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Harvard-Westlake building reflects standout student's interests

The Kutler center is named for Brendan Kutler, who died in 2009 at 17. It will house a new interdisciplinary studies department that reflects Kutler's many passions.

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During his short life Brendan Kutler had many passions — computer science, Japanese culture, photography, world music, astrophysics, filmmaking, tennis, poetry and blogging.

So it's no wonder that the Harvard-Westlake high school senior who died from an undiagnosed heart condition at age 17 will be memorialized at his school with a new building that seeks to expose youngsters to a wealth of subjects in a nontraditional way.

Students have begun moving into the Kutler Center for Independent Research and Interdisciplinary Studies, a two-story structure that links a building that houses history and foreign-language classes with one that contains the school's library.

"It's a bridge building," said Brendan's mother, Sara Kutler. "It connects classrooms with the library where kids do research. But we're creating a program, not just a building."

Kutler and her husband, Jon, a West Los Angeles investor and former investment banker, financed the multimillion-dollar project with the assistance of donations from Brendan's former classmates and others who knew of him through his Internet postings and music reviews.

The building includes three new classrooms and an office that will be used for the interdisciplinary studies department office. Glass walls frame a revamped library's study and research areas.

"This school was the nexus of our son's life, his launch pad," said Jon Kutler. The best way to honor his memory, he and his wife decided, was to create something that would benefit future students at the private Studio City school.

"He was a kind and gentle kid. Every teacher here thought he was an expert in the course they were teaching," Kutler said. "He'd post his class notes on the Internet before tests to help other students. He'd tell us that it wasn't important how he did on the test, but how everyone did on it."

Sara Kutler said that Brendan filled his allotted class schedule with advance-placement courses and audited a cinema-studies class for fun. Despite earning no credit for the class, he wrote a term paper and took the course's final exam.

During summer breaks, he did independent research on air pollution monitoring at UCLA and studied college-level celestial mechanics at a workshop conducted by the Summer Science Program. Since Brendan's death, astronomers involved in the program have named a newly discovered asteroid "223877 Kutler" in his honor.

The Kutler Center's airy and open look was designed by architect Lester Tobias, whose son Bryce was a member of Brendan's class and had been a friend since both were toddlers. Tobias drew from Brendan's list of eclectic interests to give the new building a Japanese feel with the use of light-colored wood, a wavy roofline and chopstick-like structure supports.

Tobias also incorporated Brendan's signature "two hat" look — in which he wore one baseball cap on top of another — with a glass-enclosed observation nook in one of the new classrooms.

Many of Harvard-Westlake's 900 upper-level students wore double baseball caps at a campus memorial service held shortly after Brendan's death on Dec. 29, 2009.

"Brendan's spirit carries through our mission to break down the barriers between traditional curricula," said Larry Klein, chairman of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department. "Brendan had a curiosity, an attitude of wanting to know and never be shackled to one thing."

Jeanne Huybrechts, the head of Harvard-Westlake, said the Kutler Center will be formally dedicated in ceremonies Friday at 3:15 p.m.

Those who are already using the center's classrooms and the revamped library give it high marks. Fifteen-year-old Ben Weissenbach praised the center's new desks, which can be arranged in the shape of a horseshoe for group work.

"Everything's open and it's easy to relax and focus on what you need to in here," said Jack Ennis, also 15. Agreed classmate Andrew Corlin: "Instead of looking at four walls you have a natural look with walls of windows."

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