

HIGHLANDS

HIGH SCHOOL

A NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

To the JEA Journalist of the Year Committee:

It is with immense privilege and without reservation that I recommend **Ella Peabody**, the JEA Kentucky Journalist of the Year, for the national JEA Journalist of the Year award and scholarship. As the Adviser for the Highlands High School Publications Program, I've had the unique opportunity to mentor Ella and watch her develop into a rare kind of individual in our society: one who has a pulse on the world around her and feels the responsibility to serve.

Right now, the journalism profession and the state of media are at a precipice, warding off daily accusations of bias and lacking integrity. It takes a free spirit who is unshaken by the noise—someone who wants to serve their community and do what is right. Ella is exactly this person.

But Ella brings a secret weapon that elevates her work and her presence: her beautiful sense of unadulterated joy.

From the first moment I met her, that joy was infectious. Ella saw only possibilities, transforming our publications program in just four short years.

Ella's hunger for knowledge was ravenous from the moment she entered my classroom, treating every journalistic skill as her playground. Her enthusiasm was contagious. Her freshman year, she created the "unsung heroes" feature, demonstrating her servant heart by highlighting overlooked staff members. Her first feature was about our cafeteria staff, followed by articles about our crossing guard protecting students and our then-guidance secretary's battle with Crohn's disease. She also took on articles about the vandalism in our school bathrooms due to the "Devious Licks" trend on TikTok, showing her willingness to cover difficult topics.

Her sophomore year saw her promoted to the new role of copy editor, where she guaranteed quality control and managed a smooth workflow transition amidst our program's rapid growth. Critically, she demonstrated courage and maturity by insisting on covering the foiled school shooting plot in a nearby community in Mariemont, Ohio, securing meaningful interviews and producing a complex article that showed her deep sense of journalistic responsibility. She was told the answer "no" quite a bit, but Ella was determined to tell the story.

And she did.

During her junior year, Ella served as Managing Editor for our publications program. This was a brand-new and challenging position. This role of great importance placed her as "the last line of defense" for quality control and consistency across all content, including posting every article and photo gallery to the Hilltopper Online. She handled the intensity of this challenge with the same grace and joy she has always possessed. It was in this role that she also found time to continue her advocacy for others, researching and writing an exclusive, insightful article on federal cuts to national parks, demonstrating her capacity for impartiality even with a personal connection to the topic.

This year, Ella has served as our Editor-in-Chief. She is responsible for overseeing our entire publications staff of 71 students across three different classes. It is the largest staff in our program's history. This requires extraordinary organizational skill, expert mentoring ability, and unwavering quality control. She has handled it as she does everything, with a positive attitude and immense joy. She is a patient and calm leader, which is essential when managing a large staff with a wide variety of personalities.

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Her preparation for this role was significantly shaped in Summer 2025 when she was selected to attend the highly prestigious Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference, representing the entire state of Kentucky. Her time in Washington D.C., networking with professionals and witnessing student journalists from "The Alligator" at the University of Florida being honored at the Freedom Forum's Free Expression Awards, solidified her commitment to the highest standards of the profession. I believe this experience reminded her why she is passionate about public service. It is tough and gritty, but the potential to make real change is there.

That fire that the Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference lit in Ella has been evident this year in terms of working on "New Voices" legislation in the state of Kentucky. She provided resources to her other team members and laid a foundation for those who will fight for student journalist rights in the future. Although this session did not bring the outcome Ella hoped for, her work will bring it in the future—without a doubt.

Adding to her national recognition, Ella and the rest of the editorial board presented a breakout session at the Fall JEA/NSPA convention in Nashville this November. This is an immense honor, demonstrating that she is not just a leader in our building, but an expert that peers and advisers on a national level want to learn from. She also led her staff to six national awards in the JEA National Student Media Contest.

I would be remiss to not mention Ella is the first in our school's history to earn the State Journalist of the Year honor. The field, from what I understand, was competitive. This speaks to not only her qualifications but her potential to truly change the landscape of journalism and public policy.

Ella is a dreamer who envisions a free democracy, a doer who will act in the face of adversity, and a darer who is not afraid to do what is right. I guarantee that she will be one of those rare individuals who will protect the fourth estate.

And she will do so with joy.

Without a doubt, in ten years, we will hear the name **Ella Peabody** again. Although I will miss her immensely next year, I know she is going to change the world. I cannot wait to see the next chapter of her story. She has aspirations to work in public policy, following in the footsteps of her parents. There is no doubt that Ella will contribute to our society in a meaningful way.

Ella Peabody truly represents what a high school journalist should be. I am so proud of her.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding Ella Peabody and her qualifications for selection for the JEA High School Journalist of the Year.

Sincerely,

Beth Brubaker

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