

# Student skateboarders find community, pursue sport through Bay Area organization, Despite

## Seniors Shina Eron, Oren Kim and JJ Racz gain life lessons, break stereotypes

The wind brushes past their faces as they glide swiftly through the park, the wheels of their skateboards rattling on the pavement beneath them. With their hearts racing and minds focused, they pop the tip of the board and soar into the air. They fly with their skateboards until they miss their landing and fall down. Nonetheless, cheers and affirmation from those nearby erupt around them, and the opportunity to try again preserves their smiles.

The skateboarding group, Despite, which began as an informal group of skateboarders in the Bay Area in 2018, has formed a strong community and become a home for many teen skateboarders.

For senior Oren Kim, skateboarding has been a prominent aspect of his life since seventh grade. Although he already owned a skateboard and had begun learning to skate, he only became hooked on the sport after he started watching professional skateboarders.

“I just couldn’t comprehend how they were able to move that way,” he said. “(Their) style, music and whole vibe (drew me in).”

Finding a positive community is one of the many benefits Kim gained from skateboarding. He has not only been able to meet new people from different areas, but he has made friends from the skateboarding community who uplift and encourage him. According to Kim, because skateboarding is an individual sport, there is very little competition. Instead, each person focuses more on their own progress and supports others through their unique learning processes.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re putting out a video as a professional skater or if you’re just a high school group of friends like us,” he said. “If you post (your tricks) on Instagram or YouTube, people are going to want to watch it. People see my stories, (and) they support me in other ways too.”

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The social element of skating encourages belonging, enjoyment and growth for many teens. Senior Shina Eron, for example, credits much of her new mindset and character-building to her experience in skateboarding for over five years. Throughout her journey with the sport, she has found herself becoming more motivated and encouraged to work hard and not fear failure

and challenge. According to Eron, she applies this attitude to numerous aspects of her life, even outside of skateboarding.

“I’ve learned a lot of life lessons from skateboarding,” she said. “If you’re not falling, you’re not trying hard enough. (I now know that) it takes a lot of falls to eventually land a trick, and I think you can apply that to a broader, (and more) general perspective in life. If you aren’t making mistakes, (then) you aren’t really achieving anything.”

“Swedish and Denmark skate styles were super unique. It was really interesting to learn different styles of skating and meet a bunch of new people.”

—Senior JJ Racz

Kim echoes the importance of physical and mental grit when learning to skateboard. After years of skateboarding, Kim has not only become a part of a close-knit community but also gained important lessons that have shaped him as a person. He has contributed many hours and has undergone numerous challenges within the sport. Ultimately, he credits skateboarding for a large part of his personal growth.

“I think skateboarding is a huge challenge because there are physical challenges like getting hurt and falling, but also a lot of mental challenges, like frustration (from) not being able to land a trick,” he said. “(It’s about) overcoming those challenges, like landing a trick that you’ve been working on for a long time.”

For Eron, skateboarding is a means of escape and helps her balance different aspects of her life, such as school and family.

“It’s very freeing to skateboard — it helps me de-stress when I’m tired of school, my parents or other people in my life,” she said. “I can go to the park and just focus (on being) there instead and do tricks to hang out with my friends.”

According to Eron, when she first began skateboarding, she found a community instantly.

As a female skateboarder, she sometimes felt left out and feared being judged in a male-dominated space. However, she found a

connection with other girls who had similar experiences and used this bond to motivate her to work harder.

To some skaters associated with Despite, it is simply a friend group of people who share a love for skateboarding with the intent of having fun. For others, it is a group that grants them opportunities to pursue their passion of skateboarding in a variety of ways. In the summer of 2023, part of Despite went on a trip to Denmark and Sweden with the intent of expanding their group and exploring new skateboarding areas. One member who attended was senior JJ Racz, who assists in designing merchandise and is featured in videos. Racz especially enjoyed learning about different cultures and skateboarding techniques that broadened his perspective.

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According to Racz, regardless of the stereotypes skateboarders are subjected to — such as reputations of vandalism or disturbance towards the community — one of his goals is to try to spread positivity through the sport with his friends. For example, Despite founder James Polly donated profits from shirt merchandise to support hurricane relief for families in Mexico. By making merchandise and videos, along with donating to charitable causes, this group of friends rejects the stigma pushed on them and instead focuses on spreading positivity and giving back to their community.

“I can’t speak for all (people who skateboard), but a lot of my friends are really bright and smart people that just want to help and make the community better,” Racz said.

—Written by Eanam Maor



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