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Ella Muller, senior at Laconia High School, at the school's library on Jan. 20, during a voter registration drive that she organized. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

## Empowered: LHS senior leads voter registration drive

By ADAM DRAPCHO  
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LACONIA — Steven Fay explained his granddaughter by relating the story of one day when she was in a middle

school social studies class, and, having just listened to a debate, the teacher asked the students to go to one side of the room if they were persuaded by the “pro” side of the debate, the other for the

“con.” When all the shuffling was over, his granddaughter was still in her seat, equally able to see both sides of the argument.

“Elizabeth has a mind of her own,” Fay said about his

granddaughter, who now goes by “Ella” Muller, and who hopes to work at the United Nations some day.

But before she pursues

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that ambition, she has another challenge in front of her: completing the Diploma with Distinction program at Laconia High School, where she is currently a member of the senior class.

Muller is one of a select group of students who are pursuing a Diploma with Distinction, said Superintendent Steve Tucker. Fewer than 10 students this year are in the elite graduating program. To be eligible, a student must carry a 3.25 grade point average, and if they choose to enroll in the program, they must complete 30 course credits, instead of the usual 26. But, said Tucker, the rigor comes with a reward as it allows them to leverage what the state Department of Education calls an Extended Learning Opportunity – a self-designed course tailored around a student's interests.

For Muller, that interest was politics, and she wanted her ELO to leave a legacy with her classmates. That's why, on Jan. 20, Muller was joined in the school's library by Lynda Brock, supervisor of the checklist for Ward 6, as a pop-up voter registration drive. Any Laconia High School student who is going to be 18 by Sept. 13, when the next city primary election will be held, was invited to sign up.

As a small crowd formed in the library, Muller said she was happy to see that her invitation was received.

Muller is a particularly attuned student when it comes to politics. That's something her grandparents recognized, said Fay, recalling the political rallies they took her to, in between visits to science museums and aeronautical factories. His granddaughter wavered between the worlds of astrophysics and politics, before deciding on the more Earthly, and, to some, more difficult path.

"Honestly, this wasn't my first choice," Muller said about the registration drive. Her initial plan was to put together a presentation on climate change, which she would give to her fellow students. Yet, especially after counsel from her mother, she decided to use her efforts to empower her peers, who, she said, can be already well-informed about current events.

"I think there is definitely a significant group of people that are very politically aware," Muller said about her peers. That exposure tends to happen through TikTok and other social media platforms, and so the engagement of today's youth might not be as apparent to those outside of their followers. "I think it is more now than it has been in the past."

Her peers are particularly interested in issues surrounding privacy rights, reproductive rights, and First Amendment issues, Muller said. They are primed to make their voice heard, but were they prepared to register? Not so much, it turned out.

"People were planning (to register), but a lot of people didn't know what documentation you needed to have," Muller said. Registrants were asked for their birth certificate or passport to prove citizenship and identity, as well as something that showed they were a resident of the city. For the many who didn't have those documents, there was other paperwork they could fill out to attest to their eligibility.

Brock, who facilitated the registrations, said the process for registering voters without the proper documentation can cause a delay at the polls, so it's helpful to have so many done ahead of time.

"It is much better and faster if you can register

before an election rather than (on) election day," Brock said. "I think Ella did a great job."

Stacy Anders, acting city clerk, said that when 18-year-olds visit City Hall to register for the first time, they typically do so at the urging of their parents. That suggests that young people who grow up in a home where voting isn't a habit, might not think to engage their constitutional right as soon as they can.

Katie Westcott was one of those who registered. "This makes it easier," than making a trip to City Hall, she said. She was impressed by the turnout, which indicated to her that "it was advertised really well, and that the students here are wanting to vote."

James Stafford, a senior, was waiting for his chance to register. "(This is) making the process easier, so I don't have to do it later on – and I might forget later on."

Stafford said he's eager to participate in the democratic process. "It will be very cool and interesting to be involved in who's elected," he said. He stays informed about politics, he said, and usually has a favorite in races he pays attention to, "but now I have the chance to be in control in some way."

Mayor Andrew Hosmer, who attended the drive, was pleased by what he saw.

"How inspiring it is to see a high schooler lead this voter registration drive... this is a very important right that we shouldn't take for granted." Hosmer said the scene in the library impressed upon him the educational opportunities available to the city's students. "We have young people paying attention, preparing to exercise their right, and Ella Muller is the spark behind it."