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Darin Gerdes, an award-winning teacher, makes a point to his students during a session of the student House of Representatives at StoneBridge

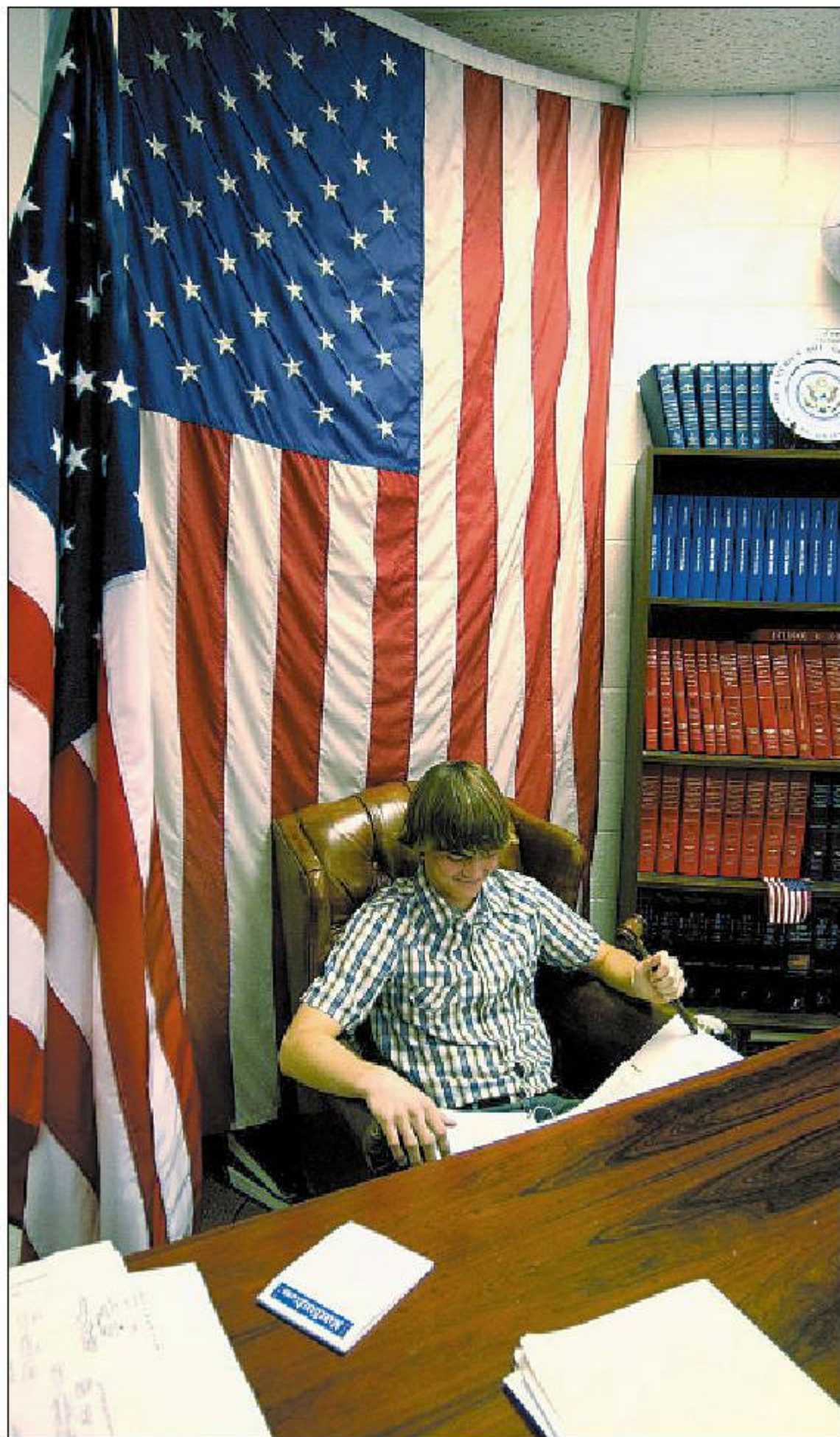
School. With copies of the Constitution and Bill of Rights to guide them, the students "run" the government as part of their history lesson.

CLASSROOM POLITICS

High school students at Stonebridge School don't just read about democracy, they run the government – with power plays – just like the real deal **PAGE 8**

COVER STORY

HISTORY COMES ALIVE



David Chadwick, a senior, doesn't just study about the federal government, he acts as Speaker of the House, with the flag behind his desk, just as it would be in the House of Representatives in Washington.



MARK MITCHELL PHOTOS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Darin Gerdes leads a history "session" at StoneBridge School, where his students learn about government by being the government.

StoneBridge government, economics and history students live what they're learning

BY VENI FIELDS
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Darin Gerdes insists he doesn't want his government and history students to learn anything from him.

Mistakes are made in politics all the time, he says; things happen that were not intended by this nation's Founding Fathers; people can be easily persuaded when they don't have all the facts.

So the 30-year-old instructor set up his classes for students to learn from "minds that are much greater," he says, than his.

Gavel, please: Welcome to history à l'expérience at StoneBridge School.

History, government and economics students at the private, Christian school in Western Branch don't "go to class"; they hold sessions. Dusty history books? Out the window. Boring lectures - forget it.

They learn about government by *being* the government.

But students don't play-act politics. Guided by Gerdes and his history teaching colleague, Geoffrey Burke, they run things like the real deal.

Andréa Peterson and Jonathan Yagel, both juniors, are embroiled in a legal dispute. Andréa was elected as an associate Supreme Court justice, when Jonathan, a Majority Leader, realized Andréa already held another position.

Oops. Taboo.

In your run-of-the-mill history class, this might get by.

Not here. If it's illegal in real-life politics, it's illegal, period. And Gerdes' students handle it that way.

"We attended a session of the General Assembly in Richmond," Gerdes said. "The students were explaining to adults what was happening. Participating in these classes demystifies the government. Government processes open up before their eyes."

High schoolers, about 120 of them, carry thick binders crammed with copies of primary source documents - the Magna Carta; state and U.S. Constitutions; Bills of Rights going all the way back to England - and centuries' worth of historical leaders' experiences to back them up when issues arise.

The matter between Andréa and Jonathan is now pending before the students' mock Supreme Court.

The ninth, 10th and 12th grades make up the House of Representatives at StoneBridge; juniors comprise the Senate. Two parties, the Liberty party and the Constitutional Alliance party sit across an aisle from each other, just as Republicans and Democrats do in Congress, Gerdes said. The classes also contain a judiciary, president and cabinet, just like the "real" government.

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Students drafted their own constitution, and have amended it twice.

Particular care is taken at StoneBridge, whose philosophy is based on a historical Biblical perspective, to ensure students are aware of historical leaders' attention to a moral and spiritual foundation for their decisions, and the documents they created, and those of people they believed would follow in their footsteps.

"Classes" are called to order as per parliamentary procedure. A prayer is offered, with emphasis on items of concern to local politicians, given to the students in interviews they conducted with local leaders. A docket is read; any bills up for voting or discussion are addressed. The formality of titles and procedure is suspended long enough for students to discuss course material without motions and seconds. Formal procedure is resumed for lesson time to be adjourned.

By studying what was important to leaders throughout national history and what it means to people living here today, students say they can see what is right in governmental affairs and spot things that are going wrong.

"Just knowing what the Constitution says," said Andréa, 16, "you can see things (in government) that shouldn't be happening, how it stepped out of its jurisdiction and why."

But they're not just passive observers. Gerdes' and Burke's students write letters to officials, and a classroom bulletin board is plastered with letters and editorials they have written to local newspapers.

"I think if some of the editors knew the age group of some of the people writing these letters," said Jonathan, 17, "they'd be pretty shocked. I don't think they realize a lot of these were written by high school students."

Gerdes has won recognition for his classroom model, and was nominated twice by former students for "Who's Who Among American Teachers." This year, Gerdes was voted a VFW Teacher of the Year by Post 9382 in Suffolk, and was awarded for "Exemplary School Program" through the Associated Christian Schools International last year.

Gerdes fashioned his classroom teaching style on his experience as an Army JROTC student in his Union, N.J. high



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Melissa Bjorklund, left, a senior, reads from her binder, crammed with copies of documents such as the Magna Carta, state and U.S. constitutions and the Bill of Rights during history class.

Turning "seniority" on its head

When your history teachers have you participating in your own Congress, majority rules, just like in any other democracy.

So while seniors at StoneBridge School may have the upper hand as upperclassmen, when it comes to speaking, their younger peers have found a way to silence them.

With three classes - freshmen, sophomores and juniors - making up most of the House and all of the Senate, the Freshmen Liberation Act was bound to be passed into law, preventing seniors from being able to hold the position of Speaker of the House.

"It's one of my highlights," said instructor Darin Gerdes. "They realized they could outvote the seniors. But this is how they learn. This is what Congress is like."

It's also like the coalition that formed in Gerdes' colleague's class, where the majority of students were female. They formed a caucus with a "girl-specific" voting action plan, Geoffrey Burke said.

"It was short-lived," Gerdes said, "but that's what it's all about. That's how they learn these processes and how things work."

Seniors may not be able to hold a key position in their Congress at StoneBridge, but they will have their vengeance: graduation is only a few months away.

school, he said, and ROTC in college at Liberty University in Lynchburg.

"I don't have an education background," he said, "but a content background," with degrees in government and psychology, an MBA, a master's degree in public policy, and a recently completed doctorate in leadership studies.

When he got to StoneBridge five years ago to teach government, he said, the format just fell into place: "I just started doing it," he said. "It's worked out great."

But he doesn't just describe processes and have his students participate. He gets them involved in the real world: voter registration drives, surveys, exit polls at election sites, and students are encouraged to volunteer on political campaigns for extra credit. They attend leadership conferences on a regular basis.

Taking the course the last two years has changed her life, Andréa said.

"I will be using these principles throughout my life," she said. "It's not only to have a Biblical world view, but also to be able to defend it."

It's different, learning like this, Jonathan said; the students in Gerdes' and Burke's classes are doing things that "are not what the average teenager would spend their time doing."

But he appreciates it, he said, for reasons that stretch beyond academics, paraphrasing philosopher and novelist George Santayana: "those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it," he said. "We can learn from the mistakes historical leaders made, and the good they did, the effect it had, and we can gauge our own lives."

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