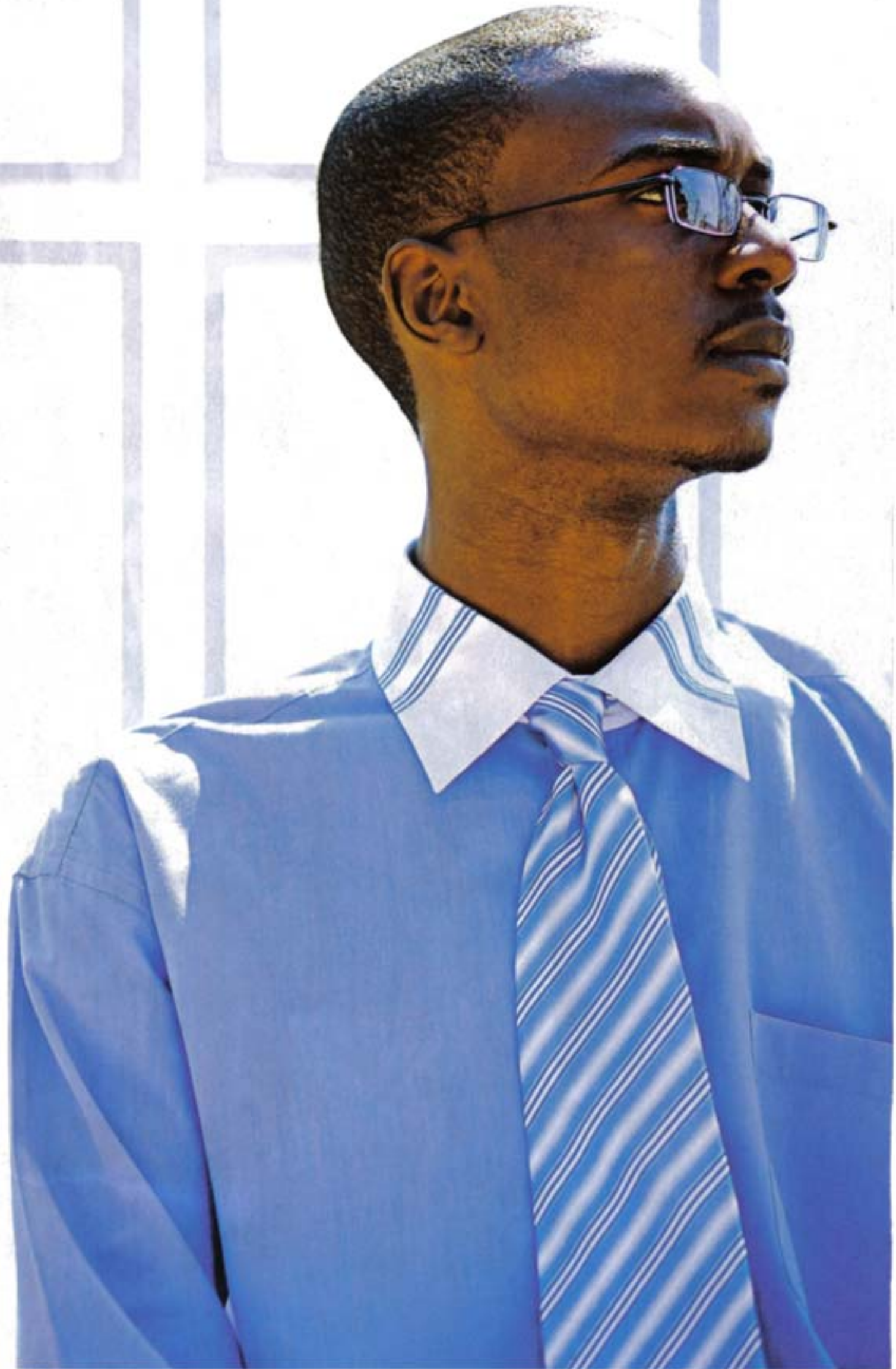


PASSIONATE
PURSUIT:
MINISTRY



DAMARIS WALKER

HIGH SCHOOL: PARKWAY CENTER CITY
THIS FALL: FRESHMAN AT
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

"The Devil will lead you to believe there's a shortcut," intones Damaris Walker from a makeshift altar in an auditorium at 19th and Girard. "But shortcuts lead to detours, and detours lead to delays. Everything the Devil offers is false."

On a hot summer Sunday, the skinny 18-year-old sweats in his polyester pastor's robes. His pulpit is a long way from the couch in the disciplinarian's office at Fitz-Simons Middle School, where, as a sixth-grader, he was summoned to explain why he had pulled the fire alarm. "I wasn't a bad kid," he says. "I was mouthy, trying to fit in."

Fitting in could have proved dangerous. When he was 13, some older kids around his family's home at 23rd and Diamond tried to recruit him to deal drugs, promising \$3,000 a week. A transfer to Stoddart Fleisher Middle School—arranged by the FitzSimons disciplinarian, who had seen his potential during their sessions—allowed Damaris to share the halls with gifted students who showed him that cool and smart aren't mutually exclusive. "I began to get serious about wanting to be successful and not wanting to find myself incarcerated or dead," he says. "I pursued what I was passionate about—church and education."

By 16, Damaris had been ordained a Baptist minister and started his own parish in North Philadelphia. Some of his 50 or so regular worshipers are recovering addicts and alcoholics. "My sermons are geared at building people up," he says, "as opposed to tearing them down."

Last spring he graduated from Parkway Center City High School as the valedictorian and second-term school-body president, and was awarded a full scholarship to Dartmouth. Damaris, the second-youngest of five children, will be the first to go to college, but not the last—his little sister, he says, "doesn't have a choice."

After college, he plans to run for mayor or councilman, either in Philadelphia or down South, where he recently visited. "They could use someone like me down there," he says, "someone who's young, fresh, vibrant and crazy." —*Caroline Tiger*

DILLON COMPTON

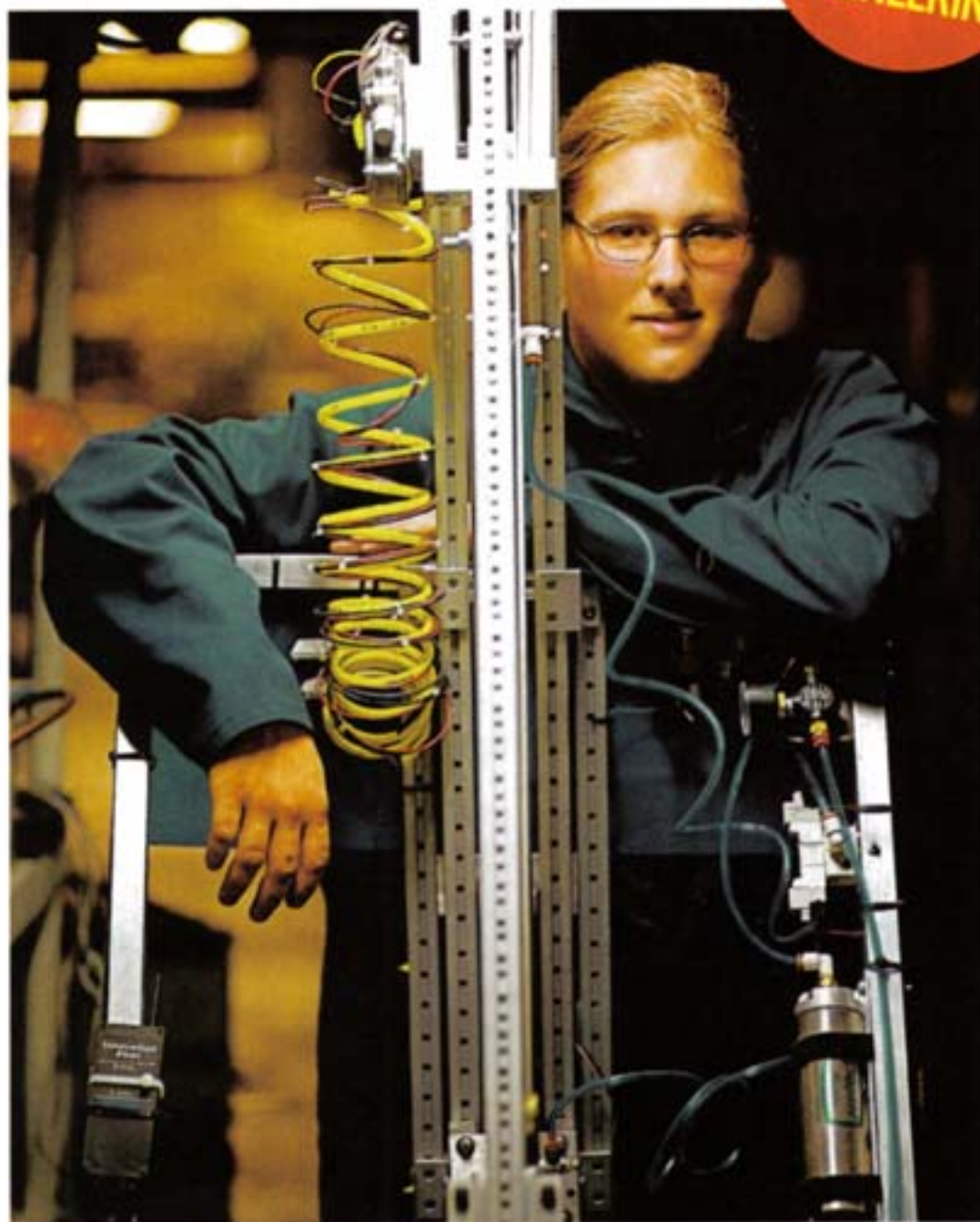
HIGH SCHOOL: GREAT VALLEY, MALVERN; ALSO HOMESCHOOLED
THIS FALL: SENIOR YEAR AT GREAT VALLEY

To Dillon Compton, grade school was one long trip to the library. He and his three sisters—educated at home and encouraged to build their learning around their interests—toted laundry baskets filled with books, returning one load and immediately checking out another. Since Dillon had so much freedom to explore, it's a little surprising to hear he had his future mapped out by age 10. "I had a sequential plan," recalls the 17-year-old. "I was going to take every pre-college class having anything to do with the law, go pre-law in college and right into law school. Then I was going to start my own firm right away."

The plan remained intact through Dillon's first two years at Great Valley, which he'd decided to attend after feeling he'd hit a wall with homeschooling, and even survived into his junior year, when he left school to take classes at the Community College of Philadelphia. But then his father, a science teacher at Mastery Charter School in Philly, asked him to contribute some computer programming expertise to his students' robotics team. Working with a core group of 10 Mastery kids, Dillon was often up till midnight unraveling their creation's design riddles. "It gave me a lot more experience in stuff I'd never touched before," he says. "It changed my whole mind-set around."

With a new direction came a new course of study—engineering. He has two colleges in mind, and will be busy this fall helping to start a city-wide school robotics program. And he's added "Have a social life" to his to-do list. Back at Great Valley as a senior, he may or may not attend the prom. "I'm really not decided," he says, sounding uncertain for the first time. "I'm going to take that as it comes." —*C.T.*

**PASSIONATE PURSUIT:
ENGINEERING**



PASSIONATE
PURSUIT:
ANIMALS



SHARRITA ALEXANDER

HIGH SCHOOL: MASTERY CHARTER SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA | **THIS FALL:** FRESHMAN AT IMMACULATA UNIVERSITY

Growing up in Germantown, Sharrita Alexander had two pet passions—shopping for clothes, and caring for her Pomeranian, Puff. She also liked watching the cable channel Animal Planet, especially the shows about healing sick animals. She aspired to be a model or a veterinarian, but since she was never that interested in school, her destiny was looking more like *America's Next Top Model* than *Animal Miracles*.

When, at her mother's urging, she entered Mastery Charter School in ninth grade, she tested at a seventh-grade level and was placed in remedial classes. "I thought school was a joke," says the willowy 17-year-old, who interpreted the high school's policy of encouraging students to work at their own pace as an invitation to slack off. But she quickly found out that it really meant she couldn't advance without earning at least a 76 in all her courses, even if this tacked another year onto her high-school career.

Sharrita buckled down a bit, and in junior year she landed an internship at the Philadelphia Zoo. Every Wednesday afternoon she'd hop on a bus to Girard Avenue, but instead of looking after cute, furry beasts like Puff, she confronted her worst nightmare: bugs. She fed mealworms and crickets to lizards and other reptiles. "I got over my fear," she recalls. "That made me feel like I could do anything." When Mastery's internship coordinator put her in touch with some real live vets, they advised her to get good grades so she'd have a chance at vet school. Suddenly, high school seemed useful.

"I knew I needed to keep up with math and science, so I tried really hard in those," she says. Since her parents were both working night shifts, neither knew that their daughter had upped her homework time significantly—but the scholarship she won to study vet science at Immaculata was notice enough.

After vet school, Sharrita wants to work at a zoo or an SPCA, where the animals need her most. And though she's honed her life goals, she'll never lose her other main interest—shopping. Ask her where Immaculata is located, and she won't miss a beat as she directs you to two geographic landmarks: "It's between the Exton Mall and King of Prussia." —C.T.

LEARNING UNBOUND

22 WAYS TO HELP YOUR KIDS FIND THEIR OWN PASSIONATE PURSUITS

Pricey private institutions and high-spending public schools have the impressive facilities, wide range of classes and activities, and personal attention that can lead students to new interests and greater achievement—but not every family can afford the tuition or the tax rates. Fortunately, there's a whole world of educational extras out there for all ages, often at little or no cost. To get you started, we've tracked down facilities and programs throughout the area that engage the mind and stoke a passion for learning. —Roxanne Patel

ART It's almost hard to bemoan the state of art education in schools these days when your kids can so easily study in the footsteps of Maxfield Parrish and Thomas Eakins in afternoon and summer art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (pafa.org). Or sign them up for almost-free workshops at South Philly's Fleisher Art Memorial (fleisher.org).

HISTORY Few areas in the United States are more steeped in the past than the Philadelphia region, and fewer still have such a rich collection of interactive museums. Weekend programs at Howell Living History Farm in Mercer County, for instance, give kids some tough rows to hoe on a functioning circa-1900 farm (howellfarm.org); for trips to other eras, search gophila.com/culturefiles/Museums/museums-history.htm. If volleys of musket fire quicken your kid's pulse, have him man the forward lines with knowledgeable enthusiasts at a war reenactment—check the David Library of the American Revolution for local events (dlar.org). Martial-arts types and quieter history buffs might like to relive medieval fighting and feasts with classes and events sponsored by the Society for Creative Anachronism (sca.org).

LANGUAGES Most high schools are strong on the standard European tongues—Spanish, German and French—but what if your kid wants to learn Latin, or ancient Greek, or Ukrainian? For mostly free language lessons online, try word2word.com, a listing of different sites that offer grammar and conversation in more than 100 languages. Then, to build up those second-tongue muscles by conversing with other foreign-language speakers, search meetup.com, a directory of monthly language gatherings of like-minded people, or start your own.

MENTORS/ADVISERS Gone are the days when a public-school counselor could take your child in hand and guide her to graduation, college and a career—now, they're too swamped to do much more than make a few suggestions based on a quick look at her transcript. For in-depth mentoring advice, try local academic, business or professional organizations, such as the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, which runs a 10th-grade mentorship program for kids at local businesses. AARP, in association with the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning, provides one-on-one mentoring in city (continued on page 183)