

Middle school student ready to make a major leap into college

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff 7.18.16



Kelly Li, 13, of Naperville, Illinois, will forgo eighth grade and high school to attend Mary Baldwin College in Virginia in the fall. She holds the acceptance letter she received from the school verifying that she had been accepted. Suzanne Baker/Naperville Sun/TNS

NAPERVILLE, Ill. — Like many of her peers, 13-year-old Kelly Li is buying supplies for the new school year that starts in August.

However, unlike others her age, Kelly is not getting ready for eighth grade. She's preparing to move into a college dorm.

The Illinois girl is skipping her final year of middle school and all of high school to get a jump start on college this fall. Kelly will attend Mary Baldwin College, an all-women's school in Virginia.

"I am really excited. I still can't believe it," Kelly said.

At Mary Baldwin, Gifted Girls Can Start College Early

Kelly and her mother, Lili Xi and father, Shengjian Li, chose Mary Baldwin for their daughter. Its Program for the Exceptionally Gifted allows girls ages 13 to 15 to bypass high school to start college. Mary Baldwin is one of a handful of colleges in the United States that has programs that accept students as young as 13.

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Kelly said she was told 18 other young girls like her will also start classes there in the fall. "I think I still will be among the youngest students on campus," she said.

Even after the acceptance letter from Mary Baldwin arrived, Kelly and her mother have had many long conversations about the decision to go to college early. They talked about how Kelly will miss out on homecoming, the prom, graduation, school sports and other traditional milestones of a teenager's life.

"I guess I regret that I'll be leaving home at an early age, but it's a good opportunity," Kelly said.

She's Not Just A Top-Notch Student

Although Xi grew up in China and attended school in Shanghai, she and her husband have embraced American culture and involved their children in many extracurricular activities, she said.

Kelly plays the piano and is on a swim team and has competed on middle school math teams. She also has taken a series of online high school classes, including advanced placement physics, chemistry and history, as well as honors biology and geometry.

Like a typical teen, Kelly enjoys playing video games in her spare time. She has also learned computer programs like Python so she can create her own games as well.

She will continue her passion for swimming as a member of a club team in Virginia.

She'll Miss Mom The Most

The university is an 11-hour drive from her home in Illinois and Kelly is still several years away from getting a driver's license. Visiting family on the weekends won't be an option. At the Virginia college, girls in the teen program are housed in a separate, more-supervised dormitory, where they live until they are 16 years old. Kelly said she will miss her mother the most.

"She's always been my support system," Kelly said. "It's scary to know she won't be in touch 24/7. I definitely want to call several times a week."

For the past year, her mother researched options for her daughter to gain entry into a private high school or a special school in Illinois.

As Kelly was finishing seventh grade in May, she was visiting colleges, filling out applications, writing essays and taking placement exams in hope of getting into college in the fall.

A month later, the acceptance letter from Mary Baldwin arrived along with a \$20,000 scholarship for 2016-17 that will fund most of the tuition costs.

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She's Still Exploring Her Options

Kelly is leaning toward studying medicine, but hasn't decided for sure yet. She plans to explore her options before making any firm decision.

"Even if I take six years to graduate, I still will be ahead of everyone else (who is my age)," Kelly said.

The biggest challenge she sees taking college-level courses will be achieving at the highest level in areas like math and science, where she's traditionally performed well in the past, she said. Kelly once received a B on a test in her middle-school French class. French doesn't come as easy as other classes, she said, so she had to devote extra time to learning the material to pull the final grade up to a low A.

"I am used to being at the top of my class," Kelly said. "With other students in the same situation, I'm obviously not going to be the very top anymore."

Swimming has shown Kelly a little bit about not always being the best. Her mother explains that every second in swimming counts and can even cost a swimmer the race.

"Swimming has taught Kelly that you can have a bad day," her mother said. "You just keep practicing and try hard not to make the same mistake the next time."

If It's Not The Right Fit, She Can Transfer

If Mary Baldwin turns out not to be the right fit for Kelly, she can transfer to another college when she's 14, Xi said. While colleges and universities are less likely to take a young teenager initially, they will accept a college transfer, she said.

Kelly's mom said she is confident Kelly will thrive in a college environment because she is very self-motivated, independent and will finally get the challenge in school she needs.

"Kelly just needs to learn how to do her own laundry before she leaves," Xi said.