Amy Ralston is attending Bard College at Simon's Rock in Massachusetts

Many 10th-graders aren’t even thinking about college, and most of them sure don’t expect to be accepted into college. But Amy Ralston is different.

This fall, the 16-year-old enrolled in Bard College at Simon’s Rock in Massachusetts. She moved to Great Barrington, Mass., this summer with her mother and 14-year-old sister. (Her father, an emergency room doctor, is staying behind in Lake Oswego.) The plan is for Ralston to spend her first two years working on her associate degree at a college known for welcoming younger students.

“The main motivation for me for my entire life has been my career and academics in general — I just saw my opportunity,” she said.

Many high school students take college classes, but going for an associate degree “is very unusual,” says Susan Roberts, Clackamas Web Academy’s early college coordinator and counselor.

Roberts says when Ralston was at Clackamas Web Academy, the teen took the unusual step of enrolling fulltime at Clackamas Community College as a sophomore in high school. And she did well, carrying a 4.0 GPA.

“She thinks very deeply and maturely, and she’s just a very good person,” Roberts says. “She’s very kind and sensitive and thoughtful.”

Ralston’s academic drive, along with her high PSAT scores, got her a lot of attention from interested colleges, including Bard. Last school year, she thought it was too late to apply, but a Bard representative helped her fast-track her application.

Ralston finished up the last part of her application in August and then had to make it to the school in about two weeks for a mandatory orientation. She, her mom and sister packed quickly and sped across the country in a van, arriving in time but with few belongings.

“It was such a whirlwind,” Ralston says.

Her mother says she doesn’t mind the chaos if it means her daughter’s getting what she needs.

“She needed more — she needed a different level of learning, and I think the college is absolutely perfect for her,” says her mom, Jean Ralston. “I couldn’t have designed something better for her.”

Her younger daughter seems happy, too, and is adjusting to her new surroundings, she adds.

Yet, the rush has resulted in a few issues. The trio had trouble quickly locating housing, so they temporarily resided in a refurbished barn before moving into a luxurious vacation rental home. Amy Ralston’s father recently visited, supplementing a sparse clothing supply with coats and boots.

Ralston hasn’t left Lake Oswego behind, though. She’s technically dual-enrolled in Clackamas Web Academy while at Bard, so in two years, she’ll be returning to her hometown for her high school graduation.

“Honestly, I’ve had no regrets,” Ralston says. “I don’t think I’ve ever
been happier in my life. I’ve just been stimulated in every area of my life — it’s been a brilliant experience. Like a star.”

She is, in fact, interested in cosmology, which focuses on the origin and development of the universe. To that end, Ralston says she’d like a physics tutor, just so she can learn more about the way the world works. When she’s not treading Sheldon Cooper territory, she’s steeped in Greek literature, which encompasses the works of great thinkers like Lucretius and Socrates.

“I’ve read so much ancient Greek literature I never would have expected to be exposed to at this age, and I think it’s really important to be exposed to it at this age,” Ralston says.

She’s also passionate about music, playing piano and composing her own songs, and she loves creative writing and math, too.

“Even mathematicians, they have to write proofs, and they have to write papers — writing can be a tool that I utilize, but it doesn’t have to define my career,” she says.

She’s also interested in another language: Spanish. This January, she’ll be on a month-long study abroad stint in Spain.

With so many interests, it’s hard for her to decide what area of study she’ll pursue, but she has an idea of at least one other college she’d like to attend.

“My dad went to Stanford, and it’s always been Stanford, but it honestly could be any college at this point. I’m completely open,” she says.

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