

by Jill Thomas, WILDWOOD PARENT

# A New Kind of Talent



Elliot Wainman, '08, has one key piece of advice for Wildwood students contemplating college: "Don't worry about what you're going to do, just study something you like." That's what he did, majoring in history simply because he enjoyed the subject. Elliot fell into his

first history class at the University of California, Santa Barbara, by accident—he registered late and class choices were limited, so he enrolled in History of Public Policy. Expecting the class to be dry and boring, Elliot was pleasantly surprised to find the professor particularly engaging and the subject matter interesting. That same professor ended up being Elliot's senior thesis advisor.

During his time at college, Elliot also "found music in a serious way." He began exploring electronic music, "focusing on aesthetic and what you want to convey."

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"There was a whole language there," says the self-taught electronic music artist.

By the time he graduated from UCSB in 2012, Elliot was booking gigs and performing as a disc jockey at music festivals. He parlayed those skills to land a position at the startup incubator TicTokLabs Inc., working on game apps that combined music with learning. Elliot's skills and

attributes were ideally suited to the rapidly growing app-gaming industry.

Employing a lot of the outside-the-box thinking typical of "Wildwoodians," Elliot conceived of a casual game app, named Poptok, shortly after joining TicTokLabs. Poptok is a puzzle game that teaches the player a foreign language as they play—think Candy Crush meets Rosetta Stone. The challenge of solving the puzzle keeps learners engaged with curriculum that they might otherwise find stale. "Using puzzles in this way is textbook gamification," Elliot says, "consistently triggering desired behaviors,

such as daily engagement and consistent progress, while actively confronting undesired behaviors, like infrequent engagement and abandonment of the curriculum." Poptok prides itself on being "commercially viable even if you take the educational component out," Elliot says. He champions the notion that today's youth "will not tolerate learning unless it's dressed up properly."

Elliot attributes much of his personal growth to his problem-solving process, and he believes that "the way you solve something is infinitely more important than the specific answers you come up with."

Now, just two years later, Elliot is an equity partner in the company and is getting tons of hands-on experience with virtually all aspects of the business. He wears a number of hats at work, including product designer, curriculum and content coordinator, and even icon master. In addition to the creative side, however, Elliot is heavily involved with the nuts and bolts of running and growing the business along with his partner, a former gaming executive from Paramount. The writing and presentation skills acquired at Wildwood give him a leg up in pitching to potential financial backers, Elliot says. A big part of it is simply "how you narrate a story."

But Elliot believes certain *other* qualities—all of which are part of Wildwood's academic culture—play an even more important role in his progress and that of other young budding tech entrepreneurs: adaptability, 360-degree thinking, cultural competence, empathy, and intellectual curiosity. These attributes are distinct from and fill the gap between the technical abilities of engineers and traditional business execs—accordingly, they have been dubbed the "Third Space." Third Space talents result in a new way of strategic thinking—one that fosters collaboration, innovation, and enhanced performance. Such talents are in short supply and high demand in a number of cutting-edge industries, including his own.

Elliot recently attended a national conference on Third Space thinking at the University of Southern California titled The Trillion Dollar Talent Gap—which is the amount of money that researchers believe the U.S. economy loses annually because of the dearth of such talents in the workforce. "These days, any tech business needs to bridge this gap to create product," Elliot says. He thinks Third Space talents will be a defining characteristic of business going forward in the 21st century.

And he aims to be a part of that trend. Elliot views Poptok as "the first brick in the wall at TicTokLabs," and his goal is "to build out the entire wall—adding other new concepts and continuing to grow the business." He sees himself as "part of a group of kids teetering on a next generation of the economy, with new things evolving all the time ... things that benefit young people," he says. 