barely able to move, she spent a week recovering at the hospital and another three weeks in a hotel. The flight back home was "no fun" either.

Ella is still in the healing process, which will likely take around a year, and the surgery was no magic "off" button for her conditions.

But four months after the surgery, the gastroparesis is nearly gone. The SIBO is gone. Blood is returning to her nutrient-starved organs, which are finally learning to function at full capacity. Ella still experiences a bit of dizziness, but "that's not too bad," she said.

For two years before the surgery, Ella was on a liquid and baby food diet. Now, simply being able to eat food again "is amazing," she said.

Now performing in her last season on the school cheer team, "I feel like I can breathe," Ella said. "I can move. I can exercise without having a sharp pain in my stomach."

## LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Her freshman year, Ella met Miss Seattle 2019 Angela Ramous, who is also from Buckley. Todd Miller, an agricultural science teacher and FFA advisor at WRHS, had invited Ramous (who is now Ella's pageant coach) to speak about the pageant to his students, and it gave Ella a different look into the pageant world than what she'd seen on TV.

Around this year, she started

thinking seriously about doing it herself.

"It was right after I found out I was diagnosed," Ella said. "I saw a flyer at my dance studio. ... I think I watched a pageant TV show, and I thought, oh my gosh, that's perfect."

In Miss USA, every competitor has a platform, which is a cause or organization they want to support. Ella wants to raise awareness of her disease so that others who suffer from it "don't have to suffer as long" as she did.

Ella is not the first teenager to seek help for a condition that mystified many physicians: Connecticut news station News 12 reported in 2019 on Hsu's first pediatric MALS surgery for a patient who had a similar story.

"There's been so many things, the social aspect, the connections you make ... that were a good reason to join (the pageant) alone," Ella said. "But my initial drive was making sure it changed the textbooks, that doctors knew about it, that people knew what MALS was. ... If a parent knows their infant has these symptoms, if they could get this diagnosed then, and they don't even have any memories of going through that pain, that's my dream — for kids to not have to suffer like that."

She plans to work with the University of Washington to fund research and heighten awareness among physicians of her condition.

Ella tried out and became Miss Teen Pierce County last spring after a virtual interview process. (Her age category includes ladies from ages 14 to 18.)

This weekend, she will compete in Renton for two days at the

state level. Nineteen contestants from around Washington will vie to become Miss Washington Teen, judged in three categories: A 150-second interview with a panel of judges, an fitness wear competition and an evening gown competition. Individual awards will also be awarded in categories like congeniality, spirit, and academic achievement.

Of those 19, ten contestants selected by the judges, plus a people's choice competitor, will advance first. (Voting for the people's choice contestant closes an hour before the show starts Feb. 5, online at bit.ly/3Hh8xbo.) That group will then be whittled down by the judges to five contestants for the on-stage questions.

The winner will, naturally, compete this summer to become Miss Teen USA.

Nurse Elliott and Dr. Abdullah from Prime Health Clinic are excited to see Ella compete.

"I'm not her mother, but you feel as proud as a parent," Elliott said. "I'm proud of Ella's mother, too. She never put down the boxing gloves. ... I think the full circle of suffering is when you can turn around and make it better for somebody else."

"We all learned from Ella," Dr. Abdullah said. "We learned to be better listeners, more patient, meticulous."

The limelight can be intimidating, so how does Ella hype herself up?

"It sounds kind of silly, but I sit in my car and crank up rap," Ella said with a laugh. (Her go-to is rapper/songwriter Cardi B.)

Maureen Francisco, the executive producer of Pageants Northwest, organizes the show and

interviews the ladies who go on to compete.

Contestants will sometimes look for excuses like their height or ethnicity when they don't feel confident in their performances, Francisco said, and she found it commendable that Ella didn't see her health conditions that way.

"With Ella, it wasn't about that," Francisco said. "It was: 'I can do anything I set my mind to despite having health challenges.' That really drew me, because I'm looking for confident women, or women ... (for whom) we can instill confidence in them."

In addition to instilling confidence and shattering stereotypes for the girls and women who compete, Francisco said one lesson from the pageants is that the hard times will pass — and that "the best years are ahead of them."

After a decade-and-a-half of pain and struggle, Ella might know that better than anyone. She's going through the college application process now, "but more than anything, I want to travel and see the world," she said.

"(Travel) is something I've always wanted to do with my life, but I had never thought it was realistic," Ella said. "I always needed to stay kind of close to my doctor, or make sure to bring a bag of pills into the airport. ... If I win, I really hope I get travel opportunities to talk to people about it. I'd be able to go see people and places that aren't in my network, or don't see me on social media."

*This article was trimmed for space. The full version can be found online at [courierherald.com](http://courierherald.com).*

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